I Seem to Be a Verb

by Aja

Summary

Notting Hill AU, written for the i_k prompt, "I'm just a girl standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her." Arthur owns a quirky hipster science bookstore. Eames is a world-famous mega-celebrity.

Clearly this calls for a meet-cute.

Notes

This fic is only 2 chapters long. Although it was posted serially, it's actually been reformatted in two parts. There are a few extras to fill the chapters that follow after the end, but the whole story is split between chapters 1-2. :) Thanks to Erin for betaing this monstrosity.

Warning: This fic features a character with moderate to severe social anxiety, and some scenes have triggered panic attacks in some readers. Readers may also be made anxious by scenes dealing with relationship angst, breakups, friendship angst, infidelity (not between Arthur/Eames), and stretches of time where Arthur dates people who aren't Eames (though these relationships are minor to the story and to Arthur, I promise). Please read at your own pace and comfort levels! (This warning prolly makes the story sound super-angsty but it's just a giant ball of fluff and wish-fulfillment mostly, I assure you!)
Chapter 1

The thing about London that Arthur liked most was that if you wanted to disappear everyone would let you, without a lot of fuss. And if you wanted to open a bookshop that only sold books on applied sciences, people might call you a lousy businessman, but mostly they'd leave you alone. Basically, no one in London gave two shillings for what Arthur did, which was why Arthur liked London enough to sell books on architecture, design, and engineering at a bookshop called The Robie House, a name he'd chosen on a whim when he was signing the papers and regretted ever since.

"No," he said into the phone for the third time that morning. "No, I'm not Frank Lloyd Wright. He's actually dead. No, the real one's in Chicago. Yes, it's open to the public. No, sorry, I don't sell Spark notes. Try Barnes & Noble. Sure. You too."

Had it been Christmas, or any of the lesser holidays involving candy, Arthur might have been headed towards a bad mood, because he actually liked the few patrons he had, and he liked selling books far more than he liked curating famous architectural works from overseas without pay. But it was only 11:30 on a Sunday morning, and three calls was quite low for the norm, and it was drizzling a nice sour downpour that made everything gray and crisp and lovely, which was just how Arthur liked it. He liked it even more because in weather like this, anyone who came into the store was damn well going to buy *something,* because they'd battled puddles and lorry sloshes and faulty umbrellas to be there, and even if they'd come hoping to buy Paddington Bear or J.D. Robb, they were going home with a book.

One of Arthur's best customers, in fact, was one of these. She'd come huddling in out of a freak snowstorm, looking for a book for her tiny daughter. Arthur sold her *Flatland.* The next week she came back. "I read it aloud to her," she said. "It didn't go as planned."

"I'm sorry," Arthur said.

"I'm going to bring her in so you can explain why she doesn't turn into a pinpoint when she faces the mirror."

Arthur gave her a look. "You've read *Flatland* before," he accused.

"Maybe, but you'll never know," she answered. "I'm Mal, by the way."

"I'm Arthur," he said, and she'd shaken hands and come once a week ever since. Mal had a dour husband who sometimes came in with her and hovered by the door while she shopped, and two bright children who Arthur mostly liked as long as they didn't try to talk to him, which they did these days with increasing persistence, as if they sensed that prolonged exposure might be wearing him down. For children, they were freakishly smart. He was even starting to grow fond of the dour husband, especially when the children would accost him and beg him to buy them books they'd found, despite the fact that nothing Arthur sold was really kid-friendly. (*Flatland* was debatable, as he was certain Mal had already known.)

When she came alone, Mal liked to sit in the back and thumb through the art and architecture books, of the giant coffee table variety that hugged the lower shelves on the back wall because they were too big to fit anywhere else. Arthur would never call his cataloguing system perfect, but it would do until he bothered to get one of those bar-code scanner things for his iphone. Or an iphone, for that matter. Or assistants to help with the scanning. His Monday/Wednesday afternooner didn’t count because she mostly came to sit cross-legged in the aisles, read books, and scold him for not getting cats.

“It’s a big customer draw, I’m telling you,” she’d said on Wednesday.
“It’s an extra forty pounds a month in cat food,” Arthur had replied.

“James and Philippa would love a cat,” Mal said from two aisles over.

“See?” Ariadne batted her eyes at him.

“James and Philippa aren’t paying customers,” Arthur answered.

“That’s not true,” Mal said, noisily turning the page of whatever she was reading. “James paid you in Bratz stickers when you were over last week.”

“And Philippa offered to do your hair like Twilight Sparkle,” Ariadne added.

“All the more reason not to get a cat,” Arthur said. “They already have me.”

“Aww, but you can’t snuggle up to yourself at night when you sleep,” said Ariadne. “Unless the snuggle position is taken and you’ve been hiding it from us.”

“It’s not,” said Mal. “I’d be able to tell.”

“You think so?” said Ariadne, craning her head around the bookshelf to look at Mal. “I don’t know, Arthur’s poker face is pretty serious.”

“When he’s happy he frowns more,” said Mal, who flipped another page and didn’t look up.

Arthur had huffed at them both and retreated upstairs. His last boyfriend, Yusuf, had been rather spectacularly hot and gorgeous and brilliant, in bed and out of it, and Arthur had maybe-tentatively started to get attached around the time Yusuf had decided Arthur was too intense for him. Actually what he’d said was, “I’m going to Canberra for a doctorate,” which was the most ridiculous reason for a breakup Arthur had ever been saddled with.

“But we could still skype,” he’d said blankly. Yusuf had sighed and patted him on the cheek, which Arthur figured was as close to, “You’re too intense for me,” as Yusuf was capable of getting.

Most days he didn’t miss being with someone, even someone as remarkable as Yusuf. He’d had been gone about eight months, and Arthur was getting back into the dating scene as slowly as someone could be who spent all his days and nights with decaying books on engineering and design, and whose only reliable sources of income were the fifteen to twenty copies of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* that he sold every year at Christmastime. Yusuf was getting his P.H.D. in chemical engineering, and Arthur was losing money by the month while doing nothing to curb the inevitable extinction of the bound book.

If he were being totally honest with himself, a cat would be kind of nice. But it might have separation anxiety, and/or Arthur might be too intense for it, and he could never go anywhere for more than a day because he didn’t know any of his neighbors, and despite London being an awfully nice place to get lost in, it wasn’t very handy for asking random strangers to petsit for you. He could probably get Mal and her family to do it, in a pinch—they were almost his friends by now, he suspected—but he wasn’t quite sure of them yet, especially Dour Husband, and it was easier just to wait til he was more settled.

As settled as he would ever get in a musty, two-story specialized bookshop on Portobello Road, where the books and the customers were all rare and overpriced.

He loved it, though. He loved the dust motes illuminated in the windows on sunny days and the rattling of the radiator in the winter, and the old rod-iron spiral staircase leading to the second-floor
landing and his Buckminster Fuller collection. He loved the looks on faces when patrons happened across exactly what they were looking for. And he loved the absolute stillness of mornings like today—when the only sound was the steady rhythm of rain on the roof, and the chill in the air bespoke a day of cozy isolation, just him and the books.

Or so he was thinking when the shop bell rang and Eames walked in.

He was wearing a rough-hewn hoodie from some American university, sweatpants, and a giant pair of sunglasses, and his face was hidden. But Arthur would have known Eames at any distance by the crowded hunch of his shoulders when he moved. It was definitely, definitively Eames. 

And now Eames was standing in front of the touristy shelf and looking at the titles as if he had meant to wander in off the street and start book-buying at Arthur’s shop. The Eames, the same Eames who had come out just after his first major film break, when Arthur was 17 and just getting used to the feeling of not wanting to die of shame every time another boy crept into his wank fantasies. The same Eames that Arthur had emulated, forcing himself to act as if being gay was no big deal—until finally, one day, it wasn’t, and Arthur could breathe for the first time since he hit puberty. The same Eames that Arthur had kept up with over the years, even though he didn’t “keep up” with the lives of celebrities, or with barely anything that happened outside of this shop anymore.

He was dressed as though he could have been out for a mid-morning jog, except that his bodyguards, who had glided noiselessly in behind him and now stood hovering near the doorway, were both wearing suits. Arthur had seen Eames in just about every level of array and disarray imaginable over the years, from borderline jailbait poses to Oscar photoshoots, but he’d never thought about any of those things as beautiful.

But this—firm muscles that peeked through the sleeves of Eames’ sweatshirt, bunching up his frame as though it couldn’t quite contain all of him; the rain dripping off his neck and his ears, which he was ignoring in order to study the titles, going over each of them one by one (Eat, Pray, Love, Eats, Shoots, and Leaves) and smiling a little at some of them; the way he held himself, gingerly, shifting his weight whenever the floor creaked beneath his steps, like a cat picking and finding his way over a land mine—all of this was beautiful.

All of this Arthur noted in the span of a few short seconds. He blinked, watched, and made himself look away before he could be caught staring.

Eames was in his bookshop. His bookshop, which lost him money every month and made him ridiculously happy and brought him nice things once in a while, had brought Eames.

Arthur fiddled with the inventory books, which he hadn’t opened in about three weeks, and smiled to himself. He kept smiling while Eames wandered through the place, sliding in and out of the corner of his vision. After a while he glanced up to see Eames thumbing through one of the books from the archaeology section. He had removed his sunglasses, granting Arthur one long, glorious look at his face shortly before it disappeared behind the shelves. Arthur had once read a Guardian review of The Withdrawn that had called Eames’ face “a house of pain.” It had stuck with him. But in person, Eames’ face didn’t particularly house anything. It was still like the rest of him—surface tension, Author thought. He wondered what it would be like to see laugh lines ripple across it.

Someone coughed pointedly, and Arthur jolted back to reality to find one of the bodyguards eyeing him from beside the cash register. He had built the counter in the back of the store so that people would at least have to wander through it before they demanded to know why he didn’t sell Dan
Brown or Joanna Lindsay. He’d always considered this one of his better decisions until now: the bodyguard had a long body and a long face, and didn’t look as though he liked his time being wasted.

“Are you done?” said the bodyguard, giving him the fisheye.

“I don’t know,” Arthur snapped. “Is he done?”

Perhaps, he thought a second later, that wasn’t the best sort of reply. Miraculously, though, it got a double-take and a chuckle out of the bodyguard. Arthur decided not to press his luck. “What can I help you with, sir?”

“Do you have any educational books for kids?” said the bodyguard.

“That depends,” said Arthur. “Are they kind of kids that like to read books or are they the kind of kids that you have to use bodily force to drag into a classroom?”

The bodyguard laughed again. “Hey, Prianka,” he said to the other bodyguard, who was still stationed by the door. “Listen to this wisearse.”

“Don’t mind him,” said the other bodyguard. “He’s just giving you a hard time.”

Arthur couldn’t figure out which of them she was addressing, so he cleared his throat and continued. “We have some books against the wall over there for children, but they’re all science-related. Some picture books and some for new readers. A few intermediate. If you have reluctant readers, I’d go with something space-related.”

“Yeah,” said the bodyguard. “Yeah. My niece loves planets and shite. She’s five.”

“You should get her The Moon,” Arthur said. “It’s an older book but they re-released it a few years ago. It’s full of Nasa photographs. She’ll like it.”

“You got a copy? My niece is so smart she likes big books, none of this kid stuff,” said the bodyguard, narrowing his eyes a little at Arthur. Arthur knew that look from years of dealing with uni profs and overzealous parents—it was the prove-you’re-worth-your-salt-as-a-bookseller look, because everyone thought they knew more than you when it came to books.

Arthur was used to it, so he just said, “It’s a decent size. We’ve got a copy, I’ll show you.”

He moved around the cash register, and then got no further, because Eames suddenly popped back into his vision and placed a book on the counter in front of him. “Here you are, Martin,” he said. “The Moon.” He flashed Martin a brief, life-altering grin that could have included Arthur, almost, at the periphery. “Seymour Simon. My mum used to read me this book.”

Then he slid another on top of it. “Give her this one as well,” he added, and threw a glance Arthur’s way.

It was another immediately recognizable look, the ‘Let’s-bond-over-how-smart-we-both-are-for-liking-this-book’ look that readers gave booksellers when they secretly wanted to be congratulated on their reading taste. Ordinarily Arthur responded to this look with as much dry scorn as possible, but just at that moment he was so busy looking back at Eames that he forgot what he was supposed to do.

Eames beamed at him. “I can’t believe there’s even a bookstore in London with a copy of this.”

“Wow,” said Arthur again. “Yeah, you—you found my only copy.” Which wasn’t what he meant. What he meant was, *You’re the first person who’s ever picked up my forty-year-old copy of Switch On the Night, which isn’t even for sale, which never mattered before because no one ever touched it, but you did, and you’re in my store, and you’re Eames.*

“This is the original, too, from the fifties.” Eames pointed to the spine. “Look, you can tell from the spine,” he said to Martin. “The older books were bound with cloth and wheat starch. The newer ones all use polyvinyl acetate. Makes the paper smear more.”

“Really?” said Martin.

“Yep.”

“Your dad teach you that when he was forging all those account books?”

“Shh, not so loud,” said Eames, cutting a glance back at Arthur. “He didn’t really,” he said. “At least they never proved anything.”

“Coming from someone who technically doesn’t exist before 1997, I’m not sure that’s comforting,” Arthur said.

Eames looked shocked for a moment, and then laughed out loud.

“Thinks he’s smart,” said Martin the bodyguard.

“He probably is,” said Eames. “You are, aren’t you?” he said to Arthur.

“What?” said Arthur.

“Smart,” said Eames.

“Oh,” said Arthur. “No.”

“No?” said Eames. “I thought all people who ran bookstores were smart.”

Arthur looked at him for a moment. Took a good, hard look. Eames had crinkles along the edges of his mouth. He was fucking gorgeous. And he knew the difference between wheat paste and PVA, and he refused to tell anyone his first name, and Arthur had seen every one of his films at least three times and knew that his lifelong dream was to become a spy, but that he’d settle for playing James Bond, and—fuck it.

He huffed out a breath. “I’m not smart because I’m about to give a book away.”

Eames made a pained sort of face. “No, really, I don’t—”

“No—no, shut up, it’s not ‘cause you’re famous,” said Arthur, and Eames blinked and shut up. “You’re the only person who’s ever come in here and picked up the Bradbury. I do things like that, sometimes—certain books that are too cool to sell, I’ll just put them out around the store just to see if anyone finds them, if anyone even notices. It’s just been sitting over there in the corner next to George’s Secret Key to the Universe. Waiting here all that time for you, I guess. Take it,” he said. “It’s yours.”

Eames blinked at him again, and for a moment Arthur imagined he looked intrigued. “Well, that’s very kind of you,” he said. “Thank you, er—?”
He held out his hand.


“Thank you, Arthur,” said Eames.

His handshake was firm and utterly peremptory, and Arthur did his best not to notice.

Eames looked delighted. “You hear that?” he said to Martin. “It loves me!”

“You think everyone loves you,” said Prianka. Even from the back of the shop Arthur could see her eyes roll.

“No, they’re just intimidated by the size of my BAFTA,” said Eames. Then he winced. “Oh, god, that sounded egotistical.” He threw a half-glance at Arthur. “But, seriously, have you ever seen one up close?” Eames asked him. “They’re huge. You could take out half a city block with one. I told my mum the one they gave me was bigger than any actual role I’ve ever had.”

“Not L’Hôpital,” said Arthur, and then immediately regretted it.

Eames never stayed focused on one thing for very long, Arthur had noticed—but now he took a long, appraising look at Arthur. It was unnerving and uncomfortable, having those eyes—greener up close than Arthur had ever realized, or at least they were today—trained directly on you, keen and penetrating. Arthur swallowed and held his gaze, reminding himself that there was nothing wrong in being an eccentric who owned a bookstore and had seen every Eames film at least three times, even the disaster that was L’Hôpital that no one had heard of (except for Ebert, who’d called it Eames’ On the Waterfront and director Fischer’s Brown Bunny). There was nothing wrong with being a fan—even if being the kind of fan who’d seen L’Hôpital meant you were probably the kind of fan who knew about the parallel behind-the-scenes disaster that was Eames’ tumultuous relationship and breakup with Fischer. Anyone who’d paid attention knew that it had wrecked them both—Eames for a long time and Fischer perhaps permanently.

Except Eames was here, in Arthur’s shop, and he didn’t look wrecked at all.

“Well, if you’ve seen that one, then you’re right,” Eames said at last, presumably after satisfying himself that Arthur wasn’t going to follow him home or lie in wait for him at airport terminals. “Clearly you’ve no sense at all.”

Arthur smiled back at him before he could help himself. He gave the cover of Switch On the Night a farewell pat and slid the book across the counter, but Eames refused it. “Hold on a tic,” he said in his lovely louche accent. “Aren’t you going to inscribe it? My mum always told me never to give a book away without writing who it’s from, who it’s to, and the date and occasion.” Arthur stared at him. Eames waggled his fingers. “Hurry along,” he said.

Arthur stared a bit longer. Then he realized he’d been gripping the countertop ever since Eames let go of his hand. He released it and reached for the nicest pen he had, trying not to look like a fanboy having a fever dream. Trying not to think about the irony that after all these years, he was giving Eames an autograph.

For Eames, he wrote in the top right corner of the frontispiece. From Arthur, he wrote just below.

Then, below that, Thanks for your patronage and love of the printed word— he hesitated. What did you say, given the chance, to someone who had no idea what a hero they’d been to you through all the years? Someone whose life had, in some incredibly indirect but still incredibly real way, shaped your own?
—and for living a life that inspires, he finished.

He signed as The Robie House and handed it to Eames. Eames read the inscription, then glanced up at Arthur again. “Thank you, Arthur,” he said again, in a different voice.

He offered his hand again. Arthur took it. This time it was more of a warm clasp, and Arthur was trying not to do anything as embarrassing as let their fingers linger when bodyguard #2 called from the front of the store where she was still lodged, impervious, “Somebody’s trying really hard to have a meet-cute.”

Arthur felt his cheeks flame up before Eames even let go of his hand. “Don’t be ridiculous,” Eames said. “Until you really get to know someone, everything’s a meet-cute.” He gave Arthur a reassuring smile, as if he was used to people embarrassing themselves in front of him or awkwardly accidentally flirting—because he was, Arthur reminded himself, and then felt his face redden even further. Martin shifted on his feet, looking faintly alarmed, as if he’d fallen down on his body guarding and Arthur might decide to leap across the counter and pounce at any moment. Arthur sullenly considered not letting his niece have The Moon, but that was probably petty.

“Put this one on mine, then,” said Eames, taking The Moon out of Martin’s hands.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” said Martin. “You have to let me buy some things for my own niece.”

“That’s not in any rulebook I know,” said Eames. “Besides, I clearly can’t give her the Bradbury anymore, I’ve got to keep it. Oh, and no giving this one away, either,” he added to Arthur. “I can’t have Martin thinking he works for free.”

“In that case, it’ll be three hundred pounds,” said Arthur, deadpan.

Eames gave him a tiny smile. “No sense at all,” he said again, sliding over his credit card, which Arthur rang up for the correct amount of £14.

He put the parcels in separate bags at Eames’ request; Eames gave one to the bodyguard and hugged the other close to his chest, declaring that he meant to keep an eye on the Bradbury until it understood who was boss.

“That’ll be the day,” said Martin.

“Thank you, Arthur, for the book,” said Eames. “It’s very kind.”

“Nice meeting you,” said Arthur, but Eames had already turned away. He slid his sunglasses back on, wrapped his hoodie around the paper bag, and pulled it tight over his forehead. Then he slipped out into the rain, the two bodyguards drifting after him like mist.

“I heard Eames was filming around here,” said Mal a few days later. “Dom said he saw a photo of him on Portobello Road the other day. How nice if someone like that were to come in here.”

“Yeah,” said Arthur. “Yeah, it would be.”

And that was that.

Four months later, Arthur was actually outside for once, taking a stroll along the Long Water, when his phone rang. It was Ariadne, calling from the store, and Arthur ignored it because usually when Ariadne phoned it was because someone desperately needed a book on applied nuclear physics that had gone out of print in 1933, and Arthur had inventoried it and then lost it, which meant it was probably shelved under Aquatic Forensics, or one of the other categories they had just made up for
lack of better descriptors; and since Arthur never had any idea where anything was, he never answered the phone.

So he didn’t, and then thirty seconds later it rang again. And again.

He picked up on the fourth try and interrupted Ariadne muttering, “Goddammit, Arthur, pick up your — oh, god, there you are. Where are you?”

“Kensington.”

“Good, you know the news stand on Peter Pan Walk? Go there. Go there right now.”

It wasn’t far, so Arthur didn’t hang up. “Are you going to tell me what I’m doing when I get there?”

“What? Sorry, hang on—” and there was the unmistakable background noise of several people talking at once, which could only mean that multiple people were in the store. At the same time. Arthur walked a little faster. By the time he got to the kiosk, Ariadne was back. “Okay, do they have an OK!”

“Ariadne,” said Arthur.

“I mean the magazine! Don’t hang up, I’m serious! Find the magazine and look for some kind of celebrity top five list or something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know, just go do it and tell me what you see.”

Arthur muttered apologies to the vendor, who was throwing impatient glances at him as he futzed around with the magazine racks. He pulled one out from where it had been jammed behind a Vanity Fair and uncrumpled it.

“Emma Stone’s on the cover,” he said.

“Right, good, okay, find the top five quiz.” The background noise swallowed her up again—she sounded like a combat sergeant rattling off orders in the middle of an artillery assault. Arthur dutifully turned to the contents and thumbed to page 54: Top Five Faves From our Top Five Faves. It was one of those deals where you polled random celebs on their favorite random things. OK!’s “Top Five Fave” actors were, apparently, Emma Stone, Jeff Bridges, Helen Mirren, Idris Elba, and—and Eames. Arthur’s stomach dropped.

“Arthur? Arthur, are you there?” Arthur skimmed past the other actors and found Eames, in the right hand column. The photo was a stock image from that collab he’d done with Herzog last year, which meant it was probably a phone interview.

“Arthur?”

“Yeah. Sorry. I’m here. Hang on a sec, I found it.”

OK! caught up with everyone’s favorite enigma, Eames, currently on break between filming the second and third films in the mega-blockbuster fantasy trilogy Mayhem. The modest workaholic was only too happy to tell us where he likes to go to relax when he’s not hauling himself up the ladder to superstardom.

Arthur took a deep breath.
EAMES’ Top 5 Everyday Sanctuaries

1. The Italian fountain at Kensington Gardens. My brother pushed me in it once when I was a kid. Some things stay with you.
2. Prince Charles Cinema, right up from the ice cream place in Leicester. Walk in off the street and you can find dirt-cheap grindhouse, arthouse, roadhouse, all of it better and vastly more interesting than anything I’ve ever got my hands on in Hollywood. Better sit in the balcony on theme nights—it gets messy down front.
3. I don’t know. Really, I think lists like these are rubbish, but there’s this fantastic bookshop called the Robie House on Portobello Road—you walk in and it’s like you’re transported to Narnia or something. Plus, if you’re nice to the owner, Arthur, he may just let you plunder his dearest treasures.
4. Hampstead Heath. I feel like I’m in a Georgette Heyer novel when I’m back there. Is it okay for guys to say they’ve read those? Oh, well, too late.
5. The Wallace Collection. Apart from being one of the most intimidatingly silent buildings in the Commonwealth, it’s got a fabulous art collection. I once filched a lovely little Fragonard from the French room. Thank you, London!

“Arthur? Arthur! What’s it say?”

“Um,” said Arthur.

“Mister, are you gonna pay for that thing or what?” said the vendor.

“Um,” said Arthur.

“Arthur? Tell me what it says now,” said Ariadne.

“I’ll—bring you a copy,” said Arthur.

“What? No! No! Arthur, don’t you dare hang up this phone! Arth—”

“Two quid,” said the vendor.

Arthur stared at it all the way home. Plus, if you’re nice to the owner, Arthur, he may just let you plunder his dearest treasures. Plus, if you’re nice to the owner, Arthur, Arthur may let you plunder his treasures Plunder his treasures Plunder his—

Arthur

He may just let you plunder his dearest treasures.

May just let you plunder his dearest treasures.

Plunder his dearest treasures.

Arthur

Arthur may let you plunder his treasures

Plunder his treasures

Plunder his—
Outside his bookstore a man holding a giant camera stuck a hideous flashbulb in his face and then ran away.

“Arthur!” Mal said when Arthur stumbled inside blinking. “You’re supposed to tell us when you sleep with famous people.”

The fifteen or twenty people milling around the bookshop stopped and gawked at them.

“Oh, my god, is that it?” shrieked Ariadne, bolting from behind the counter to the front of the store like a marathoner and grabbing the magazine from him.

“Don’t crease it,” Arthur said, rubbing his temple.

“Hey, do you have any James Herriot?” said a customer.

“I thought this was an adult bookstore,” said another one.

“Is it true this is one of Eames’ favorite places?” said another one. “You’ve talked to him, right? What’s he like? Is he hot?”

“Oh, my god, Arthur,” said Ariadne. “You let Eames plunder your treasure! He knows your name! Oh, my god, he wants to plunder your treasure!”

“It’s just a figure of speech,” said Arthur.

“Oh, my god!” said Ariadne.

“That’s a very direct figure of speech,” said Mal.

Arthur swallowed and began attempting to explain to anyone who would listen that this was a science bookstore.

“What’s that mean?” someone said.

“It means we only sell books on science,” said Arthur.

“Was this place designed by Frank Lloyd Wright?” said someone else.

“I’ll get you an aspirin,” said Mal.

And so it went. The first day six different journalists called him to ask him if it was true that he was having an affair with Eames. “Come on,” said one. “Just one little sex tape?” At least eight people came in specifically to check out Arthur and inform him they’d be more than happy to plunder his treasure, and an inspector from Scotland Yard came by to ask him if he knew anything about a missing Fragonard. Forty people came in to buy commercial fiction, and between the two of them, Ariadne and Arthur managed to sell about half of them books. “I sold a woman looking for Twilight a copy of Gorillas in the Mist,” said Ariadne at the end of the day. “I win.”

“I concede,” said Arthur, popping the lid off the bottle of aspirin Mal had given him. “Why don’t you keep the whole bottle,” she’d said before she left.

“You know, if this keeps up, you might actually start making a profit,” said Ariadne.

Arthur swigged a paper cup from the water cooler and filled it. “It means I might actually have to do inventory,” he said. “Oh, god, I’m going to be besieged with hipsters or something.”
“You are a hipster,” said Ariadne.

“Exactly,” said Arthur, taking a giant swallow.

The phone rang. It was fifteen minutes after the store had closed, and the till was already locked—they’d actually made about eight hundred dollars that day, which was kind of cool—but what the hell. Arthur answered it anyway. “Robie House,” he said. “We sell science books only, we’re not related to the Frank Lloyd Wright edifice in Chicago, and no one here has ever slept with anyone named Eames.”

There was a long pause. “This is Penelope Rider from the Turnkey Publicity Group,” said a cool voice on the other end. “I’m Mr. Eames’ publicist.”

Arthur turned away from Ariadne and banged his elbow on the counter. “Oh. Ow. Right. Sorry, I was just making a joke,” he said. “Just then.”

“I take it you are aware,” Penelope Rider forged on, “that Mr. Eames mentioned you today in an article published in OK! Magazine.”

“I saw it, yes,” said Arthur, ignoring the way Ariadne was mouthing at him frantically.

“Mr. Eames wants to make it clear that nothing in the article was meant to cast aspersions on your character, or imply that the two of you have been connected in any way,” she said.


—Mr. Eames also wants to make it clear that he will strenuously deny any and all allegations to the contrary. Concomitant to these firm denials, Mr. Eames will not be party to any suit of libel or defamation—“

“Woah, hold on, wait a second,” said Arthur. “I’m not going to stalk him or sue him, or—what do you people think I am? He’s the one who said it, not me. You think I wanted him to send half of London into my store today? Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate the publicity, but—” he stopped and sighed. “Look, could I—could I maybe just talk to him?”

Another long pause. “I don’t think that would be a good idea, Mister…”


“Mr. Arthur,” said Penelope Rider. “Mr. Eames apologizes for any inconvenience and wishes you and your business success.”

“He didn’t really inconvenience—” said Arthur, but Penelope Rider had already hung up.

“I can’t believe you,” said Dom—that was the name of Mal’s dour husband—two nights later. “I don’t know if I want you hanging around our kids anymore.”


“Because you slept with Eames,” said Dom, “and didn’t even get me an autograph!”

“I didn’t sleep with Eames,” said Arthur wearily.

“You didn’t tell anyone he came to the shop,” said Mal. “That looks suspicious.”

“See? That looks suspicious,” said Dom.
“There was nothing to tell,” said Arthur. “He came in, he bought a book, he left, it happened months ago.”

“He remembered your name,” said Dom accusingly.

“Because he’s not a heel,” said Arthur.


“Who does Arthur like?” said Philippa from Arthur’s elbow, where she was drawing a racecar on Arthur’s arm in red sharpie. “Can he come over?”

“I don’t think Arthur wants his friend Eames to come over, honey,” said Dom with a glare.

What Arthur wanted was currently off the table, because what he really wanted was to be left alone, but what he had instead were tourists and locals wandering into his shop constantly, taking photographs and asking him if he had a Twitter. What he had was Time Out calling the Robie House one of “London’s new classics,” and Fodor’s calling to inform him they would be including the shop in the newest edition of London’s 25 Best.

He also had hourly requests to do special orders, get a Facebook, get a Tumblr, get a blog, get a vlog, get a LinkedIn, get a website, do more advertising, let the local deli cater his next book club meeting, start hosting book clubs, start stocking Nora Roberts, start doing gift wrapping, increase his stock, do online ordering, partner with Amazon, partner with Book Depo, partner with things he’d never heard of, put in an extra bathroom, spill the deets on having sex with the hottest man in Britain, stop and pose for photographs, and tell him where the door to Narnia was located. Oh, and give his assistant a raise.

“You should give me a raise,” said Ariadne.

“How much am I paying you?” said Arthur.

“That’s beside the point,” said Ariadne. “Do you see all these people? See all the people, Arthur?”

“Yes, I see all the people,” said Arthur.

“Do you even know how much money you made last week? It was a lot! I should get a commission on the number of times I talked people into buying Jacques Cousteau after they came in wanting John Grisham.”

“I can’t pay you a commission,” said Arthur. “Bookstores don’t pay commission.”

“Then ask me to come in more days a week so you’ll have someone to help you with all of this when I’m not here,” said Ariadne, waving her hand in the general direction of the shop floor, and possibly at the kid who was stuffing a copy of Kinsey in her backpack.

Arthur rolled his eyes. “I’m fine. It’s fine,” he said, and walked over to the kid with the backpack. She saw him, froze, then tried to play it off. He held out his hand. “It’s wordy and outdated, you wouldn’t like it much anyway,” he said. “Try Biological Exuberance instead.”

“Are you always like this?” she said, digging the Kinsey out and handing it over.

Arthur shrugged. “Opening your own bookstore is easier than carrying a backpack everywhere,” he said. He lugged Biological Exuberance off the shelf and plopped it into her hands.
She eyebrowfaced at him. “Gay animals?”

“It’s illustrated,” said Arthur. “Next time you’re in here, buy something.”

“Cool,” she said, and took off.

“It’s seriously like you don’t actually want to run a successful business,” said Ariadne when he came back to the register. “Do you actually want a successful business?”

“Go take a lunch break,” Arthur said.

“I only have a four-hour shift.”

“Then take an extended coffee break,” said Arthur.

“You don’t!” said Ariadne. “You don’t want a successful business! I knew it! You’re independently wealthy and you don’t actually care whether you sell books or not!”

“Bring me back a soy macchiato,” said Arthur, pushing her out the door.

“Hipster,” said Ariadne.

Even if Ariadne was technically right, it wasn’t like Arthur resented his bookshop suddenly being trendy, even if it meant he had to work harder to keep up with requests, and spend more hours cleaning up and reshelving, and hire a boutique to make brochures so he could hand them to people out instead of answering the same questions eighty times a day, even if the marketing firm had drawn the line at bulleting, “No, I did not have sex with Eames,” at the top.

All right, so he did resent it.

But at the same time it was kind of cool. “Petra said she saw a writeup on the store last week,” Yusuf said the next time he called. “Is that true? Have you gone mainstream?”

“No,” said Arthur. “Please don’t say that word.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” said Yusuf. “You clearly don’t need the money, but you can still enjoy it and have a little fun.”

“I wouldn’t call it fun,” said Arthur. “Actually it’s a pain in the ass.”

Yusuf laughed. “You think everything’s a pain in the arse. Actually, you think life is a pain in the arse.” Arthur frowned. “And now you’re probably fretting over what I just said.”

“No, I’m not,” said Arthur, unfrowning.

“Oh, Arthur,” said Yusuf. “This is a good thing. Most businessmen would kill for some exposure. What happened, anyway?”

“Eames, uh, happened,” said Arthur.

“Eames?” said Yusuf. “Eames the superstar, Eames? Eames whom you’ve been in love with since you were 16, Eames?”

“Eames,” said Arthur.

“Sorry, what’s bad about any of this again?” said Yusuf after Arthur had explained.
Arthur ran a hand through his hair. “I just don’t know why it matters that I don’t have a website,” he said. “Or that I only sell science books, or that I give things away sometimes. Or whether or not I slept with him—”

“Hold on,” said Yusuf. “Hold on, you definitely left something out, I think.”

Arthur grit his teeth.

“Sorry, I’m still not getting what’s bad about this,” said Yusuf, after Arthur had re-explained. “You could get sex every night for the next five years just off the idea that you might have done it with Eames.” He barked out a laugh. “Oh, my god, you’re on the E-list.”

“That’s not a real list,” said Arthur.

“It is,” said Yusuf. “It’s the list for people who aren’t actually famous but know people who are, and so get invited to all the parties because they’re hot and everyone wants to know what their secret is.”

“You think I’m hot?” said Arthur, frowning again.

“No, Arthur,” said Yusuf. “I only slept with you for two years that one time as an ironic joke.”

“Oh,” said Arthur.

“Look,” said Yusuf. “Sometimes nice things happen. Sometimes people get lucky. Sometimes you run into something unexpected that throws you off balance, sure. But it won’t always be like this. People will forget the publicity, the job market will drop again, Eames will go on to not-sleep with some other bookstore owner, and everyone will move on. At least try to enjoy it while it lasts.”

“When are you coming back to London?” asked Arthur.

Yusuf sighed. “I don’t know. Might be back at Christmas—I haven’t decided. But that’s not really important, is it?”

Arthur chewed a hangnail and breathed in. It was night, and all the lights were off except for the front window and the lamp beside Arthur’s office desk. The store seemed bigger at night, eerie and completely still. He could hear the books whisper, sometimes. Sometimes in the fall, the radiator would rattle and the pages would answer. Sometimes the store seemed noisier once all the people had left for the day, as if the books were just waiting til they were alone to strike up a conversation. Science geek or not, some things Arthur knew better than to question.

Right now everything was quiet. Peaceful. The glares from the front windows spooled faint amber light between the bookshelves, strewing long shadows over the cherry walls. Arthur thought that maybe a website wouldn’t be a bad thing. He could post pictures when it lit up this way, all magical and Victorian—if the shop would stand still long enough to let him.

“No,” he said to Yusuf. “I guess it isn’t.”

“Ohmigosh, really?” squeaked Ariadne when he mentioned it to her later. “Oh, my god, you have to let me do the website. And the tumblr. Oh, my god, you’re going to have the best photos. It’s going to be great!” She threw her arms around him and jumped up to plant a kiss on his forehead. “You’re turning into a businessman, look at you!”

“Please stop,” said Arthur.

“I know a guy who can JQuery a whole site for us in like thirty minutes,” said Ariadne. “Just let me
handle it.”

“Why don’t I let you handle it,” said Arthur.

“Yes!” She fistpumped the air. “You know you’re going to have to redo all these flyers, right?”

“I just got those flyers,” said Arthur.

“Maybe we should have a meeting with the ad agency to talk about what the url will be and what kind of social network feeds you’re going to need, so you don’t have to keep reprinting things,” said Ariadne.

“A meeting,” said Arthur blankly.

“Why not?” said Ariadne. “You’re already wearing a suit.”

So Arthur went to the meeting. Then he made weekly business calls, and got an invitation to go to the monthly Notting Hill business association dinner.

Oh, why not, Arthur thought. He already had a suit.

The weeks went by, and gradually Arthur got used to the extra traffic through his store, and the businessmen dropping off their cards, and the weekly calls to the marketing boutique—they’d given him his own account, apparently, and his own account manager, who got testy if he didn’t send her a weekly update on his publicity campaign.

“We don’t really have any updates,” he’d explained.

“Well, then that’s the first thing we’ll change,” she said.

At her urging, and Ariadne’s gleeful encouragement, they started experimenting with the look of the place. He did something he’d been thinking about for a while and got new shelves—not the sleek modern kind but tall sturdy monstrosities of polished black walnut. The ones against the walls stretched all the way to the first-floor ceiling. The ones in the middle of the floor they arranged into an elaborate labyrinth—architecture on one end and zoology on the other, and two giant archways of books forming the entrance at either end.

“Cool,” said Arthur when they were done.

The taller shelves meant that the rows were wider, which meant that more people could actually fit into the store at one time, which was auspicious because more people wanted in. The week after the labyrinth, Arthur turned the window display into a giant double helix made out of his favorite books on genetic research. He sold more books on genetic research in a day than he’d sold since he opened the shop.

After that it was something different every week: a fish sculpture made out of books on marine life, a rocket made out of books on aeronautics. Slowly the steady stream of regulars began to increase, and Arthur started to get emails—he wasn’t totally nineteenth-century, after all, he had email, he just hadn’t bothered to check it very often before now—from people making suggestions for what the next sculpture would be. Then the art students started dropping by, and before he knew it the storefront was being featured as an ongoing art project by the Tate Museum, and the displays got more and more creative: giant Galapagos tortoises made from books on evolution; a Puffin made out of Penguin Classics; a solar system made from a strategically deconstructed *Brief History of Time.*

“Cool,” said Arthur.
Around the time it began to dawn on Arthur that he was making a profit for once, it began to dawn on other people as well. “Why don’t you think about letting people invest?” said one of the suits to him at the monthly business dinner. “You’d get all kinds of offers.”

“It’s not that kind of business,” said Arthur.

The suit looked blank. “What kind?”

Arthur considered, and figured saying, “The kind that makes money,” would sound mocking. “The kind that yields a substantial financial return,” he ventured.

The suit handwaved at him. “I know, books are dying and the publishing industry is going kaput, it’s the end of the world as we know it, et cetera. But you’ve got a really strong business here. It’s trendy —” Arthur winced—“it’s engaging, it’s entwined with the community. You could really go places.”

“Thanks,” said Arthur. “I don’t really want to go anywhere.”

“At least take my card,” said the suit. Arthur took it, and left after he finished his wine.

Gradually people forgot about the rumors about Eames. The tabloids stopped phoning, and the paps stopped hanging around outside waiting to see if he’d fuck any more celebrities. But people still kept coming into the store. If anything, more people came as time went on; after Ariadne convinced him to start offering free coffee, Arthur sometimes wound up staying open late just to accommodate the late-night crowd wandering over from the theatre district after a show. One afternoon Mal came in at the usual time and found she had nowhere to sit; she pursed her lips and went away without a word, and came back in an hour with a small café table and a set of chairs, which she sat outside of the store on the sidewalk.

“Are we allowed to block the walk?” Arthur asked.

“I don’t think anyone is going to mind a little socializing, Arthur,” said Mal, in that prim, polite voice she used when she would brook no refusal. Arthur brought her a cup of coffee and a scone, and she sat outside, contentedly sipping from her mug and reading A User’s Guide to the Brain, striking up conversations with people as they passed by, and more often than not, diverting them inside Arthur’s store.

“I should give you a commission,” said Arthur, after she’d sold three books in an hour.

“Oh,” she said. “I don’t think Ariadne would like that much. But you will get more chairs, won’t you, Arthur?”

Arthur got more chairs.

“Dear, your father and I don’t mind you squandering your inheritance,” said his mother the next time she stopped over—she squeezed in a few days’ layover between Europe and Boston whenever she could. “But aren’t you going to run out of room?”

“I’ve got plenty of room,” said Arthur, fixing her a cup of coffee.

“There must have been thirty people in here when I came in,” she said, taking the cup and looking around the place in that way she had of looking at any room and instantly making it seem three times smaller. “If you bring in any more chairs they’ll have to squeeze against the walls. You might consider expanding.”

Arthur blinked at her. “I’ve had this space for three years. I built all the shelves upstairs. And tore out
all the old wallpaper and finished the paneling, and put in all the ironwork. And redid the plumbing when the pipes burst."

“Well, I’m not suggesting you give it up,” she said. “You live just upstairs, it’d hardly be sensible to uproot your whole life. But I have been making some inquiries around the neighborhood, and—”

“Mom,” said Arthur.

“Don’t interrupt, Arthur,” said his mother. “Did you know that the man who owns the antique place next door has cancer?”

“Mom!” said Arthur.

“Well, it’s just Hodgkin’s, he’s not going to die,” said his mother. “At least I don’t think people die from that anymore.”

“Please stop talking,” said Arthur.

“My point is that he’s moving back to Cardiff to be with his family,” said his mother. “You know that means he’ll either close up shop or sell it off.”

“I’m not buying a shop from someone who has cancer,” said Arthur.

“Well, someone will if you don’t,” said his mother. “Besides, it’s not as if you have any reason not to do it. You’ve been run ragged for months, ever since that celebrity came in here. The least you owe yourself is some breathing room.”

“Eames,” said Arthur. “Eames is the celebrity.”

His mother stopped stirring her coffee and looked up at him. “You mean that boy you had all the pinups of in high school?”

Arthur felt the tips of his ears go red. He spluttered a little and got another cup of coffee for himself just to have something to do with his hands.

“You know your room is still just as you left it when you left for college,” said his mother.

“Which I’ve explained to you before is really creepy,” protested Arthur.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Ellen’s youngest stays there when they come in from Rochester. He loves it. I kept all those posters on the walls. You’d know that if you ever came home.”

“Mom,” said Arthur.

“I could mail them to you, if you like,” said his mother. “Maybe you could put them up right here in the store?”

“Oh, god,” said Arthur in a small voice. It took another moment for him to realize that she was snickering into her coffee cup.

“I hate you,” he said.

“You do nothing of the kind,” said his mother, taking a sip. “But really, Arthur. You should consider what I said. You have enough money to buy out the space next door, and you could hire someone full-time to help you with the expansion and all the new customers. You could even turn part of the store into a cafe if you like. Lord knows they’re all the rage.”
Arthur leaned against the Quantum Physics shelf and rubbed his temple. “It’s not that easy,” he said.

“Oh, Arthur,” said his mother. “With you, nothing is ever easy.”

He frowned, and the two of them stood in silence for a moment, his mother looking around the room and taking in all the books while Arthur studied his coffee.

“I’ve just never wanted it to grow,” Arthur managed after a moment.

His mother looked over at him, and Arthur tried not to grimace as she studied his face—he hated when she studied his face. At length, she sighed and patted his hair. “I know what you wanted,” she said. “You wanted to be left alone, to never have to bother with the rest of the world. But, Arthur, just because you want keep to yourself doesn’t mean life will let you. If you ask me, it wouldn’t be much of a life if it did.”

She finished her coffee and kissed his cheek. “When I come back again I want to see this place bursting at the seams with people. A new room with a full addition of books and a huge café for all your gatherings. Book clubs and chess clubs and poetry slams and open mic nights.”

“Sure,” said Arthur. “Just do me a favor and shoot me before you leave.”

In the days that followed, he found himself thinking about it anyway. More room would mean he could expand the architecture and design section, put the biographies on permanent display, and install a whole seating area with bookshelves and couches nestled against each other, so Mal could sit down and stay whenever she liked. And Ariadne would have a field day. Like Arthur, her passion was architecture, but unlike Arthur, whose interest was mostly theoretical, she was brilliant at knowing how to manipulate space, how to convert the energy of a room into something magnificent. Arthur could leave the whole design to her. Hell, they could redesign the whole bookshop. They could work with the loft space even more than Arthur had been able to at first. He could put in skylights—he’d been unable to do that before because of the adjoining rooftops. He could put in a rooftop garden and use it to promote the section on organic farming that he’d never before had the room to cultivate.

Shit. He could have movie nights.

In the end, the owner of the antique store came to him. Apparently a rumor was going around, the way rumors did, that Arthur was interested.

The asking price was enormous—of course it was, this was Notting Hill—and Arthur almost tabled the whole idea when he heard it. But then he recalled the suit from the business association.

“Are you still interested in investing?”

“I’m always interested in investing,” answered the suit.

“I’m interested in expanding,” Arthur said.

“Fantastic,” said the suit. “What location are you thinking?”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “No, not the business. Just the store. I want to buy out the building next door.”

“Marvelous!” said the suit. “And then you can think about opening up other locations.”

“No,” said Arthur. “This isn’t a chain. It’s never going to be a chain.”
The suit paused, and the call stretched out awkwardly for a few seconds. “You’ll pardon me,” he said. “I’m just not used to businessmen who don’t want to grow their business.”

“Sorry I wasted your time,” said Arthur, and he hung up.

“So I think I need an investor,” he confessed to Mal later. “But not a businessman. Just somebody who’ll accept a percentage of the business and let me run it my own way, and won’t expect me to be some kind of ruthless entrepreneur.”

“Why don’t you ask your family?” Mal asked. She was sitting crosslegged on the floor of their living room, braiding Philippa’s hair. Arthur felt awkward looking down at them, so he joined them on the rug.

“Wow,” he said as he sank down into it. “This is a nice rug. Maybe I should ask you.”

“Maybe you should,” said Mal.

“Nah,” said Arthur. “I can’t lose my best customer.”

Mal studied him for a moment, then shrugged. “Suit yourself,” she said. “We’d be happy to help.”

“You’ve done more than enough already,” said Arthur. He thought about this for a moment. “Actually, are you trying to adopt me?”

Mal smiled at him. “Don’t be silly, Arthur. We put down the re-homing fee for you months ago.”

“So why haven’t you signed a contract with anyone?” Ariadne asked him a few weeks later. The shop was closed for the night, and they were testing out different seating patterns to see how many chairs they could comfortably fit. “You’ve had plenty of people interested in going in with you. I know Mal’s asked around. She talked to my anthropology professor and he grilled me on what kind of boss you were. What was wrong with him? He’s nice.”

“Too glib,” said Arthur, trying to wedge a straight-back chair between two bookshelves. Just a few centimeters too close.

“Oh, my god, Arthur, it’s an investment, not courtship.”

“I know that, but I can’t let someone invest in this place if they don’t—oh, never mind,” said Arthur, studying the gap between the shelves.

“If they don’t love it the way you do, I know. Good thing I told him you were horrible, by the way.”

“Hmm,” said Arthur, giving one bookcase an experimental push that went nowhere. “So, no extra lump of coal for you at Christmas.”

“Don’t mock my state of perpetual poverty. Not when you’re waffling about finding the perfect investor, which you don’t actually need because you’re secretly rich.”

“Not that rich,” Arthur said. He leaned against one of the shelves and tried ineffectually to brace against it with his shoulder.

“I think you just like to do things the hard way,” said Ariadne, coming to his end of the bookcase and shifting some of the books around. “You know that’s why I became an architect?”

“Because you enjoy doing things the hard way?”
“Because I hate it. My mom is really obsessed with mazes and traps and weird houses. She would always give my brother and I these playhouses with hidden passages and secret tunnels. Once when I was little she took me inside this funhouse maze and I hated it. I was crying the whole time and finally I just got fed up and lifted back one of the curtains and kicked down the plywood so I could get out.”

“I thought you loved mazes,” Arthur said. She grabbed the chair and stood on it, then started hefting books to the top shelf.

“I do, now,” she said, hefting all the heavy books to their side of the bookcase. “At the time I just didn’t understand what the point was. Why make something convoluted when you could just go right through to the other side? So my mom sat me down after the carnies were finished yelling at me and told me that I should start trying to find the shortest way possible to get from one side of a building to the other. She made a whole game out of it. By the time I was ten or so, I could walk into just about any building and know where all the windows and exits were, and how easy the fire escape was to get to, and which was the fastest way out.” She finished stacking the heaviest books on Arthur’s end, hopped down from the chair, and came around to the gap between the shelves. “Now tilt,” she said.

Arthur tried it, and the re-distributed weight of the books helped him tilt the shelf back, lifting the bottom and giving him just enough leverage to swing the case on its axis a few centimeters in the other direction. For a moment the books shifted and slid precariously across the top shelf. “Don’t even think about it,” Arthur ordered them, and set the case gently down again.

Ariadne slid the chair in between the two shelves, with room to spare. “That’s right.” She dusted her hands on the back of her jeans. “Who you gonna call?”

Arthur sent her an unimpressed look. “My brilliant part-time assistant.”

“That’s correct,” she said.

“Who deserves a raise,” Arthur said.

“That’s cor—wait, seriously?”

Arthur sighed. “Well, somebody’s got to help me get ready for the expansion,” he said.

“What? Seriously? You’re gonna do it? Yes! Yesyesyes!” She let out a whoop and high-fived the countertop.

“There’s more,” Arthur said. “If you’re not too busy with grad school.”

“What, are you kidding? School is like candy floss for me, what do you need? I can come in on the weekends, I’ve told you that a zillion times.”

“Actually,” Arthur said, “I’d like to commission you to do the architectural redesign.”

Her eyes slowly widened, and Arthur had a hard time tamping down a grin. “Oh, my god,” she said. “Oh, my god. Arthur, you—no, wait, you can’t just do that, you’ve never even seen my portfolio! How do you know I’m even any good? Are you sure you don’t want Mal?”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure this is my only chance to hire you before Mal does.”

“Mal wants to hire me?” said Ariadne. “Jeez Louise. You’ve got to stop with the dramatic revelations, I’m going to choke.”
Arthur laughed. “I can’t promise to meet your salary requirements, but I am prepared to make you an offer.” He went around behind the counter, wrote it down, and slid the paper over to Ariadne, who’d gone still.

“Will that do?” he said.

Ariadne stared at it and swallowed. Then she gave him a hard look. “Do I get my name on the little ‘under construction’ thingy?”

“Yes,” said Arthur.

Ariadne grinned.

“This is going to be amazing,” she said.

Arthur smiled. He was pretty sure she was right.

Two weeks later he was pretty sure he was going to die in a hell of paperwork before he ever saw the inside of the new space.

He was sitting on a park bench in Parliament Hill, because his lawyer’s office was in Hampstead, and Arthur could only take so many hours of contracts and building ordinances before he rebelled. A lawyer’s office wasn’t full of messy smells like a bookshop—it was all oiled leather chairs, fresh copy toner—nothing like the stale odor of aging paper and brittling glue, or the croissants Arthur had started putting out with his coffee in the mornings. It was all too sharp and clean for him; by noon he’d been frantic for the crisp October air and a forest of leaves crunching beneath his feet—something to remind him why he was bothering with all this fuss when he could have been back at the store reading a biography on Ada Lovelace. It was a beautiful day, and although his lawyer had insisted that he pay careful attention to the fresh barrage of forms he was to fill out, he’d chosen the wrong place to do it: the Heath was full of joggers and soccer players and frisbee-tossers and dogs and dog-walkers and squirrels being chased by said dogs and nannies with prams and toddlers with caramel apples in their hands, and vendors hawking the apples, and the headiness of autumn that made Arthur shiver—one-part from the chill, two-parts from delight.

And then he saw that one of the joggers, coming up the hill in exactly the same hoodie, was none other than Eames.

He closed his folders and sat still for a moment. Eames’ bodyguards, Martin and Prianka, were following a short distance behind him, far enough to give the appearance that Eames was just another person out for a run on a nice day—if Eames could ever have been just anyone else with his body and his build, the characteristic shoulder-hunch and sloppy posture that belied all the focus in his eyes. Those dreadfully green eyes Arthur had seen up close.

Arthur watched him as he neared, without entirely meaning to. As he passed, Eames met his eyes and gave him the polite jogger’s nod.

Then he looked again, a quick glance back, and Arthur’s greeting escaped him before he could help himself. “Hey,” he blurted. Then he stared at his feet.

“Oh, right,” said Eames, after another good look at him. “Arthur, the bookseller, of course. How are you? I see you’re following me.”

“What?” Arthur glanced up at him. Eames had his hands in the pockets of his hoodie and looked utterly nonchalant, which was just unacceptable. Arthur rolled his eyes. “Look, seriously, I’m not stalking you or following you, I’m not going to sue you, I’m just a bookstore owner, for god’s
Eames stared at him blankly, then let out a hollow sort of laugh. “Sorry,” he said. “What?”

“It’s really not funny,” said Arthur. “I know you probably didn’t mean to throw my life into total upheaval and make the store all—” he bit the word out—“trendy, but you did, okay, and it’s been crazy, so the least you could do is do me the courtesy of not assuming I’m some kind of famewhore.”

Eames continued to stare, and finally he said, sounding a bit helpless, “Sorry, Arthur, I don’t—what are you talking about?”

“Your publicist,” said Arthur, noting that the bodyguards had caught up and were standing a few meters away with their hands crossed, looking at him suspiciously. “She called after your, uh, mention of us—of the store—appeared in the magazine. She said you were worried I was going to sue you for libel or slander or something—”


“I had asked my publicist to call you and apologize,” Eames said softly. “For the unintentional, um—well, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Arthur hastily. “I didn’t think you meant to—I mean—god. Of course you didn’t.”

“Except, you’re saying,” said Eames, “my publicist rather suggested I was afraid you would sue me.”


“Right.” Eames rested his chin in his hands. Arthur tried not to stare at his back. Then he gave up and stared. Eames’ back was broad and muscled and his hair was plastered with sweat to the base of his neck. He’d been letting it grow a little—not too much, just for the period movie he’d begun filming after Mayhem. Arthur found himself watching the crease where Eames’ neck met his shoulderblade. He could have reached over and touched him.

Groping movie stars was not what he’d planned on doing with his day, however, so he cleared his throat and ventured, “It’s okay, though. I mean. Thank you. For mentioning us. You didn’t have to do that.”

Eames waved it away. “It’s fine, I was just trying to come up with something that didn’t make me sound like an arse. You know, they tell you they’re only going to ask you five questions, and you think, fuck, how much can they possibly misquote or take out of context in five questions? And then you read what they came up with and it sounds nothing like you at all.”


“Did I say that?” said Eames. He cocked his head and looked at Arthur. “So I take it you don’t read only science books.”

Arthur shrugged. “If it gives me an excuse to keep from talking to people, I’ll read anything.”
Eames laughed. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Arthur dared another look back at him. “What made you come in my shop, anyway? If you don’t mind my asking, I mean.”

Eames shrugged. “Saw a crowd coming the other direction,” he said. “I like bookstores. Figured I’d pop in and let them on by.” He rubbed his forehead and looked thoughtful. Then, abruptly, he sat up and offered Arthur his hand. “Look, I’m sincerely sorry. I know you probably had paparazzi in your face for days, because I did. I had no idea what they were all on about at first. Someone had to point out to me that what I’d said and what wound up in the magazine were markedly different.”

He said ‘markedly,’ thought Arthur. Then he remembered to take Eames’ hand. He took it and clasped it. “I hope it wasn’t all bad, though,” said Eames, looking at him. “The publicity, I mean.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “No, it’s—” he stopped. He thought about the last three months of chaos and photoshoots and overcrowding and business meetings and lawyers and tourists, and book sculptures in the windows, and 3,048 twitter followers, and Ariadne fighting with him for half an hour before he gave in and let her hang a framed copy of Eames’ blurb on the wall behind the counter.

“It’s been amazing, actually,” he said. “Thank you.”

Then he remembered to let go of Eames’ hand.

“Has the phone number changed?” said Eames.

“No, still the same,” said Arthur, his stomach suddenly queasy. “Still googleable.”

“Excellent,” said Eames, getting to his feet. “I’ll make sure my publicist calls and apologizes for the last apology.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, trying not to be disappointed. “Sure. I mean. It’s not necessary, but. Thanks.”

“I still have the Bradbury, you know,” Eames said to him. “It lives with me. It tries to hide it, but it’s very prone to separation anxiety when I’m away.”

“I don’t blame it,” said Arthur, and then he had to thrust his fists into his pockets to keep from clamping his hand over his mouth.

Eames looked back at him and smirked. “See you,” he said.

And jogged away.

“Oh, god,” Arthur said faintly.

“Good to see you again,” said Martin the bodyguard. “My niece loved the book. Thanks.”

“Sure,” said Arthur mechanically.

The other bodyguard lifted an eyebrow at him.

“Still not a meet-cute,” she said, and jogged after Eames.

Arthur watched them go. “Not cute at all,” he murmured.

He took the papers back to the bookshop with him and successfully failed to concentrate on them at all for the rest of the evening. It was three in the afternoon, but he had coffee anyway. Then he sat
and stirred it for half an hour, reliving Eames sitting less than ten centimeters away from him, his face in his broad hands, his huge arms on his huge thighs.

“Jesus,” Arthur said out loud at last, and went to get the mail.

His mother had sent him a long manila envelope. When he opened it, the pinups of Eames that he hadn’t looked at since he was 17 slid out all over his desk.

“I’m cursed,” he told the bookshop.

The next day, Mal brought her whole family in. Philippa was doing a science project at school, and Arthur got to help her look up books about bugs, because she liked bugs. They were in the middle of thumbing through field guides, Philippa settled on Arthur’s lap and pointing while he did the grunt work of page-turning, when the phone rang.

“Arthur,” said Ariadne a moment later, “why is Eames’ publicist telling you to check your mail?”

“I’ll get it!” said Dom. “No, it’s okay, Philippa, sweetie, you stay there.”

“I don’t think you’re legally allowed to open someone else’s mail,” Arthur protested, but Dom was already back.

“So you’re sleeping with Eames, then?” said some douchebag at the counter.

“No,” said Ariadne. “No one’s sleeping with Eames. Buy your book and go away.”

Dom held out the envelope to Arthur. “Looks expensive,” he said.

“It’s just an envelope, Dom,” said Mal. “Are you going to open it here, Arthur?”

“Yes, he is,” said Ariadne. “She’s still on the phone, waiting to make sure it got to us.”

Arthur took it and read the name of the publicity firm. “That enough?”

“No, she says she wants you to open it.”


Arthur said, “Be my guest,” and she opened it. There was an elongated moment of held breath before she turned it upside down. Two tickets and a note fluttered out onto her lap.

“Tickets!” said Dom.

“Tickets?” said Ariadne into the phone. “Are they tickets? Yes?” Then she said, “Oh, my god,” so loudly that everyone in the store turned and stared.

“Arthur just got tickets to the fucking premiere of Mayhem 2!” she screamed.

Everyone except Arthur made noise.

“Oh, my god,” said Dom. “You are sleeping with him!”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” said Mal, “you’re supposed to tell us when these things happen.”

Arthur looked down, not at the tickets, but at the note resting on Philippa’s lap. He picked it up.
“I’m not sure I want my child sitting on the lap of a celebrity whore,” said Dom.


Plain paper. Plain handwriting. Dear Arthur, it read.

Since my last attempt at thanking you properly for the book you were so kind as to bestow upon me went strangely awry—who knew months of tabloid reporters and a listing on the London celebrity-stalking tour guides could be so unwelcome?—I humbly request to try again, and hope that two tickets to a rather silly but highly combustible movie about android-human hybrids* who want to invade the world will be more palatable.

* or, as I call them, Angdroids

The note ended with an incomprehensible scrawl that could conceivably have been an E.

Arthur stared at it blankly, vaguely aware that he’d been doing a lot of blank staring lately.

“Who are you taking, Arthur?” said Ariadne, coming around and sitting on the couch next to them.

“That’s right,” said Mal. “There are two tickets. Eames wouldn’t have given him an extra ticket if they were sleeping together. See, Dom?”

“It could be a ruse,” said Dom.

“Eames and I aren’t—aren’t sleeping together,” said Arthur. “Nothing’s happened.”

“Something must have happened,” said Ariadne. “His publicist wouldn’t let me hang up until I’d seen the tickets in your hand. She was really sweet.”

“Different publicist, maybe,” said Arthur.

“Or else she really wanted to make you happy,” said Ariadne, “because someone really wanted you to be happy.”

“Oh, god,” said Arthur. “This isn’t happening.”

“So who are you taking?” she said, drawing her knees up to her chin and looking eager.

“I think it’s only right that he take me,” said Dom.

“He barely knows you,” said Mal.

“I have him over for dinner all the time!” said Dom.

“Yes, and you complain about having to eat kosher,” said Mal. “Arthur, you’re not allowed to take Dom.”

“I want a divorce,” said Dom.

“Sure, honey,” said Mal. “Whatever you want.”

“Do you feel like Charlie Bucket, Arthur?” said Ariadne. “Do you have a golden spar-kle in your eyeeeeeeeeee?” she sang, which was as close to begging as Arthur knew she’d ever get.

Arthur gave her a smile, and tucked the note from Eames away in his pocket. He wondered that no
one had asked to read it. Then he thought maybe it was obvious. Oh, god, he thought. I’ve got a crush. I can’t have a crush on a celebrity. I can’t take Ariadne with me, she’ll interrogate me all night about my celebrity crush and then find a way to smuggle me into the men’s room when Eames is there, then bribe the doorman to lock us in. I can’t have a crush on Eames. I can’t take Ariadne.

“Well?” said Mal.

Mal, Arthur thought. I could take Mal. But then she’ll make insinuations all night long about how I have a crush, and she’ll be right, and then in the awful instance I actually see Eames and he talks to me I’ll be awkward and uncomfortable—not that I’m going to see him, or that I’m going to talk to him, because why would— oh, god, I can’t take Mal.

He stared around the room. All the customers were hovering, waiting to see what he’d say. Mal had her eyebrows raised expectantly; Dom was chewing his fingernail.

Maybe I can go with someone who’s never heard of Eames, Arthur thought desperately. Someone totally safe.

“Arthur,” said Philippa. “Can you turn the page now? I’m done with this one.”

“Philippa!” said Arthur triumphantly. “How would you like to go with me to a party?”

And that was how Arthur wound up going to the world premiere of Mayhem 2, predicted to be the biggest movie since Mayhem 1, with a six-year-old.

The premiere was in ten days; Arthur spent five of them freaking out and the next five over-preparing. Twice before the day of, he awoke in a cold sweat—the first time after dreaming that the bookstore burned down while he was away, the second, that he’d shown up to the premiere in last-season Duckie Brown.

"Well, well, well," said Mal when she opened the door on the fateful evening. Arthur was standing on her front stoop, wearing his favorite tailored Canali and what he hoped was a non-terrifying smile.

"You look stunning," she said, sizing him up. "And terrified. Come in!"

Philippa had wanted to dress up as a princess for the occasion, so Mal and Dom had let her. She had on a very respectable magenta dress with puffed sleeves, and a princess hat.

"And the wand?" Arthur asked uncertainly.

"It's because I'm a wizard," said Philippa.

"Do you have your business cards, Arthur?" said Mal, who looked more elegant in jeans and a sweatshirt than Arthur would look after hours in front of a mirror, he thought ruefully. "She called and said I was to make sure you left with them, even if I had to force them on you."

"That's stupid, though," Arthur said. "I'm just going to watch the movie, not to network."

"Arthur," said Mal sternly. "When a woman bothers to give you advice, it's probably because you need it. Never insult it."

Arthur sighed. "No, I didn't bring them with me," he said.

Mal rolled her eyes at him. "Then it's a good thing she called me," she said. "Because I have extras!"

He groaned as she stuffed them into his jacket pocket. "Just so we're clear, I'm going to this thing
ironically.”

“That’s nice, dear,” said Mal, scooping Philippa up in her arms and giving her a kiss. “Here,” she said, dropping a camera into his hands. “Take lots of pictures of Philippa interacting with movie stars.”

“Philippa is not going to interact with movie stars,” said Arthur. “Philippa is going to spend the evening protecting me. As we sit in the very back, far away from the movie stars.”

“Look at you, princess!” said Kate Winslet an hour later. Arthur knew it was Kate Winslet because Philippa had told him as they were walking down the red carpet of the BFI, tugging his hand every five seconds so he would stop and let her pose for the millions of flashbulbs going off around them. “Oh,” he had said. “I didn’t recognize her without Leo.”

“No, Leo’s over there,” Philippa had answered, and pointed him out. It was probably a good thing she had, because as it turned out, Di Caprio liked kids, and Kate Winslet apparently liked Philippa, so Arthur wound up holding Philippa by one hand while Kate Winslet led her around showing her off to people by the other. She was nice. Arthur liked her, and she didn’t seem to think Arthur was out of place at all. “Oh, you’re guests of Eames!” she said when Arthur explained. “He’s so lovely. We were at Sardi’s once and the ladies room was closed—Eames stood outside the men’s room for us and refused to let anyone enter til all the girls had powdered their noses.” Di Caprio kept nodding and beaming at Arthur whenever he talked—Arthur couldn’t figure out if he was being hit on or if Di Caprio was just generally overeager. After Di Caprio was a tall, terribly familiar gentleman who gave them long-suffering looks, as though he expected them both to whip out autograph books at any second. Kate Winslet introduced him, but Arthur still didn’t figure it out until Philippa greeted him as Professor Snape. He met a string of people he didn’t know—celebrities had always seemed older and more grown up, but a fair number of these people were younger and shorter, which threw him off a bit; movie stars weren’t supposed to be shorter than you—and wound up in a fairly animated conversation with a nice bloke named Dave who kept going on about cyborgs and Peter Davidson, whoever that was. Arthur was in the middle of telling him about Humanity’s End and how fascinating the whole if-computer-chips-are-implanted-in-human-brains-then-is-it-really-intelligence? debate was shaping up to be, when it dawned on him.

“Oh,” he said. “Wait, actually, my assist—architect, Ariadne, she made me bring these tonight.” He pulled out one of the business cards Ariadne had designed especially for the store—it was a two-pronged bookmark cut out of a page of the Theory of Relativity, with the store info on the back. It was cool.


“Come by the store when you get a chance and I’ll give you a copy,” he said, and then added, remembering that celebrities-who-weren’t-Eames didn’t go into bookstores for normal people, “uh, not that you’ll get a chance, but, uh, have your assistant give me a call and I’ll send one over or something.”

“Delightful!” said Dave again, bouncing a little on the heels of his feet. “Thank you, Arthur!” he pumped his hand and stuck the bookmark in his lapel. It fit pretty nicely, actually. He was wearing a Zegna with sneakers, Arthur noticed, and he wondered how famous this person really was. Before he could get a chance to ask Philippa, however, it was time to sit down.

“You must sit at our table!” said Kate Winslet, and since she was the only celebrity he actually knew, Arthur figured it was the safest spot in the room.

“Thanks,” he said. “I get self-conscious around famous people.”
“Don’t worry, we won’t bite!” she said. But then it turned out that her table was near the front and center of the reception, which meant that everyone passed by them, which meant that Philippa spent lots of time waving to people. Idris Elba—Arthur knew who he was because they’d been on a magazine page together—called her radiant, and Ziyi Zhang traded martial arts moves with her until Philippa tapped her in the knee. “I know, I know, that’s for doing *Rush Hour 2,*” she said, and patted her on the head.

“Can I borrow her?” asked someone—Arthur was pretty sure it was Zoe Saldana—who was wearing a knock-out orange Versace thing with feathers. “I’ll bring her back unharmed, I promise. My fiancé wants to meet her. Oh, so does Emily Watson. Is she yours?”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “No. She’s my best friend’s kid.”

“He’s Arthur,” said Philippa, taking Zoe Saldana’s hand.

“Well, Arthur,” said Zoe Saldana, giving him a smile and a heart-stopping wink, “We’ll be right back.”

The time for hiding under a chair and sinking into the floor had pretty much passed, so Arthur did his best to relax and look like he came to red carpet dinners with impeccably behaved six-year-olds all the time. The man seated across the table next to Kate Winslet was apparently her boyfriend. He was also a Canali model, and Arthur was relieved that here at last was someone he recognized instantly.

“I modeled that suit you’re wearing,” he told Arthur in a lead voice.

“I see,” said Arthur.

“Don’t scare Arthur, we like him,” said Kate Winslet.

“Sorry,” said the Canali model. “If it helps, the suit looks good.”

“Thanks,” said Arthur. “It helps.”

The next person to join their table had hipster hair and nerd glasses and was nursing a giant tumbler of red wine when he sat down. “I’m Edgar,” he said. “I write things. And I direct when Ang Lee isn’t around and reducing the rest of us to rubble by his mere presence.”


“Oh, thank god, a fellow nerd,” Edgar said, and clinked Arthur’s glass.

“Arthur is a very special kind of nerd,” said Kate Winslet from across the table. “Arthur owns a bookshop. He’s here as Eames’ guest.”

“Fabulous!” said Edgar. “I love bookshops.”

“Did I see you handing out bookmarks earlier?” Kate Winslet asked him.

“Oh—I was—just—well, here,” Arthur said, fishing some out. “I have a bad tendency to give stuff away. If you ever need someone to give you a free book about science, drop by.”

“I absolutely will,” said Kate Winslet, slipping hers in her purse. Arthur knew she was probably just being polite, but that was okay. It was probably all right to think of her as Just Kate by now, but he
was having a hard time.

“So Eames invited you? What a great guy,” said Edgar, fiddling with his bookmark. “We once got drunk and spent an hour arguing Cthulhu versus Godzilla.”

“Oh, Cthulhu, no question,” said Arthur without thinking.

Edgar laughed. “That’s what I said. Eames felt very strongly that Godzilla in his current incarnation stood no chance, but that the original Gojira was far and away the superior giant aquatic monster.”

“Actually, metaphysically speaking, I’d agree,” said Arthur. “Godzilla has all the power of nuclear holocaust at his back. Cthulhu just has hell—which despite being, you know, hell, is pretty vague and non-specific.”

“Cthulhu has tentacles, though,” said Edgar. “I mean—really, how is Godzilla supposed to defeat tentacles?”

“True,” said Arthur. “You can smash one, but then there are thirty more where that one came from.”

“Exactly,” said Edgar, and they clinked glasses. Arthur looked over to see Kate Winslet laughing.

“I thought you said you were self-conscious around famous people,” she said.

“Oh,” said Arthur, fidgeting with his glass. “I am, usually, I mean—”

—and then he saw Eames across the room and promptly forgot what he was talking about.

He was standing across the room, talking to Philippa, and Arthur was on his feet in an instant, because, no, Philippa wasn’t supposed to be bothering him—and then he froze, because Eames was wearing double-breasted Bottega and the biggest grin he’d ever seen, and Arthur couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t move.

He watched Eames offer his hand to Philippa and then bow over it like the hero of one of those novels they apparently both read. Philippa curtsied at him properly. He saw Eames lean in to Zoe Saldana, speaking something into her ear, saw Zoe Saldana answer, then turn and put the question to Philippa, who quite obviously said Arthur’s name before pointing at him.

Eames’ gaze followed her finger up and over the blur of tables to land on Arthur across the room. Arthur’s heart stopped. He may have gripped the chair beside him for support.

Eames saw him and their eyes locked.

Even from where Arthur stood, he could feel Eames’ expression change. Eames smiled in recognition, and Arthur stopped gawking long enough to send him a nod. Not for the first time, he thanked his proper Bostonian grandmother for making sure he knew how to wear a suit, because he knew the exact moment that Eames noticed that he knew how to wear a suit.

From somewhere Arthur dredged up motor movements again and lifted his glass in a gesture of thanks, hoping his hand wouldn’t flutter as much as his stomach. “Hi,” he mouthed. Eames was soaking in all black; his suit hugged his biceps and lay glued to his broad shoulders. Arthur wanted to climb over the tables and muss his perfectly combed hair. He had a vision of himself crossing the room, touching Eames’ elbow and leaning in to murmur a greeting, as if being there among all those stars, being there by Eames’ side, was no big deal. He thought he saw Eames make a move in his direction—was he coming over? To Arthur?
Arthur’s heart seized tight in his chest.

“Excuse me, are you the owner of the Robie House?”

“What? Yes,” said Arthur automatically, reluctantly wrenching his gaze away from Eames and turning toward the speaker. “Oh. And you’re Helena Bonham Carter.”

“Indeed I am,” said Helena Bonham Carter.

“Hi. Arthur.” He shook her hand and darted a glance back at Eames, but he’d moved out of Arthur’s line of sight. He chanced a quick look around the room, saw nothing, and nearly missed what Helena Bonham Carter said next.

“—was just showing me your bookmark,” she was saying. “I remember seeing photos of the shop in Time Out and thinking it would be perfect for Tim’s next film. So he sent me to come find you.”

“Tim?” said Arthur.

“No, David,” said Helena Bonham Carter.

“Oh,” said Arthur, using the excuse of taking a drink from his glass to cast his eyes about un成功地 for a glimpse of Eames, who was nowhere. “That’s very kind of him.”

“Quite,” said Helena Bonham Carter, leaning in conspiratorially. “Tim’s been doing location scouting—you know he’s doing an adaptation of The Borrowers with Gaiman. David’s just signed on for it, of course, and he and I both think the shop might be a perfect shooting spot. At the very least I’m sure Tim will want to storyboard it, he loves storyboards. So David sent me over here to filch one of your business cards.” She cast an expectant look at his jacket pocket.

“Oh,” said Arthur, reaching inside it. “Wait. Do you mean. Um. Tim as in Burton, Gaiman as in Neil, David as in the bushy-haired excitable guy I was talking to earlier?”

Helena Bonham Carter shifted one of her long eyebrows in his direction. “You’re an odd one, Arthur,” she said, pulling the bookmark from his fingertips. “Tim as in Burton, Gaiman as in Neil, David as in Tennant, i.e. yes to all of the above. I suspect Tim will be out to see the place sometime next week, if you’re interested.”

“Terribly,” said Arthur. “Terribly, keenly interested. Oh, but, we’re going to be expanding soon, so if he decides to use us, probably sooner would be better.”

“Noted,” she said, twirling the bookmark in her fingers and sending him a sharp look over the rims of her glasses. “Thank you, Arthur, we’ll be in touch!” And she sauntered away, twisting the wild wide ruffles on her skirt in her hands as she walked.

Arthur’s phone bleeped at him. It was from Ariadne.

Well? she had texted. Are you making out with E in the coat room yet?

Arthur sat back down at his table, drained the rest of his wine glass, and stared at the phone for a moment.

Then he texted back:

Tim Burton wants to use the shop in his next film. Also had a 5-min conversation about human-machine hybrids w/someone named Dave Tenant.
A few seconds later he got back a response that consisted entirely of keymashing.

Then he got six more just like it.

“I think I might need more wine,” he said to Edgar Wright.

“A lifetime of open bars, that’s the reason I got into this business,” said Edgar appreciatively.

On his way back from the bar, he met Zoe leading Philippa by the hand. “I lost count after the fourth studio exec tried to sign her to a contract,” Zoe said. “But I did tell you I’d bring her back unharmed.”

Arthur grinned. “That means no movie deals for you, princess,” he said, pulling Philippa onto his lap as he sat back down.

“I think Ralph Fiennes may have scared her a little, though,” Zoe added apologetically.

“Arthur,” said Philippa with wide eyes, “Why are there so many Slytherins here?”


“Ravenclaw,” said Kate Winslet, raising her hand.

“Hufflepuff,” said Edgar.

“Gryffindor all the way,” said Zoe. “Go lions.”

“Squib,” said Di Caprio apologetically. He’d squeezed in between Kate Winslet and the model sometime in the last half hour; Arthur had been trying unsuccessfully ever since to figure out which of them he was hitting on.

Philippa giggled. “What are you?” she asked Arthur, placing her princess hat on top of his head. He repositioned it so that it would fit more securely. Somewhere nearby a flashbulb went off. He thought about how ridiculous he must look and found himself smiling anyway.

“Tonight, I’m a Veela,” he answered, and tried to quash the stubborn part of him that hoped it was true.

After the film was over, and Arthur (and Philippa) had politely declined several offers of after parties and open bars; after watching his last chance at speaking to Eames disappear in a mob of cameras and shouting reporters, knowing it was the last time he would ever see him again; after shaking hands (again) with Leonardo and hugging Kate Winslet, after saying goodbye to Edgar and Dave and Zoe and Zoe’s fiancé, one Redgrave, two Baldwins, several Fiennes brothers, and a whole host of honorary knights and dames; after depositing sleeping Princess Philippa safely into her mother’s arms and tiptoeing away with a promise to tell Mal everything in the morning; after over-tipping the cabbie, then smiling wearily when she observed that Arthur “must have had quite the night;” after all of this, Arthur walked into his shop at half-past two in the morning and found his shop waiting up for him, resting patiently in the dark.

“It wasn’t bad,” Arthur told it. “Really, it was kind of fun.”

And then, because he was at heart a sentimental milksop hiding in cynical designer clothing, Arthur went upstairs to his third-floor walkup and rummaged through his inherited vinyl collection until he found his dad’s beloved copy of An Enchanted Evening with Ezio Pinza. He brought it down to the
shop office and set it crackling on the turntable he’d bought shortly after he moved in. He turned it up, sent the notes gliding through the store, and turned the lights off.

Tomorrow he would have to forget that he had ever wanted Eames. Tomorrow he would go back to his everyday life. He would focus on expanding his store, and begin remembering what it was like to be normal.

But for tonight, at least while Pinza sang of falling in love across a crowded room, Arthur could curl up in the corner of his maze, right at the jointure of Pharmaceuticals and Psychology, and let himself pretend that he and Eames had had a moment. That it had been real. And that maybe there was a chance Eames might be remembering it now, the way Arthur always, always would.

Two things surprised Arthur most in the days that followed: that celebrities, at least the ones he had hung out with, were decent folk who did nice things; and that despite all efforts and even appearances to the contrary, he was wholly unable to forget about Eames.

A few days after the premiere, Zoe’s assistant emailed the bookstore with some phone pics Zoe had snapped of Arthur and Philippa at the party. Ariadne had the one of Arthur in the princess hat blown up and framed. She hung it behind the counter next to the magazine cutout, and Arthur was slightly mollified to realize that people seemed to be more interested in whether Kate and Leo were holding hands in the background than in Arthur's very silly hat.

A couple of days after that bushy-haired Dave (“Tennant, Arthur, David Tennant," Ariadne had insisted, "aka the tenth Doctor, aka recently voted the sexiest man alive! Geez, why does fame always happen to the undeserving?") and Tim Burton dropped by the store. "Hmm,” said Tim Burton, while David Tennant thumbed through the children's section and Ariadne quietly had seizures behind the desk, "I like it! It's very steampunk."

"I didn't know The Borrowers was.... steampunk," Arthur said carefully.

Tim Burton clapped him on the back. "It is now!"

On the way out, happily toting his copy of the book Arthur had promised him, Dave Tennant stopped outside the store to sign autographs.

The next day ten people stopped by to ask if Arthur was hiring.

That afternoon Kate Winslet dropped in. “Oh,” said Arthur when she came to the counter to shake hands. “Kate Winslet.”

“Arthur the bookseller,” she greeted him. “So you actually don’t sell anything but science books? How on earth do you convince people to read anything they buy here?”

“Well,” Arthur said, “I can give it a try if you like.”

“Please do,” said Kate Winslet. “I like horses. Oh, and boating accidents.”

“I think I know just the thing,” said Arthur.

An hour later Kate finally Just Kate left with a copy of The Horse Latitudes: Strange Happenings in the Bermuda Triangle and a budding friendship with Mal, with whom she had exchanged phone numbers and a promise of getting together for a playdate with Philippa and Kate’s son Joe, who was apparently the same age. “Text me when your next open house is coming up,” she told Arthur as she left.
“Open house?” said Arthur.

“He’ll let you know,” said Mal.

Later Arthur sat in front of his desk and tried to compose a thank-you note to Zoe Saldana’s publicist for sending the pics. He was no good at this sort of thing; his email didn't even have an official signature. He wasn’t sure what kind of info even needed to be in a signature. I'll just copy everything over from the business cards, he thought, and then he realized that he couldn't, because they were out of business cards. He'd handed out all of the ones he'd taken to the premiere, to Ariadne’s delight; and over the next week all the ones in the store had gone before they had time to reorder.

Fuck, he thought. Well, fuck.

His bookshop was rapidly veering away from trendy and toward well-known. He wondered if Eames had known this would happen when he invited him to the premiere, if maybe he had realized Arthur was enjoying all of this and—

No, no. That way lay crazy thoughts.

He pondered for a while. Then he called Ariadne.

“What? Make it quick, I’m eating delicious cake.”

“If I finalize everything this week,” said Arthur, something warm and fuzzy growing in his chest, “Do you think we could redesign the space before Christmas?”

On the other end of the call, Ariadne started choking. “Sorry,” she said in between coughs. “It sounded like you just asked me to do my first architectural redesign in a little over two months.”

“Under, actually,” said Arthur, biting his lip. “I was thinking we’d have an open house the 2nd week of December.”

“Holy shit, Arthur, are you fucking out of your mind?” Ariadne squeaked—but in that way where she was excited and not actually freaking out.

“C’mon,” he said. “Don’t act like you can’t do it.”

“What’s gotten into you, seriously?” said Ariadne. “You hate publicity. You hate all of this.”

“I know,” said Arthur. “I know.”

“Second week of December,” said Ariadne. “It’s the third week of October. That’s...” she paused and Arthur knew she was flipping through the thick Lisa Frank agenda she carried everywhere. “That’s eight weeks, Arthur, and you want people to take time out of their busy holiday schedule to come to an open house?”

“We send the invites out now, plenty of people will have time to put it on their schedules,” said Arthur.

“There’s no way,” Ariadne said. “It’s not just me, me and my complete lack of experience, it’s the contractors you’re going to have to blackmail to finish on time, the building inspectors you’re going to have to bribe—oh, my god, I’m going to charge you so much for this.”

“See,” said Arthur. “I knew you’d do it.”

“No,” she said. “Wait. Hire another assistant. I can’t finish my thesis and this project by the end of
December and help you in the store too.”


“Like, hire someone now,” said Ariadne.

“Oh, okay,” said Arthur.

“Oh, my god. Oh, my god, you have to sign for the space immediately. Like, tomorrow, because I can’t start the design until I can get in to examine the foundations. And you need to make an appointment with your marketing firm so they can work on designing the open house flyers. Are you making a list?”

“Yes?” Arthur lied.

“Hire someone,” Ariadne ordered. “Oh, and blueprints! Get me blueprints!”

She hung up. Arthur sat for a moment, staring at his computer cursor, which still lay blinking beside Ms. Saldana, Thank you for sending the photos from the Mayhem premiere. Your graciousness made Philippa’s evening and mine. As a small token of gratitude, The Robie House would like to invite you and your guests to

After another moment of staring and frowning, Arthur hiked up his courage and picked up where he left off:

an evening of books, science, and wonder: our open house on Thursday, December 8. If you’re in London, please swing by and say hello. We’ll have strong coffee, egg nog, and a whole new expanded wing of the store, with more books to read, and more places to lounge and read them in. Even if you can’t make it, please know your kindness was greatly appreciated, and you’re always welcome.

Arthur & The Robie House

He stared at it. “My god, you’re a sellout,” he said aloud, and hit send.

He sent three more emails before the hour was out: one to Tim Burton, to let him know that the expansion was about to begin, and to, incidentally, invite him to come view the place when it was done at the open house on December 8th; one to David Tennant, who had scribbled his email down on the back of a pack of chewing gum the day before and requested to be informed whenever Arthur got in “something really cool;” and one to Eames—or rather, one to Eames’ publicist, whose email was on her web page.

He thought about sending a note round in person, but surely that would have been too presumptuous.

Ms Rider, he wrote, It would be hard to measure how grateful the Robie House is for Mr Eames’ patronage and kind attention this year. In a token of our appreciation and thanks, we would like to invite Mr Eames and friends to our Open House, to be held on Dec 8, to celebrate a year of success and adventure, made possible in no small part by Mr Eames himself.

Please thank Mr Eames again for the chance to see the premiere of Mayhem 2.

Arthur hesitated for a long time.

Then he wrote,
And please let him know that if at any time he should find himself on Portobello Rd in future, he is always welcome to swing by and plunder our treasures. :)

Arthur & the Robie House

A few moments later, Penelope Rider responded:

Just kill me now. Will pass your message along.

Arthur spent the next half-hour analyzing this email until Ariadne showed up and yelled at him to get back to work.

Right, he thought. Back to trying to forget.

Over the next several days, Arthur’s to-do list grew steadily longer and longer. There were papers to sign, proposals to draw up, city planning meetings to present them at, bank accounts to empty, loans to finance, contractors to contract, blueprints to track down. He hired a couple of assistants from Mind, and when he ran out of things for them to do he let them read books. He liked them. They stayed after their shifts sometimes just to ask him questions or shelve books, and sometimes he gave them rides back to the shelter or wherever they wanted to be dropped off.

It was late one evening, the day after Arthur had finally signed the last transfer of ownership document, making the antique store next door officially his. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it yet; he wasn’t sure if the new shop would take kindly to being appropriated or not, to having all of its chippendales and louis XIVs shipped off and replaced by musty old books on architecture and genus classifications. The former owner had taken most of the antiques back with him to Cardiff, but Arthur was having it professionally cleaned as soon as could so that Ariadne could see the space before she strangled him from impatience.

“Don’t be jealous,” he told his bookshop as he locked up for the night. “I still love you. You’re just experiencing growing pains. You’ll thank me later, I promise.”

There was a knock on the door—at least, Arthur thought it was a knock. It was so light he couldn’t be sure. The store was clearly closed, but Arthur went to the display window and peered out anyway. At first he saw no one. Then he realized that whoever it was was walking quickly away, shoulders hunched down low against the brisk wind.

His heart did an awkward flip-flop in his ribs. He ran to the door and threw it open.

“Hey,” he said, just loud enough to be heard.

The knock-and-runner froze, pulled his hoodie over his head, and turned around. It was Eames.

“Oh,” he said. Tough to tell from this distance, but to Arthur he seemed sheepish. Arthur stood back and held the door open, beckoning him inside with a head tilt. Eames hesitated, shoved his hands in his pockets, and entered.

He must really like that hoodie, Arthur thought blankly. Eames stood awkwardly in the entrance, looking around as if he’d forgotten what a bookstore looked like on the inside. Arthur shivered and locked up again, trying not to focus on what it meant that Eames had come back, alone, without bodyguards.

He made sure all the blinds were lowered before he turned back around. “Hi,” he said.

“Sorry, I thought you might be open,” Eames said. “It’s late, I didn’t mean to--”
“No, we only just closed,” said Arthur. “It’s fine.”

“Right,” said Eames, looking at him. “Thank you.”

They stared at each other.

“Hi,” said Arthur at last.

“Hi,” said Eames.

The silence stretched out, and Arthur was debating whether offering coffee could be construed as a desperate attempt to cur favor, when Eames blurted, “I think I need your help. Um, Arthur. That is— I was hoping you might be able to, um. Help.”


Thoughts of crazy paparazzi vendettas and celebrity safehouses flashed through his mind, and then Eames rocked back on his heels and said, all in a rush, “Scorsese’s doing another biopic. I know, I know, but it’s fucking Scorsese, and I’ve been trying for months to get in, my agent’s been begging him to let me do a screen test—”


“No, I always do, I insist on it,” Eames said. “And I’ve gotten nowhere with him but yesterday the main lineup for the job had to pull out. My agent just called me. They’re willing to fit me in for a screentest the day after tomorrow. This is the part of a fucking lifetime. It’s perfect for me. It’s got a script by Charlie fucking Kaufman, I love the character—”

“Who is it?” asked Arthur.

Eames took his hands out of his pockets and fiddled with one of his two pocket watches. “Buckminster Fuller,” he said, watching Arthur for his reaction.

Arthur looked at him. “No fucking way,” he said.

“The day I came into the shop,” Eames said, “You were wearing a t-shirt that said ‘Call me Trim Tab.’”

“I love that fucking shirt,” said Arthur.

“I’ve been reading about him for months,” Eames said, “Just in case I got a call, but this is less than two days. That’s not enough time to order anything on bloody amazon, and the B&N’s already closed for the night, and it’s not like they could tell me anything you couldn’t, and I need to convince Scorsese and the Paramount execs that no one else on god’s earth could possibly play this part. It’s a book emergency,” he said. “A bookmergency.”

“Have you read It Seems I’m A—”

“Course I fucking have,” said Eames, fidgeting.

“Of course you have,” said Arthur in a sudden rush of excitement. “Upstairs. Come on.”

He led Eames up the iron rod spiral staircase that he’d had installed when he opened the store. He’d put in a landing and extended the railing all the way around the shop, turning it into a narrow but functional second floor. He went to the center of the landing.
“What is this?” asked Eames expectantly.

“This,” said Arthur with all the hushed reverence such a declaration deserved, “is my Buckminster Fuller collection.”

Eames let out an incredulous laugh. “You have a Buckminster Fuller collection,” he said.

“I really like Buckminster Fuller,” Arthur said. “You know you both carry multiple pocket-watches?”

“And we both keep pretentious daybooks,” said Eames. “And prefer to live in prefab housing.”

“Do you make up words?”

“Oh, all the time. Gabnaxitude,” said Eames. “It’s a philosophical construction of the way the movements of the universe resemble the steering wheel of a car. It’d take much too long to explain but take my word for it, it’s genius.”

Arthur laughed, and then kept laughing. Eames’ mouth creased at the edges when he smiled, and Arthur found himself leaning in, brushing Eames’ arm when he reached out to browse the shelf. “I’d say you’ve got a handle on the character. What more are you looking for, exactly?” he said, running his thumb affectionately over his copy of And it Came to Pass, Not to Stay as if it were a totem.

“Actually,” Eames said, his voice dropping, “I was hoping you could tell me.”

Arthur looked up and found Eames’ eyes meeting his, and suddenly all the air was gone from the room. He fought for a breath, swallowed, and forced himself to turn back to the bookshelf.

“Well,” he said, praying to all the gods in the universe his voice wasn’t actually shaking as much as he thought it was, “if you’re looking for more than the normal level of insight into his character and you’ve already read all the major biographies—uh, Rosen, Hatch, Lorance—”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” said Eames, moving closer to the shelf and consequently crowding Arthur against the ‘E’s. He could feel the shape of Eames’ steel frame at his back, warm and full of power; turning around would mean Arthur would be virtually pressed against him. He thanked god for narrow landings and tried to stay focused.

“Yes, yes, and yes,” said Eames, moving closer to the shelf and consequently crowding Arthur against the ‘E’s. He could feel the shape of Eames’ steel frame at his back, warm and full of power; turning around would mean Arthur would be virtually pressed against him. He thanked god for narrow landings and tried to stay focused.

“Then, uh, I’d go for some of his articles,” said Arthur. “The lectures he did in ‘75 are quintessential Fuller. They’ve been compiled.” He reached somewhat blindly for the book and put it aside on the shelf, sure that if he turned around to hand it to Eames he’d abandon his last vestige of control and throw himself at him right there. Eames reached for the book, and impossibly stepped even closer, moving directly into Arthur’s space. Arthur shivered. This is not happening, he thought. This isn’t actually reality.

“Go on,” said Eames with a rasp.

“Um. Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth is another must-read,” said Arthur helplessly, gripping the bookshelf. “If you haven’t read it, I’ve got a copy.” Eames brought his hands up to rest beside Arthur’s, officially trapping him. “If you—if you—” Arthur faltered. “Oh, fuck it.”

He turned and took Eames’ face in his hands, and Eames pressed him into the bookcase and kissed him.

Eames’ mouth. Arthur had Eames’ mouth, and he opened into the kiss with a moan and sank into the luxury of it, Eames’ lips like warm satin against his.
Moments like this weren’t supposed to be magical, he thought vaguely, if they happened at all. You were supposed to be aware of all the weird uncomfortable things. First kisses were supposed to be comical, invasive, slightly awkward.

This one wasn’t.

He snuck his arms down to Eames’ waist and pulled him even closer, and Eames’ swept his tongue inside of Arthur’s mouth and kept kissing him, kept nudging closer and closer until Arthur was panting, until they both were. Arthur chanced his eyes open just long enough to see Eames’ close, a look on his face that made Arthur’s blood fizz. He felt Eames rock into him, once, twice, as Arthur tried to step back from the urge to just wrap his legs around Eames’ waist and climb on. He arched back, breath hitching, and Eames worked his way over Arthur’s throat, sweeping kisses over his skin and making it buzz everywhere he went. “Eames,” Arthur begged, and then their mouths were together again, deeper and more urgent, and Arthur had never wanted a kiss to swallow him whole before, but now he wanted and wanted and wanted. Eames ran his hand through Arthur’s hair and tilted his chin up, pressing him hard against the shelf of books.

“Arthur, god,” Eames managed, and he sounded raw and wrecked and amazing, and Arthur shuddered hard against him, and a book fell off the shelf, and then another, and Eames broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against Arthur’s, his fingertips brushing Arthur’s cheek as he breathed in. Arthur stayed still, panting, frantic for air, frantic for more of Eames, taking in the shape of Eames this close, his eyelashes, his lips, the freckles on his nose. He darted forward and kissed Eames, there, on the nose, and Eames laughed and then leaned in to thumb open Arthur’s collar so he could kiss Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur stretched out for him and inevitably they were kissing all over again, Eames’ tongue sliding over his and pulling incautious sounds out of Arthur, and then more books fell off the shelf and Eames broke away for the second time.

“I’m sorry,” he said in between gasps, hoarse and not sounding sorry at all. “God, this is such a bad idea.” He ran his thumb over Arthur’s neck.


Eames’ thumb stilled over his pulse point and Arthur turned and brushed his lips over Eames’ hand.

“Arthur,” said Eames, and Arthur really, really liked the way Eames said his name, and then they were kissing again, desperate and hot, and Arthur was going to be the one to break away any second —

He pulled back. Eames let out a sharp breath at the loss of contact, and tugged their foreheads together again.

They stayed that way for a moment, Eames’ hands resting lightly on his shoulders, Arthur trying to remember how to exhale.

After a while, he managed to rasp out, “I’ll go make some coffee.”

Eames let him go. Arthur made his way downstairs, not even trying to pretend his legs weren’t shaking.

Behind him he heard Eames picking up the books that had fallen, straightening the shelves. He felt a rush of affection for Eames, because how could you not feel affection for someone who took care of books? but instead of turning back around and pinning Eames to the railing, he made himself go to the coffee stand and put a pot on, testing the steadiness of his hands against the pounding of his heart.
His lips still tingled. He tried to focus on the coffee, not the fact that Eames had kissed him—had obviously been wanting to kiss him. Since when? Did it matter? Eames had said it was a terrible idea. But he had also said Arthur's name like—like someone who wanted so much more than a kiss.

He breathed in, then out. The third time he felt a light touch at his shoulder. He turned, and Eames was standing there, hands in his pockets, looking abashed and perfect.

Arthur drank in the view, silence stretching tense and heavy between them. “Coffee’s brewing,” he said at last. Eames swallowed and nodded, looking up at Arthur from beneath his lashes, as if he were awaiting permission. Arthur had no idea what to do with that just yet, so he reached out and laced his fingers around Eames’ wrist. “Lemme give you the tour,” he said.

Eames blinked at him, and then apparently remembered where he was. “Oh, of course, please do,” he said, donning his best gentleman caller voice. Arthur shook his head, amused despite everything, trying to wrap his brain around the fact that he’d just been making out like a teenager in the stacks with his favorite matinee idol.

“After you made us accidentally famous,” he said, leading Eames into the maze of books, “we had to find a way to get more room. My assistant’s an amazing architect. She designed this maze.”

“Why did you decide to open a bookstore that sells only books about science?” said Eames, ducking as Arthur pulled him under the archway and inside. “You know that’s the silliest idea for a bookshop anyone’s ever heard of.”

“I thought it would be a good way to get people to leave me alone,” said Arthur. Then he laughed. “That interview you did kinda threw a monkey wrench into that plan.”

Eames said nothing at first, studying all the rows as Arthur led him into the center of the maze, and then gradually out again. The lights were still off downstairs but the lamp was on in Arthur’s office, and the streetlights filtered through the lowered blinds. Eames probably couldn’t read titles, but he was making a good show of it. When they got to the center of the maze, Eames reversed their positions, lacing his fingers around Arthur’s wrist and tugging him to a halt. “You really have had that many more people start showing up since July?”

“We made some sort of feature in Time Out. Tim Burton wants to film a steampunk Borrowers here next spring.”

“I’m not sure which part of that last sentence is most alarming,” said Eames.

Arthur laughed. Eames stepped closer and traced the flash of a dimple Arthur knew he’d just shown. He swallowed and began slowly backing out of the maze. Eames followed, fingertips still lingering on Arthur’s cheek.

“Where are Martin and Prianka?” he asked, trying for conversational and failing by miles.

“Shhh,” said Eames, following him out of the maze, “I’m trying very hard not to be freaked out by the fact you remember the names of my bodyguards.”

“Shush yourself,” said Arthur, returning to the safe haven of the coffee table, “I’m trying very hard not to be freaked out by the fact you remembered how to find my shop.”

Eames joined him by the coffee stand. He stood in front of Arthur, facing him, so their toes almost touched. He still looked as if he were asking permission. “Hello, googlemaps,” he said.

“Unconvincing,” Arthur replied.
“Clearly I’ve created a monster,” said Eames.

“Clearly,” Arthur agreed, stepping in and kissing him.

They kissed and kissed, and when at last they broke apart, Arthur found himself cradling Eames against his shoulder, dragging his hand through his hair while Eames traced kisses over his throat.

“I have to leave for L.A. tomorrow,” Eames murmured against his skin. “I have to be focused for this audition, I can’t—oh, fuck me, I can’t stay, Arthur.”

Too late, Arthur thought. You’re going to stay with me always. Out loud he just said, “Okay.”

Eames found Arthur’s hand, lifted it, and kissed his knuckles. Arthur tried very hard not to be hopelessly charmed. “I don’t know how long I’m to be in Los Angeles,” Eames said, his voice darkening. “It depends on how the screen test goes, and what else my agent has lined up while I’m there. I just don’t know.”

Arthur swallowed. “Okay,” he said.

Eames pulled back and gave him a searching look.

Arthur moved in and slid his hands into Eames' pockets. Eames slid his own in over Arthur’s, letting their fingers tangle, and met Arthur's gaze without saying a word. Arthur wondered where all his shyness had gone, why all of this felt so natural, why the idea of Eames leaving just now felt so terribly momentous. He thought about the Eames who had walked into his store six months before, the Eames who had been kind and polite but wholly distant, unattainable; he wondered how long it had been since he had stopped seeing Eames that way, if the change had been in Eames or himself. Maybe both.

Eames grasped Arthur’s hands and tugged them around his waist. "Forgive me for not giving you a proper greeting the other night,” he said, dropping a kiss against Arthur's temple. "I wanted to every second I was there. You looked like sin walking."

Arthur leaned in and nestled into the crook of his shoulder. "I figured you were busy," he said.

"Oh, I was," Eames answered. "Busy thinking of reasons not to defile you over the nearest tabletop."

"How many'd you come up with?" Arthur asked.

"I don’t know," said Eames. "Every time I looked at you I lost count." And then they were kissing again, slow and intimate, and Arthur thought he could feel Eames trembling a little where Arthur moved against him, even through the fleece of his ridiculous hoodie.

"I don't normally go around accosting booksellers like this," Eames said breathlessly when their lips parted briefly, before angling back in. Behind them the coffee was hissing as it met the brim of the pot. "I know the circumstances currently would argue to the contrary, but please believe me when I say that"—he flicked his tongue over Arthur's ear—"I've never done anything like this before."

Arthur maneuvered around the table and tugged him against the wall, grateful for the solid surface against his back, wondering how unseemly it would be if he just peeled off Eames’ clothing and sucked him off right there against the wood paneling. "I wish I could say the same," he said, going for the buttons on Eames' trousers, trying not to get too caught up in the expression on Eames' face, in the warmth in his eyes, lest the whole thing become too overwhelming. "It's actually a common problem for bookstore owners, being seduced by celebrities."
"Oh, is it," Eames chuckled, running his hand down Arthur's back and grinding their hips together. "By all means, carry on being seduced, then."

Arthur kissed him. "Thank you for the tickets," he said, working his hand into the front of Eames' pants, trying to let himself slip into autopilot, because he knew how to do this, he was going to enjoy it, and it was useless if he started getting nervous. Eames sighed and pressed him into the wall, kissing his way over Arthur's collarbone and down the hollow of his throat. Arthur took him in hand—fuck, he was big, not that Arthur didn't already know that from spending a good portion of his teens scrutinizing all Eames' photo shoots—and stroked, slowly, letting his fingers trace the crown and slide lightly over the glans, tickling, teasing.

"Thank you for not bringing your boyfriend," said Eames, divesting Arthur fully of his shirt and dropping it on the floor.

"No, no boyfriend," Arthur bit out, a little dizzily. He squeezed the base of Eames' shaft once, twice, then kept gliding, taunting, while Eames brushed his fingers over Arthur's skin.

"Good, I—oh, god, that's good," Eames whispered, biting the skin above Arthur's nipple. Arthur yelped and jerked his head back so hard it hit the wall. Eames laughed, and Arthur twisted his fingers over the head of his cock until the laugh became a gasp. "God, Arthur," Eames said, pushing into his hand. "God, I want you."

"I think this is what's called having," Arthur managed, pulling him up for a kiss.

"Let me," Eames breathed, and Arthur was suddenly acutely aware of Eames muscles flowing around him and over him, and so turned on he nearly came on the spot. "Arthur, please let me—"

"Yes, fuck, yes, please," Arthur answered, hearing himself babble, not giving a fuck. "Take it, whatever you want, have me—shit, oh, fuck," because Eames was coming, jerking into Arthur's hands, his mouth meeting Arthur's, sloppy and careless as he ground against Arthur's hips. Arthur wondered how it was possible for something so simple to feel so utterly life-shaking before losing all coherent thought as Eames murmured, "Hold that thought, sweetheart," and dropped to his knees, tugging Arthur's pants down and snaking his lips over Arthur's erection in one movement.

Arthur let out a cry, arched back, and scrabbled against the wall for a second before giving up and burying his hands in Eames' hair while Eames sucked him, his plump lips even plumper stretched around Arthur's cock, his cheekbones thrown into sharp relief against the flare and hollow of his mouth as he moved. Arthur shuddered and twisted and Eames simply pinned him there where he stood, grabbing his hips and holding them still. He darted a look up at Arthur, and his eyes were gleaming, full of heat and desire. He swept his tongue around the center of Arthur's cock and then deep-throated it in a single slow downward motion, and Arthur gripped his hair so hard his knuckles turned white as he came, and came, and came, crying Eames' name in little wrecked whispers.

The moment Eames released his hips Arthur sank to the floor, dragging Eames into his arms for a kiss and going for the zipper of his hoodie at the same time. Eames sank into the kiss and let Arthur divest him of all the clothing he had without protest, letting Arthur pile it on the floor beside his own, letting Arthur push him down to the floor and get his hands on Eames' body at last.

The stretch of Eames' broad chest beneath him was almost enough to make Arthur hard again. He moaned from sheer sensory overload into the muscles of Eames' abdomen, kissing and nipping his way up Eames' chest, coming more than a little unglued at the way Eames threaded his fingers into his hair. "I know you can’t stay," he said when Eames pulled him into another kiss, “but stay."

“I really can’t stay,” said Eames, flipping Arthur over onto his back and somehow maneuvering
Arthur’s shirt between him and the hard floor as he did so. Then he balled up his hoodie and propped
Arthur’s head against it. He was so nice, Arthur thought. Christ. Eames slid his hands under Arthur’s
back and pinioned him down, letting his forearms take most of the weight of his body. Arthur still
felt deliciously trapped beneath him, and he dragged his leg up and over the back of Eames’ calf,
tugging him down against him. Eames sighed and started sucking at the pulse point of Arthur’s
throat. Arthur’s cock jumped against Eames’ thigh. “God, I really, really can’t stay,” Eames said
again, even as he reached his hand between Arthur’s thighs and stroked him a few times, almost
conversationally. “I can’t risk the paps poking about and causing a scandal before the screen test.
Ordinarily I could just tell them all to sod off, but Scorsese—you can’t get near a Scorsese project if
there’s even the slightest whiff of scandal afoot.”

“But where’s the scandal?” Arthur asked, half-focused on not just zoning out and rubbing himself off
against Eames’ massive thigh. “You’re already out. They won’t be interested in me, I’m nobody.”
He hoped he didn’t seem hopelessly naive.

“No, darling, that’s exactly what they’ll be interested in,” Eames said. “They find out about this,
you’ll be against the ropes for the next six months.” He sounded affectionate, not annoyed, and
Arthur was so dazzled for a moment by the look on his face and the fact that Eames had just called
him ‘darling’ that it took a bit for anything else to register.

“Hold on,” he said when it did. “I don’t care about publicity or people mobbing the store, it’s nothing
they haven’t already done.”

Eames looked at him and laughed outright. “You say that now,” he said. “You have no idea what it
can be like.”

Arthur frowned. “No, seriously, it doesn’t get to me. Wait, you know what? Forget it.”

Eames’ eyes widened. “Is that a rebuff?”

Arthur smiled a little and shook his head. “It’s not important,” he said, running his hands over
Eames’ back. “If you decide you—I mean, if you come back to London and you still want to—to—”

“Shh,” said Eames. “Right. Tabled til then.”

Arthur looked up at him. Please come back, he thought. Come back to me.

Eames bent low and kissed him. Then he leaned in and said against Arthur’s ear, “but right now,
would you mind terribly if I ate you out and then fucked you right here on the floor?”

Arthur could actually feel his blood pressure drop.

He arched up against Eames. “You know, if you’re going to a town like L.A., you should probably
get used to just taking what you want without asking.”

Eames’ eyes narrowed. He shifted his weight, and suddenly Arthur was completely pinned to the
floor by Eames’ hips.

“What if I want more than you can handle?” Eames asked.

Arthur shivered. “I don’t think you have any idea just how much I can handle, Mr. Eames,” he
replied.

Eames looked at Arthur’s lips. Then he licked his own. “I think you’d better get on your knees and
show me, then,” he said casually, and Arthur shivered again.
Arthur sat up and kissed him, letting himself make noise, letting himself give in and explore Eames’ mouth as much as he wanted. Eames cupped Arthur’s face between his hands, and kept his eyes closed when Arthur pulled away. Arthur turned around and spread his knees wide as he leaned down. I can’t believe I’m doing this, he thought, and then Eames’ tongue found the base of his spine and began tracing patterns there, and Arthur spread his hands flat on the hard wood and tried not to melt into the floor.

He mostly failed.

The next morning fell on a Monday. Previously, when his clientele consisted solely of grad students, professors, and the idle upper class, this would have been a good thing, because on a Monday morning, no one possessed a burning desire to read about nuclear physics. Mondays, however, were fair game for tourists and idle hipsters, as Arthur had quickly learned. It meant that instead of spending the morning staring vaguely at the archway of books where Eames had tongue-fucked him the night before, he could only do it in short snatches between actually selling books, which frankly he resented.

At noon Ariadne came in, which meant Arthur could retreat to his office instead of staring at the notable gap between Naked Species of Gondolella and Naming Nature: The Clash Between Instinct and Science where he had gripped the shelf as Eames bottomed out inside of him, then proceeded to fuck him so deep Arthur’s knees had splinters.

“You okay?” Ariadne asked him ten minutes into her shift. “You seem kinda out of it.”

“Fine,” Arthur told her, trying not to think about Eames coming into his hand not three feet away from where she was standing. About Eames coming inside him not twelve hours before.

She squinted at him. Arthur squinted back. Then his phone rang and he lunged for it so fast he nearly knocked it off the desk. The number was blocked. Arthur’s heart flopped about in his chest, and he might have accidentally shoved Ariadne out of the office in his haste to close the door. On the other side of the door Ariadne made a face at him. Arthur dropped the blinds.

“Hey,” he said hopefully into the phone.

“Hello, there,” said Eames’ warm voice, gravelly from lack of sleep and lots of ridiculously hot sex. Arthur returned to his chair, leaned all the way back, and swiveled away from the door. “On my way to the airport.”

“I’m still here,” Arthur said. “Sitting in my office.”

“In a car, surrounded by people,” said Eames. “All giving me looks of disdain right at this second.”

“Hmm, that’s unfortunate,” said Arthur. “Makes it difficult to tell you where I wish you were instead.”

“Indeed,” said Eames. “You could talk, perhaps, and I could listen? I’m a very good listener.”

“Probably not a good idea,” said Arthur. “I don’t think these walls are soundproof.”

“I think you’re a tease, Arthur,” Eames said.

“Says he who rang me on his way out of the country.”

“I couldn’t quite resist,” said Eames. “Who else will pretend to be thoroughly unimpressed with me while secretly squirming in glee?”

“Matty from Filmspotting?” Arthur deadpanned. Eames burst into laughter. He had a ridiculous laugh, really. Arthur frowned at the phone.
“Did you get a chance to do any reading?” he asked.

“Just a little, but I’ve got the whole flight, stopover in New York and the flight out tomorrow.”

“Start with *Everything I Know,*” said Arthur. “It doesn’t matter which order you read the transcripts in, just try to ingest as much as you can. There’s this great part in lecture one where he starts rambling about how the human brain is kind of like an Italian fiefdom.”

“Fabulous,” said Eames. “I’m sure whoever sits next to me on the plane will have ample opportunity to wonder why the guy in the sunglasses next to him keeps writing ‘you crazy old codger’ in the margins of his airplane book.”

“Pretty sure they made the margins wide for just that reason,” said Arthur. “Go crazy. You do want people to believe you’re perfect for the part.”

“I am inestimably perfect for this part,” said Eames. “You know we were both kicked out of the same school twice? Kindred spirits.” There was some background noise, and what sounded like Eames getting punched in the arm. “Ow,” said Eames. “I’ve just been informed I’m not supposed to tell you that in case you’re a reporter or a Russian spy.”

“Why do the Russians care about your scurrilous academic career?” asked Arthur.

“Maybe I’m a spy,” said Eames. “Perhaps I’m MI-6 and they’re on to me, and thus sent you to learn all you could about my past.”

“You mean if the world knew the truth about your years in the AmDrams, it would never be the same?”

“Precisely. And now, having delivered that precious information into the wrong hands, the future of civilization itself is at stake.”

“Too late,” Arthur said. “If you get your burn notice, I guess you’ll have your answer.”

“And yet what a sweet burn it is,” said Eames.

Arthur smiled and his voice went low. “Yeah, it is,” he said. “It feels great. You feel great.”

“Hmm,” said Eames, but it was a guttural sort of sound, and Arthur sank down lower in his chair, sliding his hand over his thigh.

“I can still feel you inside me,” he said softly. “Your tongue, your cock.”

“How very gratifying,” said Eames.

“And when you come back,” Arthur said, growing bolder, “I want you in my mouth, I want you to come all over me, and then I want to ride you while I’m still slick with your come all over my face and my chest.”

There followed a silence Arthur chose to construe as shock.

“I definitely hope,” said Eames after many seconds had passed, “that we can pursue that possibility at some point.”

“You sound a bit peaked,” said Arthur.

“Yes, that’s correct,” said Eames briskly. “You have my number now, yes?—oh, wait, no, Martin
says it’s blocked. I have to get new phones fairly frequently, which is a complete pain in the arse. I’ll text it to you. Only don’t store it on the phone, write it down somewhere and then delete the message in case your phone gets hacked.”

“My phone,” echoed Arthur.

“Absolutely,” said Eames. “You don’t think those nude pics of Scarlett Johansson that went around recently came from hers, do you?”

“Right,” said Arthur.

“So, yes, feel free to elucidate further your proposition, if you wish,” said Eames. “Just delete everything before the Russians find it.”

“Just for that,” said Arthur, “I’m going to text you quotes from the CERN seminar on neutrinos.”

“Einstein and I will await them eagerly,” said Eames.

“Nerd,” Arthur accused.

“You bring it out in me, darling,” said Eames.

In the background, Arthur distinctly heard someone mutter, “Oh, god, we’re fucked.”

Arthur grinned.

“At the airport,” said Eames. “I’ll text you something suitably asinine.”

“Break a leg,” said Arthur. “Does that work for movies, too?”

There was a light laugh on the other end of the line. “When you say it,” Eames answered, “I bet it works every time.”

He hung up.

Arthur sat smiling for another long moment.

Someone began pounding on the window. Arthur went to it and raised the blinds. Ariadne was glaring at him from the other side. He opened the door. “Are you kidding me with the closed door thing?” she said, huffing at him. “Come on, you have to at least tell me who that was.”

“The contractor,” Arthur said.

“Oh, really,” said Ariadne. “You must have been doing some hot and heavy contract negotiation. You’re blushing, Arthur.”

“I don’t blush,” said Arthur.

“Did you at least set a final deadline for project completion?” Ariadne said. “You gotta tell me because I’m going crazy trying to design something these people can actually build in a month.”

“Of course we did,” Arthur said. “He’s sending over the paperwork.”

“Thank goodness,” said Ariadne. “You know I’m technically not even supposed to be here, right? Technically I quit. I’m supposed to be holed up with a protractor and a scale right now, not here doing your job for you.”
“Sure,” said Arthur.


“What?” said Arthur. “I’m fine. Just. I’ll call in the kids from MIND, they can manage the store today.”

“While you do what?” said Ariadne.

Arthur’s phone beeped. Arthur twitched and checked it.

It was a text with Eames’ phone number, followed by another that just read: What’s up?

Arthur rolled his eyes and immediately memorized and deleted the number.

“Oh, my god,” said Ariadne, staring at him as he started to text back. “Okay, whatever, but I better not find out that you and David Tennant are schtupping or something. I’m giving you an hour while you go get Ty and Jorby, and then I have to work on the design. That okay?”

“Sure,” said Arthur. I’ve heard you expound upon the ecumenical implications of Neorealist cinema and all you give me is ‘what’s up?’

“Are you actually listening to me?” Ariadne asked. “No, Ariadne, I’m not actually listening to you!”

I did promise asinine. I hate airports. And flying. Is that better?

“Arthur, can I have the next two weeks off? Sure, Ariadne!”

Kate Winslet told me she never flies anywhere with her kids’ dad in case the plane crashes and they leave their children parentless. Oh, wait, is this a bad time to have mentioned that?

“Arthur, can I have a cash advance on my paycheck? Sure, Ariadne!”

“I heard that,” said Arthur.

Oh, that’s easy. Just always take the children with you. Problem solved.


“Are you?” she asked. “Arthur, are you and David Tennant schtupping?”

Arthur smiled. He had a feeling he blushed again too. “No,” he said. “I thought you told me he was married.”

“Engaged,” she said, crossing her arms. “That means there’s still a chance for me.”

“Far be it from me to stand in your way,” Arthur said.

I’ll be sure to pass along your advice to Kate next time I see her.

Oh, so it’s ‘Kate’ now, is it. You were networking the night of that premiere, weren’t you, you sly capitalist!

Arthur wandered back into his office. There was little else for me to do, since my date was busy putting spells on people and my dreams of dining with my favorite actor were crushed.
Favorite actor, really? Who might that be, might I ask?

Funny you should ask. No one knows his real name. I have a bet going from college that it's Clarence.

Oh, him. Terrible ham, Clarence. You'd be much better fancying DiCaprio.

Nah. Too much sexual confusion there for me.

Some people think that makes it more exciting. Certainly more marketable.

Oh, please. You know that's not true in your case.

I'm allowed to be the exception, darling. They don't know what else to do with me but keep letting me act. Doesn't change the rules of the closet for anyone else over in Hollywood.

Arthur sat on that one for a bit. A moment later: Do please remember to delete these texts. I hate to ask.

Arthur reread them and then deleted them all. All gone. The Russians will never know the truth.

I'm not so sure. You may outsmart us all yet.


“Ty and Jorby?” she said. Arthur blinked. “You were going to call them in for the afternoon?”

“Oh.” Arthur frowned down at his phone. “Right. Just a sec.”

Must return to reality, he texted. Have a nice flight.

After another moment, he added:

you're perfect for the part. you'll be fine.

Thank you, Eames wrote back.

Arthur deleted all but that one.

A large part of Arthur expected that when Eames arrived in Manhattan he would naturally be on to other more important things. He knew, logically, that as one of the most famous people on earth, Eames probably had hundreds of people vying for his attention at every second of the day. He knew, logically, that he had been lucky to get Eames to himself at all, and even luckier to have held his attention. He knew, logically, that he would probably never see him again.

Instead, Arthur got a text at two am, and since he was awake thinking about how he'd been manhandled like a chew toy and rimmed within an inch of his sanity the previous evening, he answered it.

Go to sleep, was the response.

Eames answered on the first ring.

“I'm at the Marquis,” he said by way of greeting. “It's such a bloody obnoxious hotel, but it does have very soft pillows.”
“Plus you did a stint in the basement that one time,” Arthur said.

“Freaking me out again, Arthur.”

“No, no,” said Arthur. “No, see, I was a student at NYU. I sat in a lot of cheap seats back then.”

“NYU, of bloody course you were. And so you saw me in that performance, eight—fuck, me, no, nine years ago. Of course you bloody did.”

“Okay, yes,” Arthur huffed into the phone, “I was—I am a fan of yours. Can we just embrace that fact and move on?”


Arthur bit his lip.

“Arthur? Have I lost you?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you again,” Arthur said finally.

“Oh, very smart, using an actor's narcissism as bait. What did you study at NYU?”


“Hmm,” said Eames. “So all of that willingness to be pinned down and boarded like a helpless butterfly is just for show?”

Arthur swallowed. “Not quite,” he said.

“ Hmm,” said Eames again. Silence stretched between them for a moment, not uncomfortable, but calm. Arthur was debating whether to pursue that line of conversation, because although it was two in the morning his nerves were suddenly strung tight and he was wide awake, when Eames spoke again.

“I have an early flight out in the morning. I think I’m supposed to go on one of those stupid talk shows tonight and then there’s some thing in the morning, brunch with I forget who once I’m out west, so god knows how much actual sleep I’ll get. The point is I may drop off the radar, quite by accident. And I just didn’t want... I mean, I didn’t want to be rude if you were—”

“I understand,” Arthur said. Then he added, a little stiffly, “It’s okay, I’m not—I wasn’t waiting for your call.”

“Oh,” said Eames. “No, of course you weren’t.” He sounded remote, maybe even disappointed, but it was gone in an instant, amusement flooding his voice in its place. “Why exactly are you awake at this hour of the night again, then?”

“I was doing some shelving,” said Arthur.

“Shelving.”

“Shelving. Of books.”

“Right,” said Eames. “I’ve seen your classification system and I must say it’s very formidable.”

Arthur laughed. “Yes, it’s called alphabetizing, I’m told it packs a real punch.”
“Well, you would know, wouldn’t you, my ninja-fighting friend?” Eames was laughing on the other end of the line, and Arthur’s throat suddenly felt tight.

“Can I ask you something?” he asked. “Why me?” It was out of his mouth before he knew he even wanted to ask it.

There was a long pause. “I’ll tell you when I see you again,” he said at last.

“No fair using a bookseller’s narcissism as bait,” said Arthur.

"I read all of your man Bucky's quixotic lectures while on the plane," said Eames. "Aren't you proud of me?"

"No fair using that as bait, either," said Arthur.

"I knew you would be," said Eames. "Now go to sleep. Rest well."

And funnily enough, Arthur did.

Over the next few days, Eames didn’t call or text. Arthur went about his business, and if Ariadne cast him sharp glances in between pestering him about getting forms signed and paperwork filled out, then he ignored them in favor of checking his phone more often than was prudent.

He half-hoped that Eames would at least let him know how the screen test had gone; but when four days passed with no notice, he had to face facts. It wasn’t a surprise, really. He barely knew Eames, if you could say meeting someone three times and then letting them stick their tongue in your ass was knowing a person. He could let it go. He’d had a moment--or, rather, three moments and one extended sequence full of sex--and that was that.

So. Arthur went about his business. The air had grown crisper and colder while his back had been turned, and the sunlight was slipping behind the bookshelves earlier at the end of the day, and Arthur, who didn’t much like winter, bought a set of expensive scarves out of sheer pique at the change in the weather.

“You’re grouchy,” Mal told him. “I don’t want to buy books from someone who’s grouchy.”

“Paperwork makes me grouchy,” said Arthur, shoving aside some tedious document about occupancy limits Ariadne had handed him earlier. He’d retreated to his office to escape the chaos, and Mal had followed him--possibly to escape the noise, possibly because she was Mal and allowing retreat of any kind was against her nature. The owner of the rug store had finally cleared out and the contractors had invaded. The dust was mostly shut out of the store during the day by the tarps they had hanging all over the place, but the noise was another matter. Ariadne had developed a habit of sitting cross-legged in the middle of the workspace, wearing a set of noise-canceling headphones and writing instructions and diagrams on a mini-whiteboard, usually accompanied by stern emoticons. For the most part, the contractors left Arthur alone, which was all he wanted. Mal, however, was another matter.

“Has the council approved the building permit?” she said, sitting on the edge of his desk. Arthur hummed noncommittally. He hadn’t been kidding about letting Ariadne and his lawyer handle most of the heavy red tape. So far he’d only had to go to a council meeting twice. “You’re going to have to give Ariadne a Christmas bonus that’s larger than this entire store.”

“You know, I can hear it when the two of you conspire against me,” Arthur said without heat.

“Ridiculous,” said Mal. “Conspiring against you is what happens when I lure her away from you
once and for all.”

“Even you can’t hire a grad student, Mal.”

“Oh, but I can make it worth her while to take a very unofficial internship,” said Mal, with such a lascivious lilt to her voice that Arthur actually looked up from where he’d been drumming the desk with his fingers. She was watching Ariadne direct the construction of the new alcove she had begged Arthur to let her design into the joining of the buildings. Mal had that gleam in her eye.

“You can’t seduce her into working for you,” Arthur said, mildly appalled. “You’re married. Also she’s my friend. You can’t go around seducing my friends.”


“I’ll tell Dom you can’t be trusted around young girls.”

“Oh, it’s not the girls I can’t be trusted around,” she said on a sigh. “It’s the architects.”

“I doubt Dom will make that distinction.”

“Fine. I’ll tell him you gave him a used scarf for his birthday.”

Arthur frowned. “I haven’t gotten him anything,” he said. “I didn’t know he had a birthday.”

“Well, he does, and you’re invited to dinner to celebrate Thursday night. You should give him that scarf you’re wearing, you obviously hate it.” Arthur glanced down. “Don’t worry, he’ll never know the difference.” Mal laughed. “He might even like it better. Dom hates it when other people spend money on him. It makes him nervous.”

“Nervous for what?”

Mal shrugged. She managed to make it look elegant, and Arthur wondered for the millionth time what kind of secrets a guy like Dom had hiding on him that would hold her interest. “Nervous that people will realize he doesn’t deserve it, I think.”

“Does he?” said Arthur dryly. He met Mal’s gaze when she glanced at him, her eyes suddenly sharp. She had mood swings sometimes. It was always quick, like a thunderclap, then gone, but the shock would still rattle Arthur to his bones every time.

But he didn’t look away this time, and after another moment, Mal laughed and shook her head. “People don’t work that way,” she said. “If we started keeping score, none of us would ever deserve anything but pain--and wouldn’t that be sad?”

“It’s a nice scarf,” Arthur said. Mal flashed him a brilliant smile, and slid the folds of it between her fingers. Arthur had a sudden sense memory when she leaned in of the way Eames had invaded his space with his solid presence and warm skin and low voice. He pulled back reflexively, trying not to react. The scarf stayed in Mal’s hand. She looked down at it, then up at him. Arthur bit his lip and studied the desktop and studiously ignored the awkward silence.

“Come dine with us Thursday,” Mal said, tossing the scarf on his desk. “And make sure you wrap this. Dom likes shiny paper.”

Arthur went despite the possibility of having to make one-on-one conversation with Dom, a prospect which he figured would end in awkward silence and uncomfortable throat-clearing after about thirty seconds. He wanted any opportunity not to think about Eames, however, and wondering what kind
of fancy house the Cobbs lived in was as good as any.

It turned out they owned a white Georgian in Holland Park, not too far from Arthur’s shop. It was gorgeous inside and out, and Arthur had a minor geekgasm when he walked in and noticed the Stieglitz on the living room wall. “Don’t ask how we got it,” Dom said gravely, while Arthur tried not to stare at it.

“It’s okay, Arthur,” Mal said, with a smile that suggested she was bored of showing it off. “You can touch it.”

Arthur got as close as running his finger along the edge of the frame. It was a photo of O’Keefe, the right half of her face cropped out of the snapshot, so that she loomed, close and brooding, before the viewer.

“1930?” Arthur guessed.

“1928,” said Dom. He came over, gave the wall beside the photo a light pat. “Mal found it.”

Arthur wanted to ask how a person ‘found’ a Stieglitz, but instead he just nodded and regarded it. He felt Mal beside him, leaning in to whisper into his ear.

“She has such heavy eyes,” she said. “What kind of lover must you be, to capture all your lover’s sadness on film and then proceed to love them anyway?”

“Nah, that’s not sadness,” said Dom. “It’s beauty.”

Arthur saw, without really taking his eyes from the photograph, the moment when Dom reached over and squeezed Mal’s hand.

He had expected to be dining with a house full of their friends, what with how important Mal seemed to be among architects, at least according to Ariadne. Instead it was just the five of them, Philippa and James bolting down to the living room the moment Arthur laughed loudly enough to carry his voice upstairs. Arthur was grateful for the kids and grateful for the noise, and it dawned on him that he had never actually seen Mal and Dom together outside of their children. It had taken him a while to figure out what business Dom was in, but eventually he realized Dom’s business was his wife and his kids—a business he went about with single-minded intensity. He was a stay-at-home dad who sometimes, supposedly, did freelance engineering work, though Arthur had never actually heard him refer to being on a job. Arthur would never have used the term ‘creeped out’ to describe the way Dom made him feel when he was around the whole family at once, but if someone else had used it, he wouldn’t have argued. Tonight, though, Dom seemed singularly jocular, and Arthur wasted a few moments trying to figure out if it was forced or not before deciding he didn’t really care.

As it happened, Dom did indeed like shiny paper, and he spent more time playing with the silver wrapped gift box Arthur had than he did actually looking inside it. “Don’t get excited, it’s a scarf,” Arthur told him when he went to open it.

“And a little bipolarity.”
Mal snorted. 

“Okay, maybe more than a little,” Dom said. “You should see the shit they’ve got Mal taking, you could power a small drug cartel out of our medicine cabinet—”

“Dom, I thought we agreed on no talking about our mental disorders at the dinner table,” said Mal placidly. “James, didn’t you say you wanted to show Arthur your designs?”

James did want to show Arthur his designs, and then James wanted to draw on him, because James always wanted to draw on Arthur whenever he came over, and Arthur was sitting in the floor, dutifully letting him draw a three-headed unicorn on his cheek when his phone buzzed.

Arthur dug it out of his pocket to glance at it. Then he stood up so fast James’ marker streaked over his cheekbone. “I have to--excuse me, I have to grab this,” he said, and darted outside so fast he was breathless by the time he shut the door.

The phone rang once more. Arthur swallowed before he answered it. "Hey," he said. His voice cracked a little anyway.

On the other end of the phone came a rich, warm laugh, and Arthur honest-to-god felt like his heart was going to squeeze itself right out of his ribcage.

"Arthur," said Eames in that voice. "Where are you?"

"I'm in England, where are you?"

"Just got off the plane," Eames said. "I'm jet-lagged and smelly and exhausted and I want to see you."

"Asshole," said Arthur sternly, to cover up the sound of the grin trying to spread its way all over his face. "You don't call for days because of some little screen test and then expect me to just be available the moment you do? What am I, your girl Friday?"

"Thursday," said Eames. "It is still Thursday here, isn't it?"

"For a few more hours," said Arthur.

"So tell me where you are, Rosalind," said Eames.

"I could be at the hospital," said Arthur. "I could be on a date with Ralph Bellamy."

"That would be awkward," said Eames. "Are you on a date?"

"I could be," Arthur huffed. "Just because I sell weird books--"

"And drop names of relatively obscure vintage film actors at a moment's notice--"

"--doesn't mean I couldn't be on a date."

"You're not on a date," said Eames, and Arthur realized he was grinning all over anyway.

"I'm at a friend's for dinner," he relented. "It's her husband's birthday."

"Wonderful," said Eames. "Have you sat down to eat yet or is there room for one more at the table?"

Arthur's laugh only made it halfway. "What?"
"I know it’s terribly rude to drop in unannounced, but I can bring my own chips, and I promise to stop by the hotel and have a shower first, if that makes a difference. Oh, and there’s my luggage now, so I can even promise you I’ll be wearing clean clothes."

"Are there tons of people around?" asked Arthur, suddenly warm all over at the thought of Eames just calling him up like it was no big deal, like he wasn’t currently surrounded by the constant flashing of lights and the clicking of phone cams.

"Nothing Prianka can't handle," said Eames softly, and he did sound tired suddenly. "I probably should have done something private, but there was a flight out this morning and I didn't want to wait on arranging a charter."

"Oh," said Arthur. He suddenly thought about Hubble’s theory of the expanding universe: how inside Mal and Dom and their kids were occupying a totally separate corner of existence from Eames, who was returning from what might as well be another planet; and how, he, Arthur, was standing on a stoop in Holland Park, feeling the pull of gravity in his chest as his universe grew and grew.

“I’m glad you didn’t wait,” he said.

“Arthur,” said Eames, and then the silence he left between them said everything.

Arthur let out a breath. “Mal and Dom would love to meet you,” he said, and gave Eames the address.

“Excellent,” said Eames, in his jaunty Eames voice. Arthur suddenly felt warm all over, and scowled at himself.

“Hey, is it okay if I let it be a surprise? You coming over, I mean. It’s Dom’s birthday, he’s kind of a huge fan.”

“Oh, sure, no problem,” said Eames.

“You sure?”

“Positive. It’s all right, Arthur, I’m used to people freaking out when they see me. Good for the ego, really. Nothing like people bursting into tears upon sight of you to remind you not to get too cocky.”

"If it helps, if anyone cries tonight it will probably me shedding tears of embarrassment."

"Well, in that case, I am definitely on my way."

"Look, Eames, you really don't have to do this."

"And yet surprisingly enough, every moment I spend talking to you on a phone and not actually looking at you convinces me that I really do."

"I'd be happy to meet you somewhere--"

"Arthur," said Eames. "It's fine. I'd love to meet your friends. I just got back from Hollywood, for god’s sake. Please let me come to your party so I can be reminded that normal people still exist in the world."

"Mal and Dom occupy relative values of normal," Arthur said.

"You are breaking my heart," said Eames, and Arthur relented at the note of exasperation in his
"Fine," he said. "You can come."

"You aren't having me on? Not trying to warn me away? They aren't going to abduct me and sell me into sex slavery?"

"No. Well," said Arthur, "Dom may attempt to marry you into the family."

"How intriguing."

"His kids are six and four."

"Of course I'm married to my work already, so sorry." Arthur laughed. "See you in half an hour, darling," Eames said.

"See you," said Arthur, hating the way he couldn't seem to shut down his smile.

"Who was that?" Mal asked when Arthur returned to the living room.

"A friend," Arthur said. "I invited him to stop by for a bit, I didn't think you'd mind."

"Ariadne?"

"No," Arthur hedged. "Not Ariadne."

"Is it David Tennant? Ariadne says you're sleeping with him."

Dom perked up. "What is this, like, the eighth celebrity you've slept with?"

"I am not sleeping with David Tennant," said Arthur. "Also, I deeply regret the fact that you and Ariadne ever met, and also could you please never mention the David Tennant thing again?"

"Well, it's obviously someone," said Mal. "First you're grouchy and moping about, and now you're beaming."

"I am not beaming," said Arthur, appalled.

"You're kind of beaming," said Dom, inspecting him. "Well, now you're not, now you're scowling."

"Good," said Arthur.

"Arthur's in love," said Mal.

"Oh, god," said Arthur.

Mal grinned, showing all her teeth.

"Don't worry, we won't tell him," she said. "That you're in love, I mean."

"See that you don't," said Arthur.

"I'm going to open more presents," said Dom.

Dom opened more presents and Mal put another place out for dinner, and James and Philippa argued over who got to draw on Arthur next. The decision was thankfully forestalled by the doorbell, and Arthur gathered his shirt sleeves out of the reach of the children and their washable markers, and
tried not to look nervous.

“You look nervous,” said Mal.

“Why don’t I get the door,” said Dom.

“Good idea,” said Arthur.

The living room was just off the hallway to the entrance, so Arthur did the gallant thing and motioned for Mal and the kids to be quiet so they could all eavesdrop.

“Hi,” said Eames.

From the hallway there came a resounding silence.

“Are you Dom?” said Eames after a moment, as cheerfully as ever. “Nice to meet you. Arthur invited me to drop by, I hope you don’t mind. Happy birthday, by the way. I brought, uh. Dom Pérignon? Forgive the pun. You must get bloody tired of that, I bet.”

Mal was throwing Arthur strange looks. Arthur waited a moment longer.

“Uh,” came Dom’s voice at last. “I think you must have the wrong house.”

Arthur bolted for the hallway.

“No, Dom, it’s fine, it’s just--oh, hi,” he said abruptly when he saw Eames, who was wearing a navy blue dress jacket and a gray patterned shirt beneath that would have looked horrible on anyone else but looked, on Eames, like something Arthur actually wanted to eat.

Eames’ gaze landed on him and rested, for a moment, full of hunger and heat.

Then Eames blinked, and his expression shifted, and Arthur remembered there was a three-headed unicorn on his face.

“Um,” he said. “This is--this is Eames. He’s the friend I was telling you about.” He sidled forward, just in case Dom made any sudden moves. Eames was now trying very hard not to laugh. Arthur sent him an eyeroll.

“I know who he is,” said Dom. He was still standing frozen.

“You’re not David Tennant,” said Mal from the doorway.

“A fact for which I am daily in mourning,” said Eames without missing a beat.

“I’ve seen all your films,” Dom blurted suddenly, grasping Eames’ hand and pumping it. “I mean--not all, but, a lot. A lot of them. You’re really good. I’m, uh. I’m Dom, by the way.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Eames, letting Dom continue shaking his hand until Mal stepped forward and pried him gently away.

“I’m Mal,” she said. “Any friend of Arthur’s is a friend of ours.”


“Excellent,” said Eames. “Thank you.”
The three of them stood there.

“Could he come in?” Arthur asked after a moment.

‘Oh, certainly!’ Mal exclaimed, springing into action. Arthur backed against the wall as she seized the champagne bottle with one hand and Eames with the other, hauling them both inside. Eames flashed him a toothy grin as he was dragged by, and Arthur decided that this was probably about to be the most embarrassing night of his life.

James and Philippa were unimpressed with Eames for the most part. James said hello and promptly returned to coloring, and Philippa said, “You were at my party!” before immediately losing interest.

“So, you’re... famous,” said Dom, as if he were proud of himself for being so casual.

“It would seem so--holy shit, that’s Chagall,” Eames said, stopping and staring at the small framed picture on the wall, right next to the Stieglitz. It was a cartoonlike sketch of what could have been Paris at night. Arthur had possibly glanced at it and assumed it had been drawn by one of the children.

Eames wandered over to it like a vampire host in thrall. “This is stunning,” he said. “May I ask how you came by it?”


“Arthur, did you see this?” said Eames, beckoning him over. “It’s a Chagall. I love Chagall.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Arthur said. Eames glanced up. “You did a few interviews where you talked about all the research you did for The Cezanne Game. How you got really into modern art.”

“Oh, I loved that film,” said Mal. “I was in art school at the time.” She sent him a wink. “Does that make you feel old?”

“My film CV makes me feel old,” said Eames politely. He tore his gaze away from the Chagall and his eyes lit on the Stieglitz next to it. “My, what have we here.”

He leaned forward and touched the side of the frame contemplatively, just as Arthur had done, and Arthur ducked his head to hide a smile.

“Georgia looks pissed off that he’s insisting on taking her picture while she’s wearing a nightie,” said Eames.

“That’s what I thought,” said Arthur.

“She’s reflecting on the impermanence and profundity of life,” said Dom, stepping in between them.

“No, totally pissed off,” said Arthur.

“Dom, go check on the cake before you get into a theological debate about portraiture,” said Mal.

“I’d better go check on the cake,” said Dom.

"Do you like Stieglitz?" Eames asked, full of earnestly, his lips pursing and nearly derailing Arthur's train of thought altogether. Arthur smiled, a flash before he could help himself. Eames expression softened a bit.

"I love architecture and photography," said Arthur. "So, yeah, I guess I do."
"You know, I've honestly never given much thought to photography," said Eames, stepping closer to the picture. Doing so brought his shoulders in line with Arthur's, and when their hands brushed he simply twined their fingers together.

Eames was holding his hand.

It felt nice, Arthur thought. It felt like being fourteen again, and slipping his hand into the waiting grasp of the befreckled boy with glasses who sat in front of him in homeroom. Eames’ clasp was light and warm, and Arthur chanced a glance over at him and found Eames was watching him out of the corner of his eyes, barely smiling.

Eames began excitedly describing the link between Stieglitz and the early days of cinematography, through still photographers turned cameramen like Karl Struss, back when everyone was experimenting with everything. He gestured when he got enthusiastic, taking Arthur's hand with him, and Arthur was trying not to get lost in the sound of his voice and the delight on his face when Dom returned and promptly nudged his way between them. Arthur nobly refrained from glaring at him.

"You know what I like about this one," he began, gesturing to the photograph. "She’s clearly devoted to the man behind the camera. You know, the upturned palm is an unmistakable gesture of submission and longing."

An odd silence followed wherein Arthur felt the horrified look he and Eames weren’t exchanging; then Eames squeezed Arthur’s hand lightly and let go, plastering a broad grin on his face as he turned.

"I take it you must teach literature," he said jovially. When Arthur turned around, too, Eames switched the arrangement of their hands and then linked his fingers through Arthur’s as if it were an everyday thing.

Arthur decided trying to hide the smile was more trouble than it was worth.

Dom was saying that he didn’t actually teach anything, but if he did, he’d be sure to emphasize some shit that Arthur didn’t really pay attention to because he was halfway to deciding that birthday party or no, he was kind of a dick. Eames seemed to be listening intently, though, and Arthur wound up looking back and forth between them, trying to figure out if Eames was really interested, or if it was all just a show of politeness.

After a moment he started to feel bad. Dom was a nice enough guy. He loved his family, was devoted to his wife, and--

"So tell me," said Dom, rocking back and forth on his heels, hands in his pockets, looking for all the world like a rooster puffing out its chest. "Was that giant plot hole in the middle of By My Sky there when you read the script or did it get added in during editing?"

Eames blinked several times while his face went carefully blank, a look Arthur was beginning to read on him as one of total bemusement. "I actually require a certain number of plot holes in each of my films," he replied.

Dom looked confused.

"No, really, it’s in my contract," said Eames, warming up to it, casting Arthur a quick wink. "The more plot holes, the dumber my audience. Which means the less likelihood of the smart ones showing up and realizing I can’t act."
There was a moment of total silence before everyone burst into awkward laughter.

Arthur rubbed his temple.

“Cake is ready,” said Mal, re-appearing from the kitchen. “And Dom has to take his meds before he can blow out the candles.”

Dom pouted.

“Trust me, it’s high time,” she said, folding her arms. “Has he been an arrogant prick yet?” she said to Arthur.

“Hey,” said Dom.

“I don’t think I’m allowed to answer that question on his birthday,” said Arthur.

“You’re both lovely,” said Eames. “I get hyper-defensive when I go off my Adderall every now and then, yeah? Compared to that, this evening is like walking into a bloody zen garden.” He sent Arthur a smile.

“Hey, my wife and I take that!” said Dom, nodding as if he were delighted to have found some common ground with Eames.

“I’m literally about to put my face in my palm,” said Arthur, and Eames burst into hearty laughter.

“I guess I’ll do as I’m told,” said Dom genially. Mal reached out an arm and dragged him in for a kiss as he went by her. He ran his hand through her hair and settled in, the two of them framed against the entrance to the dining room.

“I don’t really get them at all,” said Arthur.

“What’s to get, darling?” said Eames. “Just look how happy they are.”

“That’s what I don’t get,” said Arthur. Eames gave him a look of curiosity.

Arthur was spared whatever question was on Eames’ mind when James wandered over and tugged Eames’ pants leg. “Can I paint a dragon on your face?” he said.

“Only if you promise to give it three heads,” said Eames, squatting down. “That way it will match Arthur’s.” He looked up at Arthur, who knew the tips of his ears were probably beet red by now.

“Okay,” said James, rolling up his sleeves.

Eames’ smile got about a thousand watts brighter. Probably, so did Arthur’s.

Half an hour later, Arthur’s three-headed unicorn was glowering away at Eames’ three-headed dragon, where Eames sat beside him at the dinner table. Cobb had stuffed them all with vegan birthday cake and soy ice cream, and down a few glasses of the Dom Pérignon, Arthur was starting to feel relaxed, which was frankly something he hadn’t thought possible at the start of the evening. He owed it to the way Eames approached every conversation like it was no big deal, like there was no question too invasive or too awkward. He was born to make everyone love him, Arthur thought, aware that he was heady as much from the fact that he currently had his hand on Eames’ thigh as from the wine.

“I’m an actor because I’m terrible at real life,” Eames was saying, casting Arthur a smile. “I live out of hotels because I'm ridiculously messy and require someone to clean up after me at all times. I don't
think I actually know how to use a washing machine that doesn’t run on quarters. My publicist has actually forbidden me to buy print fabrics. To this day I’m not sure why.”

“Oh, I think I know why,” Arthur couldn’t help inserting. Eames made a face at him, then spontaneously leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. Arthur felt it all over, and when Eames leaned back, Arthur was sure he was red all over as well.

“So how long have you two been dating?” said Mal, as Arthur frantically rubbed the back of his neck and gulped down more champagne.

Eames said, “Are we dating, Arthur?”

Arthur drained his glass and said, “Um.”

“This is our first date, actually,” said Eames, beaming at the Cobbs.

“Oh, god,” said Mal flatly. “Arthur, why did you bring him here?”

“No, no, I wanted to come!” said Eames. “Really, you’ve no idea what it’s like to be able to get away from Hollywood, which is full of people who lie and exaggerate and fawn over you and have no idea how to be real, and just come somewhere where people are nice and natural and sincere.”

“So you’re slumming,” said Mal, narrowing her eyes.

“Precisely,” said Eames.

Cobb laughed loudly. “Funny,” he said.

“Arthur isn’t like anyone I’ve met recently,” said Eames quietly, running his thumb over Arthur’s hand where it met his knee. Arthur looked down at the melting ice cream on his plate because he was too embarrassed to look anywhere else. Eames’ thumb kept tracing his skin.

“We like Arthur, very much,” said Mal.

“Now you just sound like you’re threatening him, honey,” said Dom.

Mal squinted at Eames.

“No threatening our movie star guests, Mal,” said Dom.

“If this were a romantic comedy,” said Mal, enunciating her words, “This would be the part where I ask you to come with me into the kitchen under the pretext of helping me clean up the dishes, and instead I’d tell you all about Arthur’s loneliness and history of failed relationships--”

“I don’t have a--” Arthur started.

“Shh,” said Mal. “And tell you to be very good to him because he’s special.”

“Quite right,” said Eames attentively.

“But Arthur can take care of himself, and Dom’s the one who does the dishes, so just be sure to use condoms,” she said brightly.

“I appreciate that,” said Eames.

“I really don’t have a history of failed relationships,” said Arthur.
Eames patted him on the arm.

"I'm sorry you had to live through that," Arthur said as they were leaving, walking down the steps together to a destination unknown.

"But why?" Eames said, cheerfully winding his arm through Arthur's as they walked. "I honestly thought your friends were lovely."

"Yeah, well," said Arthur, "Dom’s more like... Mal’s husband, than a friend."

"Well, he’s obviously quite devoted to her, so that’s all right," said Eames.

"You didn’t think they were a little creepy?"

"Oh, absolutely, but in that endearing way in which two people who are at the center of each other’s worlds have trouble making room, even temporarily, for anyone else."

Arthur stopped on the sidewalk. "Huh," he said. Eames stopped, too, and turned to look at him. It was still relatively early in the evening--it was a chilly night but not freezing, and the wind ruffled the lapels of Eames’ jacket.

"Don’t put much stock in that sort of thing?" said Eames.

"It just always seemed completely dysfunctional to me," Arthur admitted. "But from the little I’ve known the Cobbs, it seems like they make it work."

"You don’t have a lot of friends in London, do you, Arthur?"

Arthur shrugged. "I’m not really the kind of guy who makes friends easily."

"Not from what I’ve been hearing," said Eames. Arthur sent him a look of confusion. Eames smirked at him and reached up to thumb the side of Arthur’s mouth, where his dimples would be. Arthur fought to keep them from showing.

"You know, I got a call from Zoe wanting to know if I were going to your Open House in December," Eames said, watching his thumb where it traced Arthur’s cheek.

"Are you?" said Arthur, wondering if he dared snake his arms around Eames’ waist, right here out in the open in the middle of Holland Park.

He stepped in just in case.

"Irrelevant," said Eames, stepping in as well, and solving the dilemma for him by wrapping Arthur up close. He looked fantastic like this, clean-shaven and so near Arthur could make out the faint mole under his ear lobe. He felt his blood rush all in one direction through his body.

"I’m saying you’re better at drawing people in than you realize," said Eames, dropping his voice to the level of a low purr.

"Hmm," said Arthur. "Maybe." He ran his fingertips over Eames’ mouth.

"I think you know exactly what you’re doing," said Eames against them.

Arthur breathed in steadily.

"God, I missed you," said Eames. "All week I missed you. I missed your sharp little mouth."
“It’s here now,” said Arthur pointedly.

Eames said, “So it is,” and leaned in, til Arthur’s heart was pounding with anticipation.

“And I missed your incredible arse,” said Eames, skating his lips over Arthur’s cheek instead and slipping his hand down to cop a feel of it right there on the sidewalk.

Arthur huffed. Eames chuckled at him. “I thought we were avoiding scandal?” he said, pressing back into Eames’ hands anyway. “Oh, hey, what about the screen test? How’d it go?”

Eames beamed at him. “Marty, my dear Arthur, was impressed with my research. How do you like that?” He gave Arthur’s ass a squeeze.

“So’d he give it to you?” Arthur asked, focusing on not melting all over the sidewalk.

“Ah, that’s the fun part,” said Eames brusquely. “If he likes me, he still has to convince the studio execs.”

“But you’re...” Arthur gestured in a way that he hoped conveyed ‘one of the most famous people on the planet.’

“Hmm?” Eames blinked at him.

“Oh, come on, nobody’s that guileless,” Arthur said flatly. Eames broke into a grin.

“Well, I try to be, darling,” he said, re-linking their hands and continuing their walk. It dawned on Arthur he should ask where they were going at some point, but for right now he didn’t really care. “You know, when everyone expects you to be shallow and egotistical, it’s its own kind of satisfaction to be as willfully humble as you can be.”

“Which is why you insist on doing regular auditions even though you can pretty much get any part you want,” Arthur said.

“Partly,” said Eames. “Partly it’s to figure out if I can work with the director. I still lose plenty of parts through auditions. I lost one last week, actually. It was an enormous waste of time, I was all wrong for the role, but my agent wanted me to read for it anyway.” He checked himself, and added, “And there’s no way I’m going to bore you with talk about my job, so why don’t you tell me how we’re spending the rest of the night instead?”

Arthur almost blurted out that there was no way Eames could ever bore him by talking about Hollywood, and then recalled that perhaps Eames got enough of it when he was actually in Hollywood.

“Do you want a road map,” he said, flexing his fingertips in Eames,’ “or should we just wing it?”

“Whatever you want, darling,” said Eames.

Arthur thought. “There’s a B-movie fest tonight at that grindhouse place you like,” he said. “In Leicester Square?”

“Oh,” said Eames. “What’s playing?”

Arthur waggled his eyebrows. “She Gods of Shark Reef.”

“Oh!” said Eames. “An underrated classic!” Arthur laughed. “But it gets chancey over there, darling, you’d have to hold my hand tightly in case we got separated.”
“I think I could manage it,” said Arthur. “You wouldn’t get mobbed by fans?”

“You’d protect me from them, wouldn’t you, Arthur? With your ninja fighter skills?”

“I deeply regret telling you that,” said Arthur.

“It should be fine. Take the tube to Oxford Street, there’ll be so many people around no one will even notice us. And I think, just between you and me, I’ve got the part”—Eames squeezed Arthur’s hand impulsively; Arthur was beginning to really like when he did that—“so even if we’re mobbed, the only thing we’ll have to worry about is how prepared you are for all those cameras in your face.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Arthur. Eames shook his head.

“No, darling, you don’t understand how intense it gets when you’re in the middle of it,” he said. “It’s not just the lights, it’s all those people all wanting something from you. And the knowledge that everything you’re doing is on display, that right now even while we’re standing here someone could be taking a blurry phonecam picture of us that will show up tomorrow on TMZ along with a 500-word screed on how much weight I’ve gained and how my new boyfriend looks like a banker, and whether this means the rumors of my relationship with George Clooney can finally be put to rest. And two thousand comments calling you a filthy manwhore.”

Arthur laughed. “I’ve heard that one before,” he said. “It’s really not a big deal, Eames.”

“You say that now, but it gets to you,” said Eames. He was worrying his lower lip, and kept glancing over at Arthur with a frown. “Look. D’you know why so many celebrities wind up dating other celebrities, or other famous people, people in power?”

Arthur shrugged. “Because they’re thrown together. All you famous people know each other.”

Eames laughed. “It’s that, but it’s also because it’s hard to get someone who hasn’t been the brunt of it to understand what it’s like. You need someone around who understands that a certain part of you has to be ‘on’ all the time, has to be perfect, because if you slip up even once, not only will you never be able to explain yourself, or keep people from taking what you said out of context and running it into the ground, but you start to get a certain reputation. And that’s the thing you have to guard at all costs, because without it you have no career. People’s careers in Hollywood have been ruined for far less than coming out of the closet. I’m quite lucky to have got this far. But I’m always looking over my shoulder trying to anticipate what the next scandal will be, so I can duck before it hits.”

Arthur had no idea what to say to any of that, so he didn’t say anything.

Eames sighed. “I’m not—I’m not trying to scare you off. I’m telling you now so you’ll know what you’re getting in to. It’s not easy being tangled up in someone with as much of a trail as I have.” He laughed, a little wryly. Arthur reached over and tousled his hair. Eames threw him a look.

Arthur smiled at him. “Eames,” he said.

“Yes, Arthur?”

“Stop being maudlin,” he said, and tugged Eames into the tube station.

For the most part, people on the tube left them alone. A few people stared, and more than a couple surreptitiously snapped phone pics of the two of them; but Eames ignored it with the ease of long practice, so Arthur did his best to do the same. Eames held his hand the whole time, and Arthur couldn’t help but think it meant something, because Eames, in his limited experience, wasn’t prone to
PDA, and seemed more or less to be a pretty private person.

Still, Arthur realized pretty quickly that when they were in public, Eames seemed content to let Arthur lead the conversation, and his responses, though polite as ever, were a bit more clipped, a bit less open, than Arthur fancied they’d be if it were just the two of them--more like he’d been the first day he’d come into the bookshop. The contrast made him aware of how much Eames had opened up to him since, and he couldn’t help feeling a little amazed at how much had changed in just a few weeks.

Which didn’t mean he was going to let Eames be aloof for the rest of the night.

“You should have laughed at that joke,” he told Eames.

“Can I laugh when we’re not potentially being recorded and posted to Youtube, darling?” said Eames, shifting in his seat.

“When that happened to Christian Bale, he won an Oscar,” Arthur pointed out.

“Are you comparing me to Christian Bale?” said Eames, his eyes lighting up.

“Face it,” said Arthur, shaking his head. “You’ll never be really big until you’ve spawned a few internet memes.”

At that, Eames did laugh, loud and long, and several people around them smiled. Arthur relaxed against the wall of the train and grinned for the rest of the ride into Chinatown.

*She Gods of Shark Reef* was in fact an atrocious movie, and Arthur laughed all the way through it while Eames pointed out the tricks of low-budget cinematography and underwater camerawork.

“You get off on technical babble,” Arthur accused.

“Look how bright-eyed you are. You love it,” Eames answered, his face red from laughing.

"Oh, yeah, baby," said Arthur, biting his lip. "Tell me that part about lens aperture again."

"Aperture," Eames said with exaggerated breathiness. Arthur burst out laughing and got shushed. Just for that, he stole Eames' Smarties, and didn't complain when Eames took them back, capturing Arthur's hand along with it. They joined in when the other people in the balcony threw popcorn at the couple necking down front, and decided recklessly to stay for the midnight showing of *The Room*.

"I really feel this is living on the wild side," Eames shouted some time later in the middle of another endless establishing shot of the Golden Gate Bridge.

"You know all the dialogue," Arthur said in horror. "What is wrong with you?"

"You're tearing me apart, darling," said Eames, and Arthur dumped his remaining Smarties in Eames' lap while Eames laughed and laughed.

On their way out a couple quietly approached and asked for a picture with them, and Eames pulled Arthur in by his belt loop and roped an arm around his shoulder before he could protest. Arthur figured at least he wasn’t wearing a princess hat.

“Is this your boyfriend?” the guy asked Eames, ignoring the way his girlfriend immediately elbowed him in the side.
Eames grinned, showing all his adorably crooked teeth. “Only if I have good luck,” he said with a wink.

Arthur flushed to the tip of his toes. The guy slapped Arthur on the back. “Hey, good luck, then,” he said.

‘I’m sorry,’ the girl mouthed at Arthur, mortified.


“I heard that, Arthur,” said Eames, without looking up from where he was signing his autograph.

Arthur circled his hands around Eames’ waist and pressed into him all along his spine. “Good,” he breathed against Eames’ ear.

Eames swallowed.

It was late when they finally left the cinema—Eames was reluctant to say no once he’d started signing autographs, and Arthur was kind of impressed by the number of people who seemed to want to talk to them both like they were just another couple of guys. There were plenty of cameraphones, however, and he didn’t miss the few times when Eames glance flitted over to him, as if he were measuring how Arthur was taking it.

On the walk back to Oxford Street, Eames’ phone went off.

“What?” said Arthur. “Your ringtone is ‘99 Problems?’”

Eames held up a finger, but smirked at him. “Yep,” he said in greeting to whoever was on the other line. “Yes, I know what time it is. It’s, what, 7:00 in L.A., hmm? You still working this late? Ah. Yes, well.” His voice had gone clipped and curt, but he kept walking, hand still swinging loosely in Arthur’s. “Thank you for the information. I’ll let you know when we have a comment.” Arthur glanced at him sharply, but Eames was looking across the street, his thumb rubbing circles over Arthur’s. “No. Yes, I’m heading over to—” he chanced a glance at Arthur. “To Notting Hill?”

Arthur nodded, his heart doing a little flip-flop.

“Notting Hill,” Eames confirmed. “Yes, right. Could you let Prianka know? Lovely, thank you.”

There was a long pause while the caller spoke. Arthur thought the voice might be female. Penelope Rider, maybe. He wondered if he could ask without being rude.

Eames stopped walking and shifted where he stood, evidently annoyed. After another moment he sighed and let go of Arthur’s hand so he could switch phonehands. With an apologetic glance at Arthur, he wandered off under an awning and stood speaking with his mouth close to the phone, hunched over as though he were trying to be incognito. As if that would ever work with those shoulders, Arthur thought, suddenly full of affection.

It was more or less the first time Arthur hadn’t been holding Eames’ hand all evening, he realized. He wanted it back. Instead he frowned at himself and stuck his hands in his coat pockets. A few more minutes, and Eames rang off and rejoined Arthur.

“What?”

Eames looked at him and contemplated the question.

“Absolutely,” he said after a moment, breaking into a sunny smile. “Everything’s lovely, darling.”
“Do you call everyone that?” Arthur asked as they crossed over to Oxford Street. When Eames didn’t reach for his hand right away, Arthur did it for him, and they settled together, shoulders brushing as they walked.

“Hmm. Stick around long enough and perhaps you’ll find out,” said Eames. “Do you frown that adorably at everyone, or just the people you’re trying to get into bed?”

Arthur frowned at the question, and Eames laughed, showing all his teeth again. “Is that what I’m doing?” he ventured. “What if I don’t put out on the first date?”

“I think we’re a bit beyond that, aren’t we, darling?” said Eames a little breathlessly, squeezing Arthur’s hand.

The ride and walk back to Notting Hill Gate seemed interminable.

When they finally reached the bookshop, Arthur led Eames around to the back and up the three flights of stairs that led to his apartment, a loft over the bookstore approximately the size of a ship’s berth. Eames had to hunch his shoulders to get through the entrance, and his head nearly brushed the rise of the ceiling, which had a barely perceptible slope to the center of the space, where an unfortunately placed radiator pipe ran from the lower two floors out through the roof. Arthur had tried to make it blend into its environs, but there was only so much one could do. Eames looked around with interest as Arthur flipped on the dimmest of the kitchen lights. Arthur watched his eyes widen.

“Ah,” he said. “So this is where you keep all the books,” he said. “I was beginning to wonder.”

Arthur liked books. So in his apartment, small and cramped as it was, he had stashed shelves all along the walls, so that every conceivable nook and cranny and crevice were lined with them. They crowded up against the pantry and nudged the flatscreen opposite the bed, and more or less invaded the bathroom in piles despite Arthur’s best attempts to keep everything tidy.

“I don’t bring a lot of people up here,” Arthur said. “It might be a little musty.”

Eames turned to face him. “It’s fabulous,” he said.

And then he stepped in and kissed him.

Arthur had a small moment of shock. He’d lost the sense memory of how plump Eames’ lips were, and the surprise of meeting them again stole his breath. He clutched at Eames’ broad shoulders and let the kiss wash over him. Eames gasped and pressed against him, broad hands gripping him by the waist and pulling him in, drifting lower to cup his ass. Eames let out a low hum when he realized Arthur lay hard against his thigh, and nipped the skin beneath Arthur’s jaw.

“That’s your bed,” he said against Arthur’s ear.

Arthur let out something like a garbled moan in response and tried to remember how to unbutton Eames’ trousers.

“I’m going to fuck you on it,” Eames said.

Arthur closed his eyes and nodded.

Eames’ jacket came off while Eames was still licking his way over Arthur’s collarbones, rubbing Arthur’s nipples to hardness through his shirt. The rest of his clothes followed, and Arthur made embarrassing noises just from being able to get his hands on Eames’ skin again, onto his mass of
muscle and the ripple of tattoos over his biceps. He wanted everything at once. He wanted to lick Eames everywhere he could reach, he wanted to get his mouth around Eames’ cock and his hands on Eames’ ass, he wanted Eames to drill into him and fuck him harder than he’d ever been fucked in his life, and he wanted it all right now.

Eames’ hands cupped his face and drew soothing circles over his cheekbones as they kissed, and Arthur flat-out whined from the unfairness of not being able to have everything at once. His hands were stroking Eames’ sides and working over the hard muscles of his stomach and his back, and Eames was breathing hard against him, kissing him sloppily, desperately.

“God, your mouth, Arthur,” Eames murmured. “You don’t even know.”

“I think I have an idea,” Arthur gasped, flicking his tongue over Eames’ full lower lip and then tugging it lightly between his teeth. Eames shuddered and then abruptly lifted Arthur straight off the ground, wrapping Arthur’s legs firmly around his waist and pressing against him. Arthur clung to his shoulders and twisted his hips, trying to rut against the thick length of Eames’ cock, already leaking where it jutted over the rim of Eames’ pants. Arthur tugged Eames’ hair and drew his mouth up for another messy kiss. “God, I fucking love how strong you are.”

“It’s all worth it when I can do this,” Eames said, and then he carried Arthur over to the bed and tossed him down on it.

Arthur lay back where he landed and tried not to come on the spot. He stretched out and tried to think languid thoughts while Eames knelt over him and undid Arthur’s trousers, tugging them off. His cock sprang free and rock-hard when he pushed down his own pants, and Arthur couldn’t resist running a finger up the shaft and circling the foreskin, gathering all that precome and trailing it over his own lips.

“Jesus Christ,” said Eames.

He quickly got his own clothes off the rest of the way and then spread himself out over Arthur, his calves pressing against Arthur’s, their ankles tangling together, Arthur’s cock nestling against his where they rocked into each other. Arthur got his hands on Eames’ ass, and Eames made a deep guttural noise of arousal when Arthur squeezed and arched up against him.

Eames’ hands bracketed Arthur’s shoulders, and when he leaned down for a kiss Arthur felt him trembling through every inch of his body.

When they manage to break the kiss, Arthur had somehow gone back to clutching Eames’ shoulders, holding him close, and Eames breath came hot and heavy against his mouth. Sweat was already pooling in the corners of his eyes and at his temples. He was the hottest thing Arthur had ever dreamed of.

Eames layered kisses over his eyes, over his mouth, over his nose and his cheeks. Arthur chased him, stealing his mouth back whenever he could.

"As lovely as all this is," Eames said at last, “I don’t want to keep you from your promise.”

"Promise?" Arthur answered foggily.

Eames chucked him on the chin and then sucked a mark there into the hollow. Arthur didn’t even try not to make noise. "You promised to get your mouth on my cock," Eames said when he’d hickied Arthur to his satisfaction. "On the phone, remember? I was especially fond of the part where you rode me with come still on your chest."
"Oh, god, that was forever ago."

"Yes, well, it sustained me in my time of need," said Eames lasciviously.

Arthur reached down and stroked his own cock as Eames watched. "Did it?" he said. "Did you wank to it? Like this?"

Eames leaned down and nipped his ear. "Every night," he said. "Now hands off of what's mine." He batted Arthur's hands away and flipped their positions, and Arthur got too distracted by the sheer strength of Eames' hands around his waist to roll his eyes at the line.

Instead he wound up straddling Eames, his leg muscles getting a workout just to stretch around the sheer muscular girth of Eames' hips. "God, you look amazing." He rocked down once into Eames' erection, and Eames obediently arched up, his muscles flexing everywhere. Arthur leaned down and licked his way across Eames' chest, nipping and biting and listening to the sound of Eames' voice as a signal for what to do more of, less of, where to tweak and suck and tease, memorizing the shape of him beneath his hands. It dawned on him suddenly that he had all night to explore Eames' body this way; that if he wanted to take hours to run his tongue up and down the expanse of Eames' broad back Eames would probably let him; that if he wanted to fingerfuck Eames and blow him and then make Eames fuck him for hours straight, Eames would probably be up for that, too.

"What do you want right now, Eames?" he murmured as his tongue curled around the dark thatch of hair at Eames' groin. Eames' entire body jerked at the touch, and Arthur thought: I'll have to remember that.

"God, your mouth," said Eames, reaching down to trace his thumb over Arthur's lips. Arthur dutifully sucked it and ran his tongue along Eames' knuckles, and he felt a strange new kind of warmth in his chest when Eames smiled and stroked his hair. He wanted to please Eames, be good to him, be the best he'd ever had. The strength of it hit him at once, leaving him feeling a little breathless and bowled over, so he ducked his head before it showed on his face and ran his tongue over the tip of Eames' cock.

He'd been with uncut men before, but Eames' cock was heavy and full in his mouth in a way that left him feeling raw and needy rather than sated. He loved the salt-sting of it against his lips, the way it made them buzz with want, and he loved the way Eames left his hand in Arthur's hair as Arthur licked and stretched his foreskin.

"God, yes, god, that's beautiful," Eames said, his voice a low, heady rumble. "Can I--can you take--?" Arthur nodded, and Eames let out a low chuckle, maybe at how eager Arthur looked with his tongue curling around Eames' shaft. He looked up at as he took him in his mouth for the first time, keeping his eyes fastened to the spot where Eames was watching, head angled forward for a better view, breath coming in sharp, rhythmic gasps. Arthur knew how to give amazing head--he knew how to work his lips, his lower jaw, the whole back of his throat--but he had to make allowances for his reluctance to look away from Eames' face as he worked. He couldn't help the disappointed clutch of his throat when he finally had to break the gaze so he could swallow Eames straight down, and Eames murmured soothing sounds and stroked his cheekbones as they hollowed and flared around his shaft.

"God," Eames said, more of a grunt than a word. "Can I fuck you like this? Can I--can we go slow? S'that alright?"

Arthur slid off, feeling the loss of the girth of Eames in his mouth. "Slow? Like--can you fuck my mouth like that? Sure, any way you want."
Eames’ eyes lit up. “Any way?”

Arthur licked his lips and swallowed the taste of precome. “I like cock,” he said, shrugging his shoulders and trying not to look turned on out of his mind.

“I’ll make it good for you, darling,” said Eames, stroking his face.

Arthur shivered. “I know you will.”

When Eames started to fuck his mouth, he held Arthur there, gripping his jaw lightly, and he moved so deliberately slowly that Arthur nearly forgot how to breathe.

“That’s right, Arthur,” Eames murmured. “I want you slow and easy for me, just like this.”

Arthur relaxed and let go of his gag reflex as Eames slowly slid into his mouth, in, and in, and then in.

Arthur’s eyes stung but he held on, and Eames closed his eyes and said, “Arthur,” on a long desperate note, and then he was fucking Arthur’s mouth in earnest, letting Arthur breathe deep before he slipped back into the waiting cavern of Arthur's throat. Every time he got close to the back, Arthur felt the struggle to control his gag reflex kick in, and every time he mastered it, Eames sank in just a fraction further, until Arthur was moaning and shivering around him just at the sheer thought of how much of Eames he had inside of him. It was both the slowest and the most sensual blowjob Arthur had ever given, and his own cock was still hard and leaking onto the bedsheets. Eames kept stroking his cheekbones, murmuring a litany of praise the whole time: for Arthur’s lips on his cock, the stretch of him inside Arthur's mouth, the way Arthur knew just how to keep him so fucking hard.

"God, I want to fill you up with come,” said Eames, and he must have known what his voice was doing to Arthur, because he kept talking right over the heady sounds Arthur was making around his cock. "Would you let me do that? Spill come down your gorgeous throat and then fuck you full of it, oh, my god, Arthur," - and he was pulling out of Arthur's mouth with a slick slurp, giving Arthur just enough time to ignore his warning before he spooled long, thick braids of come all over Arthur's face and chest.

Arthur let out the most undignified noise he'd ever made, and he had time to wonder what he must look like with come in his hair and all over his open mouth, before the idea that Eames had put it there had him coming all over himself.

"Oh, fuck, oh, fuck, come here," Eames laughed breathlessly, and he dragged Arthur up to be kissed, come-splattered cheeks and lips and all.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," said Arthur senselessly, letting himself be kissed, clutching on to Eames anywhere he could. He felt like he'd just been hit by a freight train. "Fuck, I've never--fuck, Eames." He slipped his hands into Eames' hair and Eames' kissed him long and deep.

"You're the hottest thing I've ever seen, Jesus Christ, look at you, Arthur," Eames said, and again a wave of pride and affection and need broke over Arthur before he could defend himself against it.

"What are we doing?" he almost blurted. Instead he caught himself on a hitched breath and kissed his way over Eames throat and his chest and his thick biceps. Eames settled back and closed his eyes beneath him.

"Don't you dare go to sleep before I've gotten you hard again," Arthur said, his throat tingling and wrecked and already missing Eames’ cock. Eames laughed weakly.
"God," he said. "For this, I may never sleep again."

Arthur paused in the act of licking that one tattoo he'd always wondered about and rested his chin on Eames' stomach. He met Eames' eyes, feeling worn out and alive and buzzing with want, and so fucking happy.

He ducked his head, fitting his cheek against Eames’ side and trying to relax against the panic welling up in his chest.


“Is this too much?” Eames said hesitantly. “We can go slow. We’ve got plenty of time. Arthur, we’ve got so much time.”

Arthur laughed. “I don’t want to go slow,” he said, hating how shaky he sounded. He pressed their foreheads together, an echo of the first time they’d kissed and he’d felt the world shift beneath his feet. “Do you?”

Eames looked up at him through his gorgeous thick eyelashes. Sweat drenched his hair and his shoulders. “I mean, we’ve gone quite slow enough already, darling, wouldn’t you say?”

Arthur laughed and ducked his head. “Yeah, just slightly.” Eames leaned in and kissed him on the nose.

“I told you I’d tell you why,” he said. “When I got back. Remember?”

Arthur’s stomach clenched, but he tried to relax. “Did you really keep the Bradbury?” he said.

“I’ve got it with me now,” said Eames. “I don’t really--I mean I have a house in L.A. and a townhouse in NY, but it’s easier to stay in hotels and all when you’re moving around. I stuck it in my suitcase eight months ago and it hasn’t really left.”

Arthur ran a hand down Eames’ torso, raking his fingers through the patterns of ink and hair over his chest. “So you liked me,” he said. “From the start.”

Eames grinned. “I liked you from the start. You and your ridiculous trimtab t-shirt and your nerdy designer sports jacket.”

“I love that t-shirt,” said Arthur.

“I like you better in suits,” said Eames. “And even better--” he ran a hand over Arthur’s back, and down to cup his ass--“just like this.”

And then they were kissing, and Arthur was letting Eames push him back into his own soft pillows, and Eames was whispering his name over and over again, and it was perfection.

“I have to tell you something,” Eames said in between kisses. “That was my press agent on the phone earlier.”

“Yeah?” said Arthur dizzily, already feeling himself hardening, like his body had lost all awareness of how old it was. “What’d she want?” He reached down to stroke Eames, humming appreciatively when he realized Eames was already hard.
“To tell us we’re on the internet,” Eames said against his lips.

“Well,” said Arthur again, spreading himself bare on the bed below. “That’s not so bad, is it?” He felt, vaguely, that he should be asking more questions, but he was slipping into some sort of new arena of the mind, into some heady floaty place that only consisted of Eames’ voice and Eames’ words and Eames’ hands on his skin.

“You may not say that when you see it,” said Eames, kissing the line of his neck from beneath his ear down to his collarbone. Arthur arched back to give him better access--to give him whatever he wanted.

“Then I just won’t look,” he murmured. His eyes fluttered shut, and he heard himself murmur Eames’ name.


Arthur tried to bring him in for another kiss.

“Shh, darling,” said Eames, stroking a hand down his chest. “You’re superb, Arthur, you’re wonderful. You’re so good for me.” Arthur twisted towards the tone of his voice and the warmth of his touch. “Just relax for me, darling. I’ve got to go get some things for us, but I’ll be right back, I promise.”

Doing what Eames wanted suddenly felt like the most amazing idea Arthur had ever had. “I’ll stay until you get back,” he mumbled over the white noise in his head. “I’ll stay wherever you want.” He felt the mattress springs flex as Eames moved off of it, heard him rummaging through the bathroom. Vaguely he thought of sitting up, helping Eames look for whatever it was, but Eames had told him to stay put, and Arthur wanted to do exactly what Eames wanted.

He kept his eyes closed and floated instead, and a moment or hours later the bed dipped and Arthur felt Eames’ hands running gently over his sides, cradling him. “Love when you touch me,” he mumbled.

“Christ,” Eames said. “Give me your mouth.” Arthur leaned up obediently, and Eames kissed him, deep and slow, while he ran his hands over Arthur’s sides, coaxing soft noises from him and eventually working his way down to stroke Arthur’s cock and balls. Arthur let out a moan. “Fuck me. God, just look at you,” Eames said. He took Arthur’s cock in his hand, and Arthur moaned at that too.

“Will you hurry up and fuck me?” he mumbled. Then he added: “Please.”

He heard Eames chuckle, from what seemed like a long way off. He heard the tear of the condom wrapper and the stretch of rubber, and he writhed, stretched his legs, wanting to get nearer to wherever Eames was, wanting him now.

“Good, sweetheart, that’s so good,” said Eames, sliding his hand, now wet and cool, down over Arthur’s ass. “You’re so good for me.” He slid one long thick finger up in between Arthur’s ass, and Arthur went rigid at the coldness, then relaxed in a shiver.

“That’s right, sweetheart, you know how to relax,” said Eames. “You know how to spread for me, don’t you?”

Arthur did, he did and he gulped huge swallows of air as he spread-eagled himself, shuddering all
over when Eames tilted his hips up and slid his fingers deep inside. His fingers were cold and hot and blunt and sharp all at once, and Arthur writhed onto them, driven more by the sound of Eames’ voice than anything.

“God, look at you.” Eames was fucking him with two fingers, burning and stretching him, so good and tight and still not nearly enough. “Show me how you like it, darling.”

Arthur dug his fingers into the bedsheets and tried to impale himself on Eames’ fingers.

Eames reached his hand up and stroked Arthur’s sides, soothing him and coaxing him open even more just from his touch. “You’re perfect,” he said, his voice catching. “Open your eyes.” Arthur’s eyes flew open. “Beautiful,” said Eames, reaching up to trace the line of Arthur’s cheek as Arthur focused all his attention on the deep flashing blue-grey of his eyes. “Tell me how it feels.”

“So good,” said Arthur. “Not enough. Please, more.”

“Talk to me, Arthur,” said Eames, and Arthur moaned solely from the thought that Eames was telling him what to do.

“Fuck, please, just fuck me,” he said, more a cry than a language.

Eames slipped in another finger and stretched him, and Arthur nearly climbed off the bed in frustration. “Do you need it?”

“God, yes. God,” Arthur said, his body taut and quivering around Eames’ hand.

“Say it, darling,” said Eames, pressing a kiss to Arthur’s thigh. Arthur rocked off the mattress and pushed his hips against Eames’ fingers, trying to get more friction, more of Eames, more of everything.

“Your cock,” he heard himself sob. “Please, I need your cock. Eames. Eames, I need it.”

“God, yes, that’s so good,” said Eames, hoarsely, slipping his hand from Arthur at last and bending up to kiss him. “I know, darling, I know how much you need it.” Arthur moaned into his mouth and tried to push their bodies together. “Christ, you’re a livewire,” Eames murmured against his lips. He pushed down into the pillows again and covered him, pressing him into the mattress and kissing him hard. “Fuck, Arthur, you’re going to feel so good, I’m going to be so good for you. Relax for me, sweetheart.” Arthur shivered and tried to relax as much as he’d ever relaxed, vaguely aware that the tiny gasps and pants and moans in the background of his mind were all coming from him. “That’s right, darling,” said Eames. “Can you bend for me?” He tipped Arthur’s legs back over his shoulders, and Arthur nearly sobbed in relief.

“Fuck me,” he whispered. “Fuck me so hard, I need you in me for days, I need you inside me, god, please, please--”

“God, Arthur, I want--fuck, yeah, just like that.” And then he arched back, and the head of his cock was pressing against Arthur’s ass, sliding in, slick and easy. Arthur shuddered around the shape of it, so thick and warm and snug inside him, and when Eames pushed in deeper, he heard himself begging, asking for more, so much more, for everything, just like this, Eames--

“Shh,” said Eames, reaching up to stroke Arthur in long steady movements. “I’ve got you, Arthur, I’m here, you’re so good, you feel so fucking good.”

He fucked Arthur slow and deep, laying kisses on Arthur’s thighs and his chest and his mouth, every time pressing firm against Arthur’s prostate until Arthur was a wreck of tangled nerves wherever
Eames moved inside him.

“Fuck,” Arthur gasped. “Harder, Eames, fuck, please—”

“Yeah,” said Eames. “Yes, fuck, whatever you want, anything.” He sped up, thighs flexing as he fucked Arthur, his body glistening with sweat, and Arthur couldn’t stop looking at him, couldn’t stop trembling. Eames kept talking, hoarse and incoherent, coaxing Arthur to let go for him, the wet sounds of Eames’ cock inside of him, his balls against Arthur’s ass, all joining with the low thrum of his voice as he spoke, drowning out the sound of Arthur’s own gasps and moans and pants.

“So good, you’re so good for me,” Eames whispered, fucking him deeper and deeper, jacking him off to the same regular rhythm, letting Arthur adjust to the feel of him. Arthur pitched his head back and held onto Eames’ gray eyes as he felt himself building to the peak, felt himself trembling and tightening around Eames’ cock, sparks of pleasure shooting through him whenever Eames moaned in response. “God, I want to fill you up, Arthur, I want in you all the time, just like this, fuck, Arthur, that’s it, let me inside you, let me make you come, I want to see you dripping with it, god, come for me, just like this—come so I can make you hard again and fuck you til you’re dry, oh, fuck, sweetheart, yes...”

And Arthur couldn’t resist, knew he could never, ever resist when Eames was asking him so prettily, so he tilted his head back against the pillows, and said, “Eames, Eames,” again and again as he came in Eames’ hands. Eames kept fucking him through it, and Arthur shuddered and kept spasming into Eames’ hands, even harder than before, until Eames sank home inside of him and held himself sheathed tight and quivering, his eyes clenching shut as he came with a choked-off cry.

Arthur went dizzy.

When he came to himself, Eames was tying off the condom. Arthur instantly let out a sob at the loss of contact and curled in to Eames’ body. Eames spread out against him, wrapping him up in his arms and kissing him everywhere.

“Fuck,” he said, his voice raspy. “Fuck, Arthur, Arthur. Look at me, sweetheart. You’re so good for me, you were so good. You’re amazing.”

Arthur arched into him and shivered, pressing kisses over his chest. Eames ran his hand over Arthur’s back, over his sides, and eventually said, “God, come here, come up here,” and gathered him up against him, tipping Arthur’s head onto his shoulder.

They lay quiet, breathing ragged, Arthur nuzzling Eames’ collarbone and Eames stroking his hair. After a while, Eames said in a low voice, “I need to get us cleaned up, darling. I’ve made you all messy.”

“I like it when you make me messy,” Arthur murmured.

Eames thumbed the spot where his dimples would be. Arthur yawned, resisting the abrupt, inexorable weight of drowsiness. Eames hadn’t told him it was time to sleep.

“I’m afraid I’m probably going to make quite a mess of you,” Eames whispered. “If you’ll let me.”

“I want you to,” Arthur mumbled. “Please.”

Eames bent down and touched his forehead to Arthur’s. Arthur leaned up and kissed him. Eames stayed there for a long moment, cupping Arthur’s face in his hand.

Finally he said, “Go to sleep, darling,” and Arthur, feeling warm and perfectly content, closed his
eyes and did just that.

When Arthur drifted into consciousness the next morning, the first thing he noticed was that he felt *amazing*, that he was thirsty as fuck, and that someone was padding softly around on the other side of the flat, a sound Arthur had gotten so unused to that it surprised him the rest of the way awake. *Eames*, he thought, and it was a good thought--made him feel kind of floaty. He cracked an eye open--Eames had drawn all of the curtains shut, presumably so Arthur could sleep in, and there was a beautiful glass of cold water waiting for him on the bedstand, of which Arthur made quick, grateful work as he sat up and stretched, relaxing into the cosy, satisfying burn of having been thoroughly fucked the night before.

Eames was standing next to the row of countertops that passed for Arthur’s kitchen, fiddling with the toaster. He was shirtless, and Arthur sat for a moment enjoying the view before he registered that Eames was wearing a pair of Yusuf’s old shorts that he’d managed to leave behind in Arthur’s flat. They were a perfect fit.

Arthur laughed.

“Don’t laugh,” he said. “I’m making you breakfast in bed.”

“A breakfast of burnt crumpets?”

“Precisely. I hope you don’t mind,” he added, gesturing to the boxers. “I found the pants in the drawer where you keep all the clothes from your previous life as a welterweight.”

Arthur smiled as Eames brought him two slightly scorched crumpets piled high with marmite alongside several elegantly sliced pads of butter, all placed daintily on a tea saucer that Arthur suspected Eames had chosen deliberately because it was chipped. Eames handed it to him and then slipped back into the bed beside Arthur, pulling the covers up to his neck.

“They belonged to an ex of mine,” Arthur said, nibbling at one edge of a crumpet, then doing the same to all the way around it, while Eames looked on in fascination. “His name’s Yusuf. Nice guy. You’d like him.”

“Yusuf,” said Eames, evidently savoring the sound of the word rolling around in his mouth. “He’s not going to come looking for them, is he?”

“He’s in Australia, so probably not,” said Arthur, finishing off the crust of one tart and repeating the process on the other.

“Is he going to send me threatening emails declaring that you’re his soulmate and if he can’t have you, no one can?”

Arthur paused and sent him a pointed look. “You realize normal relationships aren’t actually like the movies.”

“Nonsense, most relationships are exactly like the movies,” Eames declared, pulling his knees up and lying back against the headrest.

“Mine aren’t,” said Arthur, watching the flex of Eames’ arm muscles. He wondered if he could add, ‘until now, anyway,’ or something equally cheesy. Obviously not *now*, but maybe. At some point in the near future. Unless Eames were about to fly to Singapore or something. He wondered if he could ask Eames not to fly to Singapore. He slid some butter onto his crumpet instead.

“Ah, but I bet you were never in love with any of them, or they with you,” said Eames. “Love makes people do all kinds of wonky shit.”
Arthur snorted. “You can be in love without engaging in wonky shit, Eames,” he said, leaning over and poking Eames in the stomach. Eames grinned. His eyes went all crinkly. He looked amazing. Arthur resisted the urge to just pull back the covers and wipe marmite over his abs or something so he could lick it off. Eames was looking at him like he could read Arthur’s thoughts anyway, so Arthur figured his ego didn’t need the flattery.

“I don’t believe it,” Eames said. “That’s a lie. The wonky shit’s what makes it love. Otherwise it’s just two people who like each other an awfully lot.” He stole a bit of Arthur’s crumpet that Arthur hadn’t gotten to yet, distracting Arthur from the realization that Eames’ description sounded a lot like him and Yusuf. And a lot like most of his other boyfriends, too--the ones he’d actually liked, at least.

“I was in love once,” Eames added a little awkwardly. “It was nothing but drama and pain and agonisingly dreary confessionals.” He laughed, but to Arthur it seemed a little forced. “You probably already know all about it.”

Arthur took a bite full of crumpet and wound up with mostly marmite. “I think Fischer’s an ass,” he said, muffled around his sticky mouthful. “Hey, you want the rest of this? I’m going to go brush my teeth so I can kiss you.”

“Asking a British person if they want crumpets is like asking a duck if it wants water,” said Eames, “and I should very much like to try out that kissing thing.” He made a dive for the wreckage of Arthur’s breakfast as Arthur slid out of bed. He gulped down the rest of the water Eames had left for him and made a noise he hoped translated to ‘oh, hey, thanks.’ “Oh, no problem,” said Eames, his mouth full. “I figured you’d be dehydrated after last night. That was a bit of a rush, yeah?”

He said it casually enough, but his eyes were sharp, and Arthur knew he was probing. Memories of the previous night washed over him, pooling in his cheeks and turning them scarlet. Arthur had begged. He’d wanted Eames to--to, um, do anything and everything he wanted with Arthur--god, he still wanted it, and that should probably have been scary instead of making him think, oh, fuck, yeah. And, shit, were they going to have an awkward conversation now about Arthur’s apparent desire to let Eames top him and toss him around and treat him like his own personal pet slave? Because, on the one hand, talking about it might mean they could get to it faster, but on the other hand, talking about it meant they’d have to talk about it.

He swallowed. “Last night was great,” he said, and as he said it he found himself breaking into a huge smile. Fuck, he was still riding some kind of high from last night. He flushed at the grin that slid over Eames’ face and added, “Uh. And I have to open the shop in like a half hour? So. Um. I’ll be right back.”

Eames frowned. “Open the shop?” he said. “But this is such a lovely bed. I was hoping we might while the day away in it.”

Arthur ducked his head to conceal the automatic reaction of oh god yes please that he was sure crossed his face. Then he scowled at himself, sent Eames an apologetic glance, and went to pull the curtains open as he passed into the bathroom.

“No, no, don’t do that!” Eames screeched, and Arthur paused with his hand on the cord.

He looked at the cord.

Then he looked at Eames.

“And why would that be?” he said lightly.
“Er,” said Eames.

“It wouldn’t be, by any chance, because there are a horde of paparazzi standing just outside my building and you don’t want me to see them,” said Arthur slowly.

“Well, actually, I don’t mind you knowing about the ones down there,” said Eames. “It’s the ones waiting on the balcony across the street so they can get a better shot in case you open the window.”

“Eames!” hissed Arthur.

“Your phone’s been buzzing all morning,” Eames said, fiddling with the sheets. “So has mine, but I turned them both off so you could sleep.”

Arthur spluttered.

“How many paparazzi are we talking about exactly?” he said. “Am I going to be able to open my store?”

Eames laughed. “Sorry, darling, but even if anyone could get to the store today, I don’t think you’d want to expose them to the harassment.”

“Don’t call me that,” Arthur snapped, realizing with a sharp twinge in his gut that for all he had been reading interviews for years, he actually knew very little about Eames. And here Arthur was, contemplating letting Eames have his way with him whenever he wanted. Christ.

Eames’ face fell. “I apologize,” he said tightly. “But I did tell you last night that our picture was already on the internet.”

“Last night I was a little out of my head! Or did you not notice?”

“I noticed, I just thought you’d remember in the morning, and we could talk about it in due time.”

“Oh, yeah?” Arthur said, lifting the corner of the curtains enough for a peek outside. “When was that going to be, when I opened the blinds and then had to explain to my mother why there were nude photos of me on TMZ?”

“Your mother reads TMZ?” said Eames with sudden interest.

“My mom reads everything,” said Arthur. “Don’t do that.” He could see people milling around on the balcony of the community centre across the way, but there was nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary about them. He didn’t see a single tripod.

“What?”

“The distraction thing.” He opened the curtain a bit wider and peered down at the street. Oh. There they were.

There were... a lot of people down there.

Eames sighed. “Arthur, I just didn’t want the first thing I said to you this morning to be, ‘hi, did you sleep well, by the way, you can’t leave your apartment today.’ Call me a romantic.”

“You tried to distract me with marmite!” Arthur accused.

“No!” said Eames. Arthur glared. “Okay, yes,” Eames said guiltily, flinging back the bedcovers and coming to Arthur, which gave Arthur a glimpse of his muscles rippling underneath his shirt and
made him feel woefully exposed and turned-on and a number of other confusing things.

He rubbed his temples. Eames appeared to hesitate, then said softly, “I hope this hasn’t altered the original plan.”


“The one involving kissing,” Eames said.

Arthur looked up and met Eames’ face and his stomach did flip-flops all over again.

“No,” he said after a pause, aware that he sounded fond and foolish. “There can still be kissing. Just without any natural light, apparently.”

“Oh, good, because I--” and then Eames pulled Arthur into his arms and kissed him, despite Arthur’s non-minty marmite-flavored taste, and Arthur squirmed at first because no, there had to be some kind of law that famous people didn’t go around kissing people with unbrushed teeth, but then Eames carded his fingers through Arthur’s bedhead, and Arthur forgot what he was angry about and focused on the way Eames’ lips were making his toes curl, and the way his hands were smoothing their way over Arthur’s bare skin like Arthur was his to touch, and it was true, he was definitely still loopy after last night, but apparently he wasn’t leaving his loft today, and Eames was getting really good at wrapping himself around Arthur and making him feel enveloped in safety and strength and lots of other things that trumped hordes of people with cameras banging down the doors, so, what the hell--

Arthur kissed back.

It turned out that Penelope Rider was even more persistent about trying to get Eames to answer his phone than she was about steadfastly ignoring Arthur’s existence.

“I thought you turned the phones off,” Arthur murmured after the fourth time an insistent buzz had interrupted his progress in mapping out the lines of Eames chest, first with his hands and then with his tongue.

“Mmmm,” Eames said, sounding muzzy and content. “I did. That’s the backup number, emergencies only.” He reached up and tucked a loose strand of Arthur’s hair behind his ear. “Congratulations, Arthur! You’re an emergency.”

“Really?” said Arthur, his lips brushing Eames’ skin. “What do they do for fire drills, call MI6?”

Eames laughed, and Arthur felt the rumble in his stomach where he lay tucked against it. “I hope never to find out.”

Arthur shimmied up the length of Eames’ torso and kissed him. He loved the way Eames felt stretched out beneath him, so broad and muscular but still so warm and real. He liked the way Eames drew him into kisses, always slow and hesitant at first, like he wasn’t sure what Arthur was offering, and then more and more confident, like every kiss was some kind of discovery. Eames ran his fingers through Arthur’s hair, and Arthur made a soft sound into his mouth that came back to him in the answering shiver that ran through Eames’ body where he pressed against Arthur.

He’d always loved this room, this bed, even though it took up most of the space in his ship’s berth of an apartment, the books usurping the rest. With Eames in it, the whole place felt twice as small. Arthur loved it. He felt cramped and cozy and fine.
“I really hope there’s not a fire. I could stay here all day,” he said honestly, figuring they’d long moved past the cheesiness stage of their whatever-this-was.

Eames chuckled and then looked abashed. “Conveniently enough, that’s probably what will happen,” he said. “I don’t think there’s a way out of this place unless you can somehow land a helicopter on the roof.”

“You still won’t let me look out the window so I can only assume that you’re being really melodramatic right now,” Arthur said dryly.

Eames gave him a look and raised his eyebrows without a word. Arthur cast a pointed glance toward the window, where the curtains were still drawn and the light had shifted higher to cut across the tops of the panes.

“You do realize you’ll have to let me go outside at some point,” Arthur said. “Also, this is kind of my place. You just showed up.”

“You planning on kicking me to the curb?” Eames said, drawing his hand up Arthur’s side while Arthur tried not to lean into the touch like an overgrown cat. “Tsk, tsk, so soon.” Arthur must have failed at not doing the cat thing, because Eames ran his fingers straight up to Arthur’s chin and then stayed there, lightly brushing his throat like Arthur was a pet who needed coddling. “I was hoping to get in a little more debauchery before you threw me to the wolves.”

“You are the wolves,” Arthur protested. Eames leaned in and followed his fingertips with long, messy kisses to the side of Arthur’s neck. When Arthur leaned back, Eames took advantage and tipped him over onto his back against the bedsheets, straddling him with his broad thighs and bearing him down into the blankets.

Arthur let out a strangled laugh and slung his legs around Eames’ thighs, arching into the steady friction where their cocks met, Eames rocking him to a steady, toe-curling orgasm that melted through him, a slow wave of pleasure.

Eames’ come joined his own a moment later, a messy conglomeration on Arthur’s chest that ordinarily would have sent him fumbling for the bathroom and the nearest washcloth. At the moment, he was strangely unbothered, perhaps because Eames couldn’t stop staring down at him, as if he were an easel and Eames had just painted something gorgeous.

“What?” Arthur said carefully, suspicion creeping into his afterglow.

Eames reached down and traced the edges of Arthur’s mouth, where his dimples would be if Arthur weren’t frowning in confusion. “Nothing important,” Eames said, too carelessly. “Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“That you’re lovely,” Eames said, “and you don’t look at all like an American industrial tycoon.”


“And hockey blades, and ice skate blades, and kicksleds,” Eames said, peering down at him. “My goodness, your ears are turning pink.”


“And?” Eames finally prompted after another moment of awkwardness. “I did wiki you already—or, rather, Sugarscape wiki’d you and told me all about you on this morning’s celebrity gossip, which I
read on my phone while you were asleep, so I’m politely pretending to be hearing all this for the first time.”

“Oh,” said Arthur.

Eames scooted off of him and yawned agreeably as he settled back onto his side. “Are you embarrassed because you made your fortune from a sledding empire, because there’s a wiki page, because right now thousands of people are probably looking at it, or because you’re secretly wealthy?”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “God, I don’t know, take your pick?”

Eames poked him in the side. Arthur glared at him. Eames beamed and propped his hand on his chin expectantly.

“My whole family loves bobsledding,” said Arthur. “Like, they’re seriously huge into it. My mom and dad met at a luge competition. My mom runs the company, but she’s also kind of a big deal because she was a really successful amateur push-athlete before she went to work for my granddad. So now she’s always traveling, giving speeches at sports conferences, meeting Jamaican bobsledders, all kinds of stuff.”

“So what’s the catch? You hate snow?”

Arthur laughed. “No, there’s no catch. I mean, I don’t really get it, the whole luge thing, but it doesn’t bother me.”

“Must be something,” Eames said. “You didn’t move all the way to England just to get away from tenacious bobsledders.”

Arthur shifted to face Eames on the bed. Eames reached out one broad hand and hauled him in closer, so Arthur’s knees bumped his where they lay on Arthur’s bed. Eames’ hair was sticking up and a sheen of sweat pooled on his shoulders and his broad chest. Arthur ducked his head and tried not to think of how many other people had seen Eames look like this.

“So my mom’s side of the family is Jewish,” he continued, mostly to gather his thoughts while Eames reached up and started playing with his hair as he talked. “She basically took over the whole company from my granddad while he was still CEO, because he was really bad at marketing and she was brilliant at it, right. But my granddad is super old-fashioned, we’re talking total Orthodox, and he had lots of issues handing over his company to a woman, even though he’s always claimed to be super liberal.”

“They always do,” Eames interjected, still running his hand through Arthur’s hair.

“Then my mom married my dad, who’s stereotypical old money Bostonian, and it was a total nightmare. My dad’s parents were appalled because he’d married a Jewish woman who made more money than he did, my mom’s parents were appalled because she’d married outside the faith, my granddad threatened to disown her, and then she got pregnant with me and suddenly everyone kissed and made up and I was always the angel of the family.”

“Let me guess,” said Eames. “Then the precious angel came out of the closet, and everyone blamed everyone else, and the hate flowed large?”

Arthur laughed. “Pretty much. That and my parents got divorced.”

“Ah.”
“It’s less open hate than passive-aggressive sniping at this point, though. The whole family still loves bobsledding; we have tickets to the Lake Placid tournament, and they all go, every year. My mom and dad go together and hold hands, then argue about me all the way home. It’s ridiculous.”

“Ah,” said Eames. “Still in love then, just not in love with living together?”

Arthur thought about it. “I don’t think so. I think they just like pretending.”

Eames frowned. “Well, why can’t that count?” he said. “I mean, pretending is what most people do until suddenly they don’t have to pretend anymore.”

Arthur laughed before he could help himself. “I don’t think brainwashing yourself into thinking you’re in love counts.” He cut a sharp glance at Eames. “Why, is that what you did? Is that more of your wonky shit?”

Eames’ answering smile was a bit thin, Arthur thought. “Nah,” he said, finally taking his hand from Arthur’s hair and rolling onto his back. Arthur waited for more, but Eames only folded his arms and said, “So you moved all the way to England to escape squabbling relatives and too much money.”

“No,” said Arthur, surprised. “I just liked London. I read a lot of John Le Carre novels growing up.”

“Hmm,” Eames said, smiling sincerely this time. “I always wanted to be a spy.”

“I know,” said Arthur.

Eames sent him an odd look, the look he got when Arthur revealed too much of his past as an Eames fanboy. Arthur must have made a face in response, because instead of saying anything, Eames just looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “Is this why you’re not a typical rich kid?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Arthur said. “I went to public school. Er. Not a prep school.”

“I know what public school means in the U.S.,” Eames said. “Though I suspect a public school in Boston is a bit different than a public school in one of those other places where everything is named after a confederate war hero or something.”

“Well,” Arthur hedged.

“But that still doesn’t explain the fact that you came all the way to London to open a science bookstore. And you had to have actually come here with intent to start the business, no British Visa would let you stay longer than six months otherwise. Not to mention entrepreneurship Visas are bloody expensive.”

“How do you even know all this?” Arthur asked. “What did you do when you were—”

He stopped short. Eames didn’t actually stiffen on the bed next to him, but he fell silent, as if he simply hadn’t heard Arthur at all.

Arthur thought for a moment, then reached out and ran his hand over Eames’ chest. Eames didn’t look over at him, but he caught Arthur’s hand and held it there for a moment, over his ribcage where Arthur could feel him breathing in and out. He wondered if Eames could feel Arthur’s pulse fluttering in his wrist.

“My family is great,” Arthur said softly. “I love them a lot. But sometimes there’s just... not enough space. California’s too weird, New York’s too pretentious, Seattle’s too kooky, Canada’s too cold, and I can’t really live anywhere else but America or somewhere else where they speak English,
because my English is barely passable, let alone my French. I just really like London.”

“What about Australia?” said Eames.

“Never been,” said Arthur. “Scared of koalas.”

“Do they have koalas in Australia?” said Eames. “We should go and find out.”

“No,” said Arthur, too quickly, before he registered the look on Eames’ face. “Really?” he added. “You wanna go fight koalas with me?”

“Not in Adelaide, though,” said Eames, pulling Arthur against him and blanketing kisses against his jawline. “I hear they have kangaroos there, too.”

“Hmm,” said Arthur, straddling Eames’ chest and leaning in. “The koalas are one thing, but a kangaroo-koala alliance would be terrifying.”

“So not Adelaide, then,” murmured Eames, drawing him into a kiss.

“Oh,” said Arthur, momentarily distracted from visions of sex on a white coral reef. “And no Canberra, either. Yusuf, the ex—he’s there doing doctoral research.”

“Lovely, we could drop in for a visit,” said Eames, smiling up at him.

“Really? That wouldn’t bother you?”

Eames blinked. “Someone’s a bit clingy. How long since you were together?”

Arthur frowned. “Fifteen months. I’m not clingy.”

“No, I like it,” said Eames. “At least in small doses.” Arthur frowned harder. Eames reached up and pushed one corner of his mouth up in a mock smile.

“I’m really not,” Arthur protested. “I don’t get possessive or weird or anything. I’m not like—”

He halted on the point of blurting out something that might make Eames shoot him that earlier, fake smile.

Eames studied him. “You’re not the least like Fischer,” he said after a moment, “if that’s what’s bothering you.” Arthur hesitated. Eames sat up, sending Arthur back onto his haunches, and wrapped his arms around Arthur’s waist. “Fischer was a nasty piece of work. He tried, he really did. But in the end, he didn’t know how to interact with people because he distrusted everyone he met. You—you’re kind, generous. I don’t know you that well, but that much is obvious.”

Arthur felt his cheeks start to burn. “You know me,” he said, hoping Eames wouldn’t notice.

Eames, of course, noticed and beamed at him as if Arthur had just said something delightfully filthy. “I’m beginning to suspect I might, at that.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Why would you want to be with someone if you didn't think he was a good person?”

Eames frowned and scratched the top of his head. After trying for a few moments, he came up with, “Hollywood?”

Arthur snorted.
“I’m serious!” said Eames. “Look, it’s different in L.A. Out there it really is all about who you know, and it’s easy to get caught up in what the people around you can do for you rather than who they are. Fischer had so much talent. And his father was—well. You know who his father is.” Eames waved his hand, as if he could dismiss the whole subject just like that. Arthur stared at him.

“But he made you miserable,” he said. “That was obvious.”

Eames ducked his head. “Well,” he tried, “the idea of the suffering artist is a siren call to all of us, isn’t it, darling? And you have to admit, we had a bit of a Herzog/Kinski thing on screen.”


Eames had the audacity to look sheepish. Arthur felt a sharp surge of warmth and affection; he leaned in and kissed Eames’ mouth until Eames shivered and pulled him close. The firmness and the heat of Eames’ body pressed against his sent his stomach into cartwheels, careening with joy and terror. He had no idea how they’d wound up here, but Eames had shown up at his bookstore, and Arthur wasn’t about to let him go.

“Look,” he said, voice rough when he and Eames finally broke apart. “I know we just met and I’m just some fanboy, and this is crazy, but—”

“Arthur, if you end that sentence with ‘call me’—”

“Shut up,” said Arthur, laughing. “I don’t want to pressure you into anything, but this ‘suffering for love’ thing is total bullshit. There are probably lots of decent, normal people in Hollywood. If you don’t—” Arthur swallowed. Eames raised his eyebrows. “I understand if you can’t date someone like me,” Arthur managed. “But I’m sure you could at least date one of them. Someone who won’t fuck you up because of their own issues, whatever they are.”

Eames looked back at him in silence for so long Arthur started to feel queasy. “Do you honestly think it’s possible to fall in love without it fucking you up?” he asked at last.

“I don’t really know,” Arthur answered. “It’s never really done a number on me, but then maybe I’ve never been in love. It’s no reason not to date people, at least,” he added, hoping Eames wouldn’t point out that he’d just spent over a year not dating anyone.

Instead Eames smirked. “Well, when framed like that, it seems a perfectly reasonable learning experience,” he said. Arthur glared at him. “Hey, I just met you,” Eames continued, “and this is crazy, but—”

“No,” said Arthur. “No.”

—But I’ve recently spent an inordinate number of hours with my cock buried in your ass, so date me, maybe?”


“Don’t act so flustered,” said Eames. “You’re a secret member of bobsledding royalty. You’re the one that’s slumming in this scenario.”

“I,” said Arthur.

“Did you really think after all this, I’d show up and then leave, just like that?” said Eames, his voice suddenly soft. “Are you sure no one’s ever done a number on you, darling?” He twirled one of Arthur’s curls around his finger, then brushed Arthur’s cheek with his thumb.
Arthur’s throat worked uselessly for a few moments before he could get sound to come out of it.

“Not until now,” he said at last, and then had the satisfaction of watching a dawning glow creep into Eames’ expression.

“I—Arthur,” said Eames, a little thickly. “I make no promises in the not-fucking-up department. I’m not very good at it, since we’re being honest, and this is—it’s a bit out of my realm of experience, honestly. But if you—that is, I mean I’d very much like to try—”

Arthur kissed him.

They were still kissing when someone started pounding on Arthur’s door.

“Shit,” Arthur said, breaking away and scooting off the bed. “Who the fuck—?” He ducked into the bathroom and began frantically hunting for a clean washcloth.


“How do you know who Ariadne is?” He poked his head back around the doorframe.

“Oh, I was texting her this morning, while you were still asleep,” said Eames, casually reaching over and retrieving his shirt from wherever Arthur had flung it earlier.

“You were using my phone?” Arthur hissed.

“Well, I had to put it on silent so it wouldn’t wake you, darling,” said Eames, pulling his shirt on and stretching in the same motion, a move clearly designed to disarm Arthur and derail his train of thought. “She seemed very worried about you. It was only natural I assure her that you were quite all right.”

Arthur knocked his head twice against the doorframe. It was almost enough to drown out the pounding on the door.

“Do you want me to answer that?” Eames said helpfully.

“Er,” said Arthur. “No.” He finished cleaning up and shrugged on a shirt as he crossed the room. Ariadne was in mid-rap when he opened the door, half a scarf wrapped around her wrist for easier banging.

“Oh, my god, Arthur!” she greeted him, nudging past him and setting her bag down on his counter. “I am not your PR manager! I—oh, hey, Eames.”

“Ariadne, what are you doing here?” Arthur demanded, because it was a better option than banging his head some more on the nearest hard surface.

“Ariadne, what are you doing here?” Arthur demanded, because it was a better option than banging his head some more on the nearest hard surface.

“Discovering the beauty of the cosmos,” said Ariadne, without taking her eyes off Eames.

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Eames dutifully.

“Eames, I’ve come to rescue you,” said Ariadne.

“You have?” said Eames.

“He doesn’t need rescuing!” said Arthur.

Ariadne turned and poked Arthur in the ribs. “Yes he does, you moron. Have you even seen the mob outside? They’ve called in the constables to chase away all the paparazzi.”

“So we’re good, then!” said Eames.

“No, the road’s blocked,” said Ariadne.

“So we’re screwed, then! What’s your plan?” said Eames, rubbing his hands together.

“You’re just lucky I’ve been renovating the building next door,” said Ariadne. “There’s a car waiting around the corner street, we can go through the antique shop—that’s the shop Arthur just bought—out the basement. Penelope says to tell you she’ll deal with you later,” said Ariadne.

Eames blanched. “You’ve been talking to my press agent?”

“Well, what was she supposed to do when she couldn’t reach you?” said Ariadne, who’d evidently already gone from starstruck to exasperated. “She called you, and then she called your hotel, and then she called the store and left a frantic voicemail for the two of you. She’s super nice, by the way, just stressed out because you aren’t around to give her a statement for all the calls and emails she’s been getting.”

“Shit,” said Arthur, as it suddenly dawned on him that Eames escaping from his handlers for a day or two might possibly be a bigger deal than Eames had let on.

Ariadne turned and punched him in the arm. “That’s for turning off your phone, asshole. Just be glad I thought to check the shop voicemail. I called her back and she put me in touch with your bodyguard. Prianka, right? She’s meeting us outside. Oh, and I called Ty and Jorby and told them not to come in today,” she added to Arthur. “You’re welcome, by the way. Then I called the art students and told them the window display would have to wait.”

“Um,” said Arthur meekly. “Thank you.”

Eames huffed. “Look, you really didn’t have to come all the way—”

“Shush, guttersnipe!” said Ariadne. “Arthur, you can go with Eames if you want, but he can’t stay here.”

“Why can’t he?” said Arthur, suddenly feeling defensive.

“Because I was supposed to have the construction workers for a full 8 hours today and I’ve lost the whole bloody morning because they can’t get their equipment in through the crowd,” said Ariadne.

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Well, it’s okay, I can still pay them for the time lost.”

“No, Arthur, no,” insisted Ariadne. “Not okay. Six weeks, remember? Six weeks and a miracle so
you’ll have everything ready by December 8th? We need them here every minute we have. And you need to fill out the permits I gave you last week."

“Oh, that’s right,” said Eames. “You’re having an open house.”

“All your fault,” Arthur grimaced.

Eames chuckled. “Somehow I doubt that immensely,” he said, and leaned in to kiss him.

Something about kissing Eames in front of other people, even if other people was Ariadne, made all of this feel real in a way that it hadn’t up until that moment. Arthur curled his fingers around Eames’ elbows and tugged him closer, and Eames obliged by wrapping his arms around Arthur’s waist and enclosing him against the counter, pressing so close Arthur gasped.

“Hey, no, no, wait, PDA, I don’t need to see this, oh my god,” said Ariadne. “Look, I’m just gonna wait outside.”

“Excellent idea,” Eames said, his voice muffled against Arthur’s neck.

“Ew!” said Ariadne. “No, there will be no copulating in the building while I’m in it. Arthur, go put some clothes on or something and you and Eames can neck at his hotel.”

“I’m sorry,” said Arthur over the top of Eames’ head where Eames was sighing against Arthur’s shoulder.

“No, no, she’s right, the whole block will be closed off if the paparazzi think we’re still inside,” said Eames, straightening up. “We’ll take the roundabout route back to the hotel and lead them on a merry chase for a bit, mmm? That should give you time to get your contractors in before the day’s gone.”

“Oh,” said Ariadne. “You’re nice. He’s nice, Arthur!”

“I’m sure he lives for your approval,” said Arthur.

“You’re mean,” said Ariadne. “Eames, he’s mean.”

“You mustn’t be mean to my rescuer, darling,” said Eames, kissing Arthur on the cheek. Arthur felt the tips of his ears go red.


“Hey,” said Ariadne, suddenly losing the pained expression she’d worn for the last few minutes. “Eames. Can you introduce me to David Tennant?”

"No, I don't want to meet your Hollywood boyfriend, and I do wish you'd stop asking," said Arthur's mother.

Next to him, Eames was running a hand over the curve of Arthur’s thigh, his thumb stroking the place where the fold of blankets ended and Arthur’s skin began. Arthur leaned back against the plush pillows and looked out over the endless blue of sky and sea that surrounded him. He felt like a million dollars—or perhaps a high-class call-girl, he wasn’t sure which.

It probably should have been weirder that he was talking to his mom while naked, but there just hadn’t been much of an opportunity in his life recently for clothes.
“That’s crazy,” he said, combing his hand lightly through Eames’ hair. “Also he’s right next to me so he can probably hear you.”

“Hi, Arthur’s mom,” said Eames. He rolled onto his stomach and started to play with Arthur’s toes. Arthur kicked him.

“Where are you?” his mom asked.


“Oh? Did you bring your Top Five desert island books along?”

“It’s tropical, not a desert,” said Arthur, “but no.” Then he couldn’t resist adding, “I just brought Eames.”

Eames gave no indication of having heard him, but sucked a kiss onto Arthur’s ankle in response.

His mother sighed audibly over the phone. “And here we have the reason I can’t meet your Mr. Eames. You wear your heart on your sleeve, and it’s embarrassing, Arthur.”

“I do not,” said Arthur.

“Who knows you better, you or your mother?”

“Um, me,” said Arthur.

“Wrong,” said Arthur’s mother. “How many boyfriends have you brought over for dinner? Do you know what it’s like having to watch you make googly eyes at them across the table, wanting to dump baked beans on your head every time because you have terrible taste in men? No one ever talks about that part of parenting, let me tell you.”

“Mom, I was in high school. This is different.” Eames smirked. “Stop eavesdropping,” Arthur ordered.

“Terrible taste in men?” Eames mouthed at him, throwing Arthur that delighted grin that Arthur had quickly come to realize meant that he would be filing this away as fodder for teasing Arthur later.

“I’m not so sure this is any different at all,” said his mother skeptically.

Arthur rubbed his temple. "Right, mom, I gotta go,” he said, unsure who he was rolling his eyes harder at.

“You have to go,” said his mother. “You just finished telling me you’re on a tiny island, where on earth is there to ‘go’?”

“On second thought I don’t want the two of you to meet, ever,” said Arthur, scowling.

“That’s fine with me. I’m going to be in Europe until the holidays anyway. If you’re still together by then, we can talk. Which reminds me, are you sending me an open house ticket?”

“What? You just said you’re going to be in Europe.”

“So? I still want a ticket. I have to have something to put on my refrigerator.”

“Oh, my god, goodbye, mom,” said Arthur, ringing off before anything more horrifying happened to him.
“Wait, I wanted to say hi!” said Eames, making a grab for Arthur’s cell. He lunged for it and wound up sprawled over Arthur’s stomach, where he settled agreeably a moment later. Arthur relaxed underneath him, hooking his legs around Eames’ calves and rubbing against him, just because he could.

Eames hummed appreciatively, low in his throat. “Your mom likes me,” he said, still wearing his wolf’s grin.

“You’re deluded,” said Arthur.

“No, I can tell! If she didn’t like me she’d have no trouble meeting me,” said Eames. He beamed and bumped his nose against Arthur’s.

“She just thinks I’m crazy,” said Arthur, trailing his hand over Eames’ arm.

“Well, you are crazy,” said Eames. “She probably thinks you’ve spent far too much time slumming around with shallow hot men because that’s what people as gorgeous as you usually do.”

Arthur flushed. “Shut up.”

Eames sighed in a longsuffering way. “I hope for my sake you never realize how hot you are, darling. Then you actually might start slumming around with shallow hot men.”

“So absolutely nothing would change,” laughed Arthur. He dropped his phone onto the pile of blankets scattered over the floor, just as it started to buzz. It was probably Ariadne; she’d left him endless messages since they got to the resort a week ago. He’d mostly ignored them, because he knew if anyone could handle things while he was away, it was Ariadne.

She and Penelope Rider had been leaving them both messages in tandem. Eames had run away from the start of awards season, and even though he was only up for a few ensemble awards for the Mayhem franchise, she was still annoyed about it. For someone Arthur had never met, she filled Arthur with a considerable amount of dread, but he figured if Eames wasn’t worried, he shouldn’t be either.

Besides, he’d had better things to do.

Eames ran his hands up Arthur’s chest and made out with him for a little while, unhurried and relaxed. “I brought you here so I could do this to you for hours,” he’d told Arthur in between kisses the first night they’d arrived, when the whole world was carpeted in an endless thick blanket of cobalt sky and sea, no stars anywhere except for the twinkling of lights all along the beach outside their suite. Since then he’d been true to his word. Arthur had taken to slicking himself up in the morning with coconut oil, so that Eames could slide on a Durex and slip inside him whenever he wanted. Eames had laughed when Arthur had gone for the largest, most expensive bottle of virgin coconut oil on Ocado because he refused to take an endless supply of lube with him through customs; but he certainly hadn’t laughed at the results.

He scooped Arthur’s legs over his shoulders and nuzzled Arthur’s throat. “She’s persistent, your shopkeeper,” he said. “I’m flattered I can hold your attention against that kind of competition.”

“I’m gay, you idiot,” Arthur said, flicking Eames’ hair back from his face and shivering as Eames’ cock brushed against his ass.

“Oh, Arthur,” Eames answered, looking down at him affectionately. “I meant your bookstore.” And then he was inside Arthur, fucking him, and Arthur’s eyes fluttered shut and he drifted, floating on a calm sea of Eames’ voice murmuring hushed endearments and his hands moving slow and confident.
over Arthur’s skin, trailing at length over his abdomen, his thighs, his cock, his hands, leaving warmth everywhere.

It was impossible for Arthur to think straight when they were like this, impossible for him to do anything but feel, trapped beneath Eames’ touch and his words and the weight of his body pressed against Arthur. Impossible for Arthur to do anything but float quietly, quickly out of his head over Eames. He would tell Eames eventually so they could be out of their heads together, he reasoned while Eames was mouthing his way over Arthur’s skin, rocking into him endlessly, until all Arthur felt was a kind of deep-seeded, contented desire for Eames to let him come. He shuddered and arched and clung to Eames’ broad shoulders, opening his eyes when Eames called him back to the present.

“Arthur,” Eames murmured against his lips. “Are you thirsty, kitten?” Arthur shook his head. “Don’t stop,” he said, but his voice was hoarse, and Eames gave him a knowing look. Arthur dug his fingernails lightly into Eames’ skin. “I like this.”

Eames smiled. “Do you, pet?” he brushed Arthur’s hair away from his forehead and pushed inside Arthur a little more deeply. “You’d let me stay inside you all day, wouldn’t you.”

“I’d let you stay forever.” Arthur blinked up at him, open and honest. Distantly, he registered the flicker across Eames’ smile, but he was too content and relaxed to really care, especially when Eames only leaned down and thumbed his cheek, then kissed him until Arthur was breathless.

“Come for me, darling,” he breathed against Arthur’s mouth, slipping his hand over Arthur’s cock, and it took nothing more for Arthur to do as he asked. He sighed Eames’ name as he shuddered and arched, and felt his orgasm unfurl throughout his body.

He tightened his muscles as he came down from the high, and felt Eames own orgasm inside of him moments later. Eames unhooked Arthur’s legs from his shoulders and withdrew, laying kisses along Arthur’s throat for a moment before he shifted onto the bed beside Arthur and left him feeling chilly and sticky and bereft.


Arthur tilted his chin and kissed him. He felt endlessly happy.

“Stay here, I’ll go fetch us more bottled water,” said Eames once they finally broke apart.

“I can go,” said Arthur muzzily.

Eames smiled. “Stay,” he said.

“Okay,” said Arthur. He stayed, because he was cold and the bed was warm, and because Eames had told him to. He listened to the sound of running water as Eames cleaned himself off, then watched through the haze of his own exhaustion as Eames pulled on shorts and trousers before stepping outside. He liked being pliant and agreeable, and liked that Eames brought out this side of him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d ever just let go and stopped himself from worrying about anything. They’d managed to never really talk about it, but a pattern of total compliance from Arthur during sex had developed, and Arthur found he felt totally at ease. Maybe later on he’d fuck Eames, take him to bed and keep him there for hours. They had time.

For now, he was content just to listen to the sea as it lapped the shore outside. It was the first week of November, just on the outside of tourist season, too early to escape the late winds of spring that
rustled the banyans and rain trees crowding the veranda. Arthur closed his eyes and drifted. He thought about nothing.

He lay there for what seemed like an extended moment, waiting patiently for Eames’ return. At first he barely registered the sharp buzz in the background of his afterglow; then he heard it again. Then again. Gradually he realized it was the phone on the nightstand—Eames’, not his.

Without really thinking about it, he rolled over to face the sound.

Once. Twice more the phone buzzed.

Arthur dragged himself up, suddenly bone-deep with exhaustion as he came back to himself. This was Eames’ private phone, the one that he didn’t use for press and public contact. Arthur only knew of a few people who had access to it. It could be important.

Without really thinking about it, he sat up all the way and reached for the phone. The latest text appeared on the lock screen, which Eames never actually bothered to lock:

RF:
...and then you can explain everything to the press.

Arthur blinked and thumbed the phone open to the message thread.

Arthur stared. It took a moment for the words to sink in, and for RF to become clear in his mind.

“Arthur?”

Eames knelt on the bed beside him, freezing in the act of handing Arthur a water bottle when he saw what Arthur was doing.

Arthur’s throat was terribly dry when he tried to speak. “Your phone kept going off so I thought it
might be important,” he said. He turned and exchanged the phone for the water bottle Eames was offering. “But it’s just Fischer. I didn’t know you two still kept in contact.”

He glanced up at Eames’ face as he took a deep, grateful swallow. Eames was still frozen in place, gazing with wide eyes, first at the texts, then at Arthur.

“Arthur,” he said, sounding panicked, “I know how this must look but it’s not what you think.”

Arthur settled back against the pillows. “It just looks like you still talk to your ex,” he said carefully, choosing for the moment to ignore the blatant flirting Fischer had been doing. “I still talk to my ex. I just didn’t know you were still close.”

Eames bit his lip. “We’re not,” he said. He looked annoyed now. Arthur curled a hand around his elbow and tugged. Eames propped a pillow up next to him and tucked himself in close, settling his head on Arthur’s shoulder. “Drink all of that, darling, I got us plenty.” He pointed to the pile of water bottles lying where he’d left them, on the edge of the bed. They could build themselves a fort, Arthur thought, of pillows and water bottles, and stay right here.

He swigged his water, then pressed a kiss to the top of Eames’ head. “I didn’t mean to pry,” he said. “It’s none of my business.”

Eames sighed. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” he said, catching Arthur’s hand and lacing their fingers. “I don’t intend to hide anything from you.”

He switched the phone off and chucked it into the pile of bedsheets on the floor next to Arthur’s. Arthur waited for more, but Eames seemed unsure of how to continue. “What did Fischer do to you?” Arthur finally prompted, as gently as he could.

“Nothing I didn’t do to myself,” Eames muttered.

Arthur blinked in confusion. “He obviously made you miserable,” he tried again. “Why bother with him now?”

Eames tightened his grip on Arthur’s hand, then gave it another squeeze and relaxed. He turned his head into Arthur’s shoulder and kissed Arthur’s bare skin.

“You’re so unlike anything Fischer could or will ever be,” he said quietly. He almost sounded meek. Arthur propped his head on the pillow and looked at him, still sleepy but ever more alert.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” he said. “But whatever it is, it won’t change how I feel about you.”

Eames raised his head and sent him a probing look. Arthur looked back evenly.

“Fischer has something on me,” Eames said at last. “Something I’ve kept secret my whole life. No one else knows except a man living in Bristol who’s probably forgotten the whole thing entirely.”

“But you told Fischer,” said Arthur skeptically.

“I was—I was in love,” said Eames, and his voice cracked. “I thought love meant total honesty, letting your partner see your biggest flaws, the deepest and darkest parts of yourself.”

“Jesus,” said Arthur before he could help himself. “And Fischer thought differently?”

“Well, Fischer,” Eames hedged, grimacing, “that boy’s relationship with his father’s even worse than
you could imagine. His father fucked him up even worse than mine did me, made him paranoid, made him so he suspects the motives of everyone around him. He naturally assumes the people in his life are using him, because so often, he’s using them. He just thinks that’s how people are.” He frowned. “He’s not evil or anything. He just doesn’t know any other way to be.”

“So you told him... whatever you told him, and Fischer took it badly.”

“Telling him was the biggest mistake of my life,” Eames said grimly. “I thought I could trust him. What I told him... it could ruin my career. Everything.” He laughed a little hollowly. “Might even get me arrested, though I doubt it.” He turned Arthur’s palm over and began tracing it with his fingers. “And it would make a lot of people hate me. Might even make you hate me.”

“No,” said Arthur immediately.

Eames shrugged. “Well, it made Fischer hate me. I thought it would be... I don't know, an act of faith or something. I thought it would bring us closer together. Instead he thought I was crazy. Thought I'd been using him, playing mind games, trying to cheat my way into—” he broke off abruptly, his face crumpling with more emotions than Arthur knew what to do with.

“Hey,” he said harshly, forcing Eames to look at him. “Hey. It doesn’t matter what you did or what Fischer made you think about what you did,” he said. “Fischer’s an ass and I know you.”

“Oh, fuck me, how do you make those lines sound so good,” said Eames, kissing him roughly.

“It's real,” said Arthur. “I'm real.”

“No you're not,” said Eames, smiling at him sadly. “I made you up.”

“You made up a guy who works in a bookstore?” Arthur murmured against his lips.

“That was the best you could do?”

“Absolutely,” said Eames. “And one day the clock will strike midnight and you’ll turn back into a pumpkin, along with all of this.” He waved his hand at their bungalow, at the open sea, as if it encompassed everything he was.

“I thought I told you to stop being maudlin,” Arthur said. “Seriously, if Chris Brown can destroy Rihanna’s face and still have a career, I don’t think there’s anything you could do that would impact yours.”

“Arthur, I’m an openly gay man,” Eames protested. “To so many people that’s worse than being an abusive boyfriend. I’ve been box-office poison waiting to happen for the better part of a decade.”

“And yet you’re on the A-list,” said Arthur. “Why do you think that is?”

“It’s because I’ve been bloody careful,” Eames bit out. “Except for this one misstep.”

“No, it’s because you’re amazing,” said Arthur. Eames shook his head.

“No, Arthur, no, it’s not. You don’t understand—everything in Hollywood is about image, it’s not actually about talent. A few people liked me enough to get me started and I’ve been lucky, but given an excuse this could all be gone faster than you could say ‘anonymous source.’”

“Bullshit,” said Arthur emphatically. “You can be as self-deprecating as you want, whatever, but don’t ask me to do it on your behalf.”
Eames flashed him a look that was half grateful, half fond. As if Arthur was too naive to realize Eames was telling the truth. Arthur felt a flash of annoyance.

“If it’s so bad why hasn’t anyone found out? Why hasn’t Fischer told anyone yet?”

Eames passed him another water bottle. “Think about it, Arthur,” he said, studying Arthur as he took an indignant sip, then another. “Why do you think?”

Arthur thought. “He was... being nice?” he tried. Eames snorted a laugh and kissed him on the nose.

“He’s still in the closet,” Eames said.

Arthur made a face. “But everyone knows he’s gay,” he said.

“No, everyone ‘knows’ he’s gay,” Eames said, with finger quotes. “But he’s never fed anyone an ounce of proof. He keeps his partners confined to such secrecy it’s almost debilitating.”

“But why?” said Arthur, boggling. “You were never seen together, sure, but everyone knew—”

“Because of his father,” Eames interjected. “Tabloid articles are one thing, Fischer can explain that away as gossip. But if Maurice ever found absolute proof that Robert was queer, he’d cut his son off totally. He’d be finished. He’d lose everything, all his shares in the company, all his chances at doing big projects, everything.”

“And he’d rather live a lie, rather hurt you, than distance himself from his father and become his own man,” Arthur scowled.

“Athur, it’s not that simple. If he tried to get work in Hollywood doing anything else no one would work with him. Fischer-Morrow would blacklist any actor or tech who tried.”

“So?” Arthur retorted. “It’s not that hard to walk away from your family legacy, believe me, I’d know.”

“Maybe it wasn’t for you, but not all of us are that lucky,” Eames said heatedly. Then he looked shocked at himself. Arthur had come to know that look well over the last few weeks: it was the one Eames got when he accidentally revealed, or almost revealed, too much about his own past.

“So Fischer’s in the closet,” Arthur said more gently. “What’s that have to do with you?”

Eames looked at him. “You go too easy on me,” he said softly. “You know you’re the only person I’ve ever dated who’s never even asked me what my first name is?”

Arthur shrugged. “I know who you are,” he said simply.

The look Eames gave him in response was so grateful and a little startled and affectionate Arthur couldn’t help giving his hand a squeeze. “What else?”

“For the past six years, Fischer and I have been in a detente. He knew he couldn’t say a word to anyone about my secret or I’d reveal his, to his father. But now....” he broke off, looking vaguely repulsed. “But now his dad is on his deathbed.”


“So Fischer knows he’s about to inherit controlling interest in the studio. Unless his dad’s included some sort of ‘no homo’ clause in the will—which, let’s be honest, he’s not above—Fischer knows he’s in the clear.”
“And he’s using that as insurance against you telling the world he likes cock.”

“Fischer never cared what the world thought,” Eames snorted. “Just his father.”

“So what does he want from you?” Arthur asked. “You said he hates you.”

“Wants me to do another film with him,” Eames said shortly.

“And?”

“And it’s Fischer. Who the hell knows,” Eames said. “He texted me a few days ago, right when the news about Maurice started getting ‘round. I’ve been trying to appease him so he won’t fly off the handle and ruin my career.”

“Have you told anyone else?”

“No. What can anyone else do, anyway?”

“Can you make a deal? Eames, are you sure no one else knows about the secret?”

“No one,” Eames nodded.

“So who’d believe Fischer? Does he have any proof?”

Eames laughed. “Oh, he could get proof if he wanted it. He may actually have documentation now, if he hired a private detective. You might say it’s been hiding in plain sight, just waiting for someone to come along and look at the evidence.”

Arthur’s stomach twisted. He smoothed one of the worried creases in Eames’ forehead to distract himself from it. Eames had said that all of this could vanish, just like that. It was too easy lately to forget that Eames could vanish, too.

“What if you called his bluff?” he said. “What if you made a full confession before he outed you for whatever it is? Then you’d at least have the advantage of doing it on your own terms.” He swallowed. “Would there—would there be any jail time?”

Eames shook his head. “No,” he said. “No, I was a minor. But—” he laughed again, that sharp, hollow laugh. Arthur didn’t like it at all. “Arthur, I’m telling you, my career would be over.”

“I don’t think so,” said Arthur. “And even if that happened, you could still start over. And this wouldn’t be hanging over your head. You wouldn’t have to avoid talking about your past at all costs, you wouldn’t have to pay attention to this asshole who’s trying to blackmail you. You could just... start over. Do whatever you wanted, be whoever you wanted to be.”

By the time Arthur finished, Eames was wearing a soft, fond expression. “You make it all sound so easy,” he said. “Ironically enough, that’s how all this got started. Trying to start over, become my own person.”

Arthur kissed him. “I know who you are,” he repeated. “That’s all that matters.”

Eames shifted to tug Arthur back down into the sheets beside him. “I live on Earth at present,” he said, still wearing that fond smile, “and I don't know what I am.” He curled an arm around Arthur’s waist and breathed the words softly against his hair. “I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing—a noun.”

“I seem to be a verb,” Arthur answered, letting his eyes droop as his head hit the pillow and a new
wave of exhaustion settled in. “An evolutionary process—an integral function of the universe.”

Eames kissed him on the forehead.

“Don’t go back to Fischer,” Arthur murmured, the words turning into a yawn.

“I’ve no intention, darling,” came the answer, just as sleep finally settled over him. “I like it very much where I am.”

When they finally ventured out of their hotel suite, Arthur discovered several things about Eames in the wild. For one thing, Eames was terrified of sharks. *Terrified.* On their sole whale-watching excursion out at sea, they spotted a whale shark and Eames nearly climbed the rigging to escape. Failing that, he clung to Arthur for ten minutes after the vicious creature had made its exit, and thereafter got a panicked look at the suggestion of snorkeling even in the shallow water near the beach.

“Sharks can attack in shallow water!” he told Arthur later on the beach, eyes wide. “I’ve seen *Jaws: the Revenge!* I know what they did to Michael!”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe you’re afraid of sharks because you’ve seen *Jaws*?” Arthur responded. “Or that the most terrifying thing here is that you’ve seen *Jaws 4*?

“I learned valuable life lessons from *Jaws 4*, like never ride in a plane with Michael Caine, and never live by the ocean,” replied Eames, shuddering.

“You might have considered this debilitating fear of marine life before you relocated to an island nation in the middle of the sea,” Arthur noted, but the next day, Eames was eager to take to the high seas again, all fear of sharks forgotten until the next time Arthur brought it up.

Eames had not exaggerated his inability to do laundry. He seemed to regard it as something that happened magically while he slept, and the night that Arthur spilled red wine on his shirt and then doctored it with salt and club soda, Eames hovered around him in fascination, as if Arthur were some sort of a witch doctor instead of someone who’d Googled “remove wine stain.”

“Can’t you just get a new one?” Eames said, wrinkling his forehead.

“No,” Arthur said patiently, “but that attitude would explain why most of your clothes look like they come from thrift stores.”

“You can find lovely things at thrift stores,” Eames said, with a dignified toss of his head.

For the most part, Eames liked lounging around eating weird fruits, watching bad movies, and fucking. These were all hobbies Arthur supported, but since most of the movies on their hotel television were classic Kollywood and Dhivehi, and probably not actually bad ones, they wound up making up their own bad plots with subtitles as they went along. “This sucks,” said Arthur, halfway through their mediocre second attempt. “Tomorrow’s our last day and you haven’t even taken me for a romantic walk on the beach, asshole.”

“But there’s a Bollywood number coming up soon,” said Eames. “I can feel it.”

Arthur eyerolled. “Then I’ll go for a romantic walk on the beach by myself.”

“Don’t leave me for a hermit crab,” said Eames. He frowned. “Or become a hermit crab.”

“I might,” said Arthur. “They have cozy shells.”
Eames pouted. He sat up and took Arthur’s hand. “One little musical number,” he said beseechingly, “and I will waltz you up and down the beach, my little crustacean.”

Arthur sent him a withering look and settled back down beside him on the bed. “One,” he said. “But then I expect Gower Champion to rise up from the grave and choreograph that shit.”

“It’ll be like South Pacific before people start dying,” Eames promised, and Arthur pointedly did not tell him about his thing for Ezio Pinza.

When the romantic walk on the beach finally did happen, it was regrettably devoid of waltzing, but Eames’ tendency to stop and talk to everyone they met meant that they got invited to a beach party on one of the neighboring islands. A short time later, Arthur found himself a guest on an enormous yacht, compliments of the corporate mogul from Bahrain who’d seen all (okay, most) of Eames’ movies. They motored across the open sea with the moonlight glittering in their wake; and while it was obvious that this sort of thing happened to Eames all the time, Arthur couldn’t shake the sensation of being caught up in a fairy tale.

“You look as though you’re wishing you’d carried your shell with you,” Eames remarked, settling beside him after Arthur had spent perhaps too much time staring around him in silence.

“I was just thinking,” Arthur said, “that if I had a boat like this, I’d chase all those trails of moonlight all the way to fairyland.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about right now,” Eames said, swinging his legs up on the deck lounge they occupied and settling his head on Arthur’s lap, “but that sounds lovely. And you look lovely. I like your ears.”

“Eames, it’s not nice to have too much of the host’s free champagne,” said Arthur. “Just because you can get drunk on someone else’s tab doesn’t mean you should.”

“I disagree,” said Eames, running his fingers over Arthur’s wrist. “Getting drunk for free is the best reason to get drunk at all. But in any case, your argument is invalid.”

“Really,” Arthur murmured, letting Eames chase the veins of his wrist up his arm to the edge of his sleeve.

“Yes,” said Eames. “The only thing I’m drunk on right now is the sight of you.”

“I’m going to dump you off the side of this boat,” said Arthur, “after which you will be drunk on terror, because of sharks.”

“Oh, look at you, you’re all embarrassed,” said Eames, tugging Arthur down to be kissed. Eames was one of the handsiest boyfriends Arthur had ever had, but while that typically made Arthur feel claustrophobic, Eames paired it with so much casual, inexplicable self-deprecation that it felt to Arthur more like an act of reassurance rather than possessiveness. As if he were Pooh and Eames were Piglet. Eames just wanted to be sure of him. And he didn’t mind.

“I don’t mind at all,” he said when their lips parted. Eames smelled good, and the night air was warm, and Arthur had sampled a fair bit of the champagne himself. He felt fine.

“What don’t you mind?” Eames asked, sliding his fingertip down the hollow of Arthur’s throat. Arthur tilted his head back. He was vaguely aware of one of the other guests snapping their picture, but he didn’t mind that either.

“If anyone tossed you overboard, the sharks wouldn’t know what to do with you,” Eames said. “You’d pelt them with literary references, and your blood would probably taste like honey, too syrupy to drink.” Arthur scowled at him. Eames grinned back, brilliant and sure, so Arthur kissed him. Another camera went off.

Later they gathered on the beach with more champagne and listened to their host, Rashed, compose impromptu love poems to his wife, Mahendra, on their twenty-third anniversary. Rashed passed around fat cigars and they smoked, huddled together around the bonfire, listening to what appeared to be someone’s playlist of “Mundian To Bach Ke” remixes piped through portable speakers. Further down the beach, another group of partiers were launching a parade of floating lanterns into the sky. Arthur curled his toes into the warm sand and sat quietly, watching the lights drift over the water and moving circles over Eames' forearm while Rashed and Mahendra talked, sometimes to Arthur and Eames, but mostly to each other.

"We played a hand of poker ten minutes after we met," Mahendra said, her hand mirroring the patterns Arthur was drawing on Eames' arm as she talked. "We argued over which of us was going to ask the other out, so I said we would play for it. And he won."

"So she said, 'Fine, but that means I get to propose,'" said Rashed. "And she did."

"Just like that? How did you know?" Arthur asked sleepily. Eames shifted inward, angling closer to the curve of Arthur's body.

Mahendra laughed. "At the time, I'd overheard him telling my best friend that he knew Shahrukh Khan." Eames chuckled into Arthur's shoulder. "I knew he was full of shit, but I thought, what the hell, a few dates and then if he turns out to be for real, when I meet SRK I can level up."

"I danced with her at Shahrukh's wedding," said Rashed. "But by that point she was already in love with me. I could tell because at that time we both still lived in Madras, and when we went for walks along the beach, Mahendra would always write my name in the sand. I knew that she wouldn't waste the tidewater on a boy she wanted to throw away."

Mahendra scoffed. "Please," she said, poking him in the arm. "People aren't disposable. They're not like bad take-out. I went on one date. Then I went on another. But even before I realized how I felt, I never wanted to throw those memories away."

"But when did you know?" Arthur asked. "Was there a moment?"

She smiled. "Yes," she said. "There were a million of them."

Arthur smiled back. "Oh," he said.

Rashed raised an eyebrow at him. "You are too nosy," he said. "Americans always are. This is my favorite subject, so I don’t mind. But now, your turn."

The fire crackled and sent a shower of sparks into the air between them. Eames shifted his head where it had come to rest on Arthur's shoulder. "Our turn?" he echoed. Rashed shook his head.

"No, no," he laughed. "You think I want to hear about your silly little romance? Please." He took a long drag on his cigar, then waved it at them. "You're a world-famous actor. He's a nobody. Perhaps you're in love. Perhaps you're just fucking. I don't care. The only epic love story I care about is my own." He patted his wife's hand. "No, it's your time to tell us your own story. What are you doing here, in the middle of the Indian Ocean? Why did you come here?"

"Gauguin," said Arthur.
"I thought he went to Tahiti," said Eames. "Arthur's fond of non sequiturs, it's part of his charm."

"No, I mean the painting, wiseass," said Arthur. "Where do we come from? What are we?"

"Where are we going?" finished Mahendra. "I hate Gauguin, but it's a catchy title." She sipped her champagne. "Speaking of Europeans who wound up on exotic islands, which of you wants to go first?"

"Ooh, I will," said Eames, sitting up. "I'll tell you about Arthur."

"Me?" Arthur gave him a look. "You're going to tell them the story of my life."

"Absolutely," said Eames. "Everyone loves a good fairy tale. And Arthur's here is one of the best." He gave Arthur an indulgent nudge in the side. "You see, Arthur is actually a young prince and heir to a kingdom of snow in the faraway land of Massachusetts. His parents, the winter queen and king, expected Prince Arthur to become a wise and noble ruler one day, but Arthur preferred to spend his days reading and dreaming. He didn’t even like snow, which is a terrible thing for a winter prince."


"Shh," said Eames. "The winter queen reassured Arthur that no one really cared if he ruled the kingdom or not, since she intended to live for a thousand years, but Arthur felt like a horrible royal son anyway. So he went on a quest, a noble, princely quest to find a kingdom of his own."

"And his travels took him to...?" asked Mahendra.

"A lovely little hamlet called Notting Hill," said Eames. "Arthur built himself his own tiny castle for his own tiny kingdom, and now he rules there over all his faithful subjects, pretty as you please. One day, word of his kingdom will spread so far that it will reach the snowy land of Massachusetts, and Arthur, like his namesake, will be able to unite the two kingdoms, and all the lands in-between."

"Huh," said Arthur.

"Sounds like a lot of conquest to me," said Rashed.

"I don’t think Arthur’s really the conquesty type," said Arthur.


"Shut up," said Arthur. "Do I get to do yours now?"

"My story is untellable," said Eames. "But try your best."

"Okay," said Arthur. "Once upon a time, in a far-off land called Hollywood, there was a small village... called... uh, The Academy." Eames snorted. "In The Academy, there lived a childless widow named Oscar," Arthur continued. "Oscar was respected and loved by all the villagers in The Academy, but he was sad, because his wife... Marlon Brando... had died, and left him all alone in the world." Eames buried his laugh, smoothing his broad palm over his smile.

"One day, Oscar went to market for his daily trip to buy fruits and vegetables," Arthur continued. "He purchased melons and cantaloupes and peas and carrots, and then his attention was arrested by the biggest, fattest squash he had ever seen. Since it wasn't the season for gourds, Oscar was intrigued. 'Where did you get this prize squash?' he asked the greengrocer. 'Ah,' she replied. 'That is
no ordinary squash. I will let you have it, for you seem like a good fellow who could use a nice squash, but you must promise never to cut it open or purée it for soup.' 'Well,' said Oscar, 'that seems like a waste of a perfectly good gourd, but very well.' So he took his fruits and vegetables and his great squash and went home, where, true to his word, he sat the squash on his table and gave it a place of honor.

"As the days and weeks passed, Oscar sometimes greeted the squash like a neighbor or a pet. Sometimes he fancied that the squash wobbled approvingly or that it had grown from day to day, but he put such theories aside. But then one day he heard a great noise from the kitchen, and when he ran to see what was the matter, there sitting on the table amid the smashed remains of his squash was a tiny young boy, still picking seeds out of his hair.

"'Who are you?!' cried Oscar. 'And what have you done to my squash?'

"'I was in that squash,' said the boy. 'I was hiding there until I found a good home.' 'That can't be possible,' said Oscar. 'Children just don't pop out of squashes.' The boy shrugged. 'They do in fairy tales,' he said. 'I'm Eames, by the way.'

"Oscar soon realized that regardless of where the boy came from, he needed proper feeding and clothing and education. So he took him to town and treated him to the finest clothes and meals he could buy, treating him like the son he never had. But the villagers in The Academy were astonished, and said among themselves, 'Where did such a fine young boy come from? I heard he was found in a pumpkin patch! Respectable young men don't go around popping out of vegetables!'

"So a town council meeting was called to decide what to do about Eames, or, as he had come to be called, Squashboy."

"This is a very thorough fairy tale," said Rashed. "Are you a writer?"

"I've just read a lot of folklore," said Arthur, without looking at Eames, who had gone quite still and solemn beside him.

"Perhaps you read too much," said Rashed. His wife hit him on the arm.

"So anyway," said Arthur, "the villagers were all, 'We can't let Oscar adopt a squash boy! Who knows where that squash came from? It could be cursed!' And there was talk of sending Eames off on quests to slay dragons and such.

"But since there are no dragons in the 21st century, Oscar eventually stood on a chair and made a speech. Firstly, he said, there were no evil squashes. Secondly, who cared if he was born in a gourd or a brothel? The kid had talent. And finally, 'I like him,' said Oscar. 'The kid stays with me, and that's that.' So Eames got to stay in the village, and soon he was beloved by all the townspeople for his charm, good looks, and eagerness to please, and eventually the townspeople forgot that he had ever been born from a squash at all."

Arthur finished speaking. There was an awkward pause. "Well?" said Rashed. "And then what happens?"


"Bullshit," said Rashed, tapping his cigar expressively in Arthur's direction. "There has to be a quest or a kidnapping by orcs or something."

"It's not true, after all," said Mahendra, "that there are no dragons in the twenty-first century." Her head was turned and she was studying the shoreline. Arthur suddenly wanted to ask what her
dragons were. He felt a vague sense of sadness at the realization that he would never know; that he might as well be a sea shell she had picked up to listen to for a moment before tossing away again into the waves.

"Well," he started awkwardly, but Eames touched his arm.

"Don't, darling," he said. "Always leave your audience wanting more."

"Wait," said Rashed, narrowing his eyes at Arthur. "There is a flaw in Oscar’s theory. What if this boy was just some thug who broke into Oscar’s cottage and smashed the gourd to make it look like he came from inside it? What if he’s not special at all?"

“I don’t think that’s how it works in fairy tales,” said Arthur.


Next to him, Eames giggled abruptly, a strange sound that made Arthur glance at him for the first time since he’d started telling his ‘story.’ In the firelight, Eames looked grim and unsmiling, and his forehead stood out sharply, furrowed with worry lines.

“I liked Arthur’s story better,” said Rashed, waving his cigar at Eames before tossing it onto the bonfire. "At least he gets a castle."

“And that is the problem with always leaving them wanting,” said Eames. He glanced up and sent Arthur a fond, sad smile.

“You are the worst audience ever and I hate you,” said Arthur, grabbing his collar and pulling him in for a kiss that left Eames carding his fingers through the curls at the base of Arthur's neck; and when they finally broke apart, Arthur looked down and saw that Eames was trailing Arthur’s name in the sand.

The next day was their last day in Villingili. The sunlight stole the first vestiges of sleep from Arthur, creeping steadily over the blankets and into his eyes. The low murmur of Eames’ voice over the phone, and the vibrating of Arthur’s own phone, did the rest, pulling him into consciousness until he was an unwilling eavesdropper.

"No," Eames was saying. "Surely there's no point chartering a private jet, it'll just—oh. No. I don’t want to make him fret. He'll find out soon enough how awful it gets, there's no need to—well, if you —really? A trend? Oh, well, if it was just in the U.S. then—oh, god, no, don't tell Arthur. He'll find out soon enough and his little hipster sensibilities will revolt. Let him remain in blissful ignorance until then."

Arthur ignored the buzz of his phone—probably just Ariadne again—peeled one eye open, and looked muzzily around for Eames. He was sitting at the edge of the veranda by their private pool, wrapped in a giant fluffy towel that hid the lower half of his body from view but accentuated the long broad sweep of his back and his torso. Arthur opened the other eye solely for a better look. He wanted to look forever, and also wanted to go to him and touch and be touched.

He yawned noisily, and Eames glanced up, saw him, and sent him a sweet sort of smile. Then he ran his hand over his eyes and sighed. “Yeah, that’s fine,” he said to whoever was on the other end of the call—Arthur guessed one of his bodyguards. “If you need to hire extra security at the airport, just —do what you need to do. I hope you’ve had a good vacation from all this, at least.” He listened, then laughed. Arthur disentangled himself from the bedclothes, grabbed a pillow, and stumbled over
to Eames and the side of the pool, scrubbing a hand through Eames’ hair. “Oh, now, I’ve woken Arthur,” said Eames. “Or, wait—no, perhaps I haven’t,” he added, as Arthur piled into the other deck chair, sank into his pillow, and promptly fell asleep again to the caress of Eames’ hand on his wrist.

When he woke again, it was to Eames standing over him scratching his back and the sun burning his pillow. “Wake up, Arthur,” Eames was saying gently, smoothing circles over his skin. “Would that we could stay here forever, but our flight leaves in a few hours, and back in Britain, you have an eccentric bookshop to run, and I have an eccentric inventor to play.”

Still fuzzy with sleep and comfort, Arthur first had the horrible, terrible thought that this meant Eames was leaving him, followed by the thought that perhaps Arthur should go with him, leave the bookstore behind to run itself for a while longer. Hard on its heels came the patently ridiculous conviction that he couldn’t do that because the Robie House would miss him.

It shouldn’t have been that simple conflict, warring in his sleep-muddled brain, that suddenly jolted him awake with urgency and longing; but Arthur found himself sitting bolt upright and staring, thinking of Eames writing his name in the sand, each letter taking shape over the pounding of Arthur’s heartbeat and the desire to mold himself to Eames like the sand beneath his fingers. “You got the part?” he said, to dispel his rising panic. This was an absolutely awful moment to get clingy.

Eames beamed at him. “My agent sent a contract to Paramount this morning,” he said, and then his smile grew impossibly wider. “We start filming January 13th in Maine. Sorry, did I say we? I meant Scorsese and I.”

Arthur laughed despite the dread twisting his stomach and stood up to give him a kiss. “You don’t have to act so surprised.”

“Did you know he stopped talking for two years?” said Eames, bouncing on the heels of his bare feet. “Not really totally stopped, but basically stopped speaking unless he was spoken to. Do you think I should do that? I could never manage it, could you imagine? Oh, Bucky, Bucky, Bucky, what am I going to do with you.”

“I guess this means Fischer held off on his threat,” said Arthur. “Or he made it and it didn’t matter.”

Eames paused in mid-bounce and frowned. “No, it would definitely matter,” he said. “Maybe he’s just putting it off.” He shuddered. “I don’t want to think of it if I don’t have to,” he said. “Things have worked out so far, haven’t they?”

Arthur’s expression must have been dubious, because Eames did that thing where he poked the corner of Arthur’s mouth, where his dimple should have been. He stepped in and wrapped his other arm around Arthur’s waist, cupping Arthur’s cheek. His eyes, up close, were almost distractingly pretty, and Arthur had to duck his head to keep from blushing. He wasn’t remotely used to the novelty of Eames’ attractiveness. He didn’t think he ever could be.

“It’s amazing,” Eames said. “I can actually see you overthinking things by the second.”

“It’s what I do,” said Arthur blandly.

“And you do it so beautifully,” said Eames. “But doesn’t it get exhausting?” Arthur raised an eyebrow at him. Eames sighed. “Look,” he said. “I think I know how you probably feel about discussing the future, but I don’t want anything to change, do you?” He leaned his head against Arthur’s shoulder. “I mean, apart from the lovely scenery, I don’t think anything has to.”
A dozen responses to that sprang into Arthur’s throat, foremost of which was, *You have to leave the country in a month and you have an ex-boyfriend trying to blackmail you for a dark past you won’t tell me about and also you’re rich and famous and I have no idea what you’re even doing with me and you wrote my name in the sand and I’m terrified.*

Instead he just swallowed and choked out, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Good!” said Eames, patting him on the back and separating from him, leaving Arthur with a pang and a wish for an excuse to do more cuddling. “Even though I hate to leave this place, we can always come back some day, you know? If we can stand the fifteen-hour plane ride.”

“You know you could charter a faster jet,” said Arthur.

“Yes, darling,” said Eames, “But you wouldn’t like me nearly as much if I were that kind of actor.” He kissed Arthur again, heedless of morning breath or bedhead or any of the things that Arthur had previously spent weeks being needlessly paranoid about. “And I’m trying very hard to be the kind of actor you like.”

“Just be yourself,” said Arthur blankly.

“The boy with no past,” said Eames.

“If that’s who you are,” said Arthur. “I think we’ve established that Oscar and I don’t care.”

Eames smiled at him, then looked away. “Arthur, Arthur,” he said, looking out over the beach with an expression that reminded him of Mahendra, the night before—her unspoken secrets and the way she expected the ocean to keep them safe. “You don’t—” he started, and then trailed off.

Arthur watched him for a moment longer, waiting for him to speak. At last the silence was interrupted, this time by the buzzing of Arthur’s phone, again. Arthur squeezed Eames’ hand and went inside to turn his phone off, leaving Eames to stand and watch the sea.

Eames’ insistence on flying regular air meant that they had to stopover in Dubai for a couple of hours on the flight back, adding to an already long trip. Normally, Arthur wouldn’t have minded, but customs was a nightmare, and plenty of people in the crowded airport stopped them and asked them both for autographs and pictures, delaying them even more until Eames registered Arthur’s growing discomfort and allowed the security he had hired to whisk them away from his fans and off to the seclusion of a private airline lounge.

“They wanted my autograph, too,” Arthur said, when he finally lay sprawled next to Eames in an unfairly comfortable first class seat with his legs stretched out and his head on Eames’ shoulder. “Why did they want my autograph?” It wasn’t the first time; back in London, every now and then fans would ask for his, too, when he and Eames were out, or when they recognized him behind the counter of his shop; but this felt different somehow—as if he, Arthur, were a celebrity, too.

Eames shrugged. Then he yawned. “Dunno. Apparently we were a Twitter trend yesterday, can you imagine? Lots of pictures of the two of us while on vacation flooding the tabloids and gossip blogs, I expect.”

“What,” said Arthur blankly. His *dad* used Twitter. And people he knew from college. Arthur didn’t exactly understand what was so significant about a trend—the Robie House twitter account had gotten up to 1500 followers or so before he left for the Maldives, but he mostly let Ariadne handle all of that stuff—but it *sounded* significant.

“I think word broke that I was playing Bucky last night and somehow that led to people speculating
about the two of us,” Eames said. He sounded unconcerned, but he wasn’t looking in Arthur’s direction, and, oh, it was scary how Arthur could read him.

He sat up. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Eames looked at him and winced. “Nothing,” he said. “Just that Prianka and Martin think we need extra security at Heathrow.”

“What?” Arthur asked. His throat suddenly felt dry. “Have you been getting threats or—”

“Oh, no, darling, no, nothing like that,” said Eames, cupping the back of Arthur’s head and thumbing the base of Arthur’s neck. “Just something about all the publicity we’ve been getting.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, leaning into Eames’ touch. “Is that all?”

He let his head rest on Eames’ shoulder again and promptly slept the ten hour flight back to London.

At Heathrow, airport security escorted them off the plane and through a side-entrance to customs, Eames’ phone buzzing the whole time until finally he got one of his bodyguards on the line.

“They’re taking us round to our car directly,” Eames said to Arthur over the tinny sound of whoever was on the other end of the call. “Apparently someone leaked our flight schedule and there’s a mob outside. This way is still a disaster, we still have to go through the terminal, but at least it’s shorter.”

“But why?” said Arthur. “What about our bags?”

“Martin’s bringing them through customs,” said Eames. “We’re to meet him there. Prianka’s got security waiting on us at the gate.” He sighed heavily. "I’m sorry for this, Arthur." He kept his hand in Arthur’s and held it fast, so tightly Arthur barely understood what was wrong until they retrieved their bags, came through customs, and met up with Prianka and the additional bodyguards Eames had hired.

"Arthur," Eames said just before they rounded the corner to the terminal, "put your sunglasses on."

"Why?" asked Arthur. "They'll recognize us anyway."

Eames shook his head. "Not so they won't know you," he said. "To protect your eyes." He slipped on his own, and...shifted: into a creature of granite, with a face carefully devoid of expression; into someone Arthur didn’t recognize at all.

Something cold curled a fist into Arthur’s chest, and he fumbled for his sunglasses. And then they were at the terminal and two hundred flashbulbs exploded in Arthur’s face.

He staggered. Could not see, did not know where to go, felt someone pulling him forward into the mass, a surging wave of people and sound and light. Someone grabbing his shoulder—a bodyguard—Eames tightening his grip on his hand until it hurt. Cameras in his face like fireworks, yelling, pushing, he couldn’t move, someone yelling his name, "Eames, Eames, tell us bout Fischer!"—flashbulbs, tugging, shoving, Eames’ hand slipping from his grasp, stumbling, a girl with tears in her eyes, her arm outstretched, the fleece of Eames’ pullover stretching and slipping from her fingertips, "Are you living together?"—security jostling him, a bullhorn, “Arthur do you have any comment—” sunglasses knocked from his face, hands on his arms, at his waist, in his hair, Arthur couldn’t breathe, couldn’t turn off the lights, couldn’t hear over the roar of people calling Eames’ name, couldn’t find Eames, couldn’t see the exit, couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe—
Eames, his stone face, finding Arthur's hand again, crushing it, tugging him, bodyguards pushing him, an exit, sliding doors, air, thank god, another throng of people on the pavement, Prianka shouting curse words, "—the nature of your relationship with Robert Fischer?"—a car, the doors opening, a hand pushing his head down, into the dark, inside, the roar of silence, muted flashes of light still bursting beyond the tinted windows, Eames' face white and close.

"Jesus, Arthur, Arthur, are you alright? I'm sorry, fuck—"

"Eames, get back, give him some room." Prianka, suit wrinkled, beads of sweat, voice cool. "He's having a panic attack, he needs space."

"I'm fine," Arthur said. His voice croaked. He could feel all at once the heat in his face, the rush of embarrassment.

"Here," said Prianka, producing a bottle of water from nowhere, still leaning well away from him. "Drink this." She thrust one at Eames, too, who took it and drank it weakly from his new perch in the opposite corner of the limo, watching Arthur with a stricken face. Outside security was still yelling, the car shaking as bags were shoved into the trunk. Prianka watched Arthur while he dutifully guzzled water. She had a radio but she ignored it while the other members of the security team crackled in the background. When he had drained the bottle she held out her hand for it, then passed him another.

"I'm so sorry, Arthur," said Eames, sounding wrecked.

Arthur took a long swig of his second bottle of water, which was the ridiculously overpriced kind movie stars drank. "You could have warned me," he said. He suddenly felt very calm.

"I tried," said Eames.

"You could have been a bit more explicit," said Arthur.

"No one can warn you for that," Eames said roughly, running a hand through his hair. "I hired extra security, I did everything I could, you never know how bad it's going to be, sometimes it just happens—"

"That was an ambush," said Arthur. "You let them ambush me, for—what, so I'd know how it felt?"

"What? For fuck’s sake, Arthur, I didn't know what it would be like and I didn’t want to worry you for no reason," said Eames. "I didn't know, I didn't think—and if we'd gone on separate flights or something it would have been a huge scandal and they'd've just followed us around for weeks wanting to know if we'd fought."

"No," said Arthur, clenching his fist around his bottle of water, which crumpled with a loud crack. "You don't make that decision for me. You do not get to manage me and keep me in the dark just to mitigate bad press."

"I wasn't!" Eames said. "But there may be moments when expediency trumps sitting down and having a nice long talk about the pressures and expectations of fame, and I hope when that happens you'll trust me to handle it, because forgive me, but I do know how this works a little better than you."

"That's bullshit," Arthur exploded. "It's celebrity, not rocket science. Stop being such a goddamned martyr and talk to me once in a while."

"Oh, it's simple, is it?" said Eames. "Just because I don't remind you on a daily basis that, oh, by the
way, as I’m a bit famous, there may be people following you and watching your every waking
move, scrutinizing everything you do and wanting to know everything about you—really, Arthur?
You think that was easy, back there, going through that, watching you go through it, too, knowing it
never gets any easier, that from here on out they’ll never ever quite leave you alone? Don’t you think
if there was any possible way to prepare you for any of that, I would? What do you take me for?"

"An idiot!" Arthur snapped. “This is not the first time you’ve done this. It stops now. Give me an
actual reason to trust you instead of just expecting me to swoon and acquiesce.”

Eames started to reply, apparently thought better of it, and glared at the window instead. Prianka,
smooth as glass, handed him a second bottle of water when his first was finished, and despite his
anger and ebbing fear Arthur felt a rush of affection watching him take it like a surly teenager. Eames
took a swig, then another, and a stiff silence prevailed until Prianka's radio informed the driver that
Martin and two more guards were following them in another car, and the limo finally, mercifully,
pulled away from the curb.

Arthur leaned back against the cool leather and closed his eyes. A moment later he felt the seat give
beside him and a tentative touch against his hand. He ran his pinky over Eames' wrist without
opening his eyes.

“You’re right,” Eames said. "I'm sorry for not being open. And for not letting you have more
information so you could freak out in advance."

Arthur snorted. "Don't do it again," he said. He uncrumpled his crushed water bottle and took a long
drink.

Eames slipped his fingers into Arthur's and held them lightly for a moment. Outside, London rolled
past, refreshingly dreary, and Arthur suddenly missed home and his bookstore with a sharp pick of
longing. He had no idea where they were headed, he realized. He'd let Eames arrange that, too. “I
guess,” he conceded, “I could have been paying more attention. Not very fair to you.”

Eames huffed. “Well,” he hedged. “No, not really.”

"Why was it so bad just now?" Arthur asked. "We've been all over London, nobody cared."

Eames sighed. Arthur didn't know when he'd lost his own sunglasses, but they, too, were gone.
"Penelope said there'd been a lot of interest in our vacation photos from the American press. When
the casting news got out it just jumped to the forefront of people's minds, I guess."

"Is that really all?" Arthur asked. “What was all that stuff about Fischer?"

Eames blinked. "I try not to listen to a mob of paps shouting things at me. What about Fischer?"

"She didn't tell you?" Arthur blinked. Prianka had this habit of slinking into the shadows until she
was called for whenever Arthur was around. He supposed it was a standard lesson they taught you in
bodyguard school—Advanced Celebrity Protection—but it never ceased to startle him.

Eames looked over at her. “Who, Penelope?” he asked. “Tell me what? If it’s about Fischer, I told
her after the press tour had wrapped on L'Hôpital that I was done with dealing with him, that I never
wanted to know when we were being mentioned together in the press. I told her it doesn’t concern us
until it does.”

“Well, it does,” Prianka said. “If she hasn’t told you yet she was probably waiting for a damn good
reason. Probably to verify the photos weren’t shopped.”
“Jesus,” said Eames, “What the fuck’s he done?”

“His father died last night,” Prianka said. “He was named the new CEO of Fischer-Morrow this morning. About two hours after that, TMZ got a leak of photos of the two of you together, allegedly on vacation in Bristol in 2006.”

For a moment the shocked silence in the limo was so thick it made Arthur’s ears ring. Eames’ face went so blank with surprise Arthur almost began to suspect he was having a panic attack.

After another moment, Eames swallowed with visible effort. “And that,” he said, tossing Arthur a brittle, sharp-edged smile, “is why we can’t always prepare for everything.”

“These photos aren’t explicit,” said Arthur, who’d already pulled them up. They were sharp, black and white, probably taken professionally. Eames was sitting on a riverbank and laughing at something Fischer had said. His smile was strained, but he was looking at Fischer, and their hands were interlocked. Arthur, to his surprise, didn’t feel jealous when he looked at it. He mostly just felt sad. “Fischer obviously hired someone and had these taken himself, then sat on them all this time.”

“That’s Fischer,” said Eames, waving the phone away when Arthur tried to show him. “I remember that day. It was a shithole and we fought the whole time. Nothing they photographed is real. He didn’t decide to forget about those threats. He’s just stretching it out, one public humiliation at a time.”

“What are you going to do?” Arthur asked.

“I—” Eames began, and stopped. “What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Tell the truth about whatever he’s got on you,” Arthur said.

“Not happening,” Eames said tersely, not looking Arthur in the eye.

“Then do nothing,” Arthur said, quelling his annoyance. “It happened almost six years ago. It doesn’t concern you at all.”

“Right, that’s the gist of it,” said Eames. “Probably Penelope’s feeling as well. Can you tell her that’s the plan?” he added to Prianka. “Then she won’t have to call me later, and I can go to bed.”

“I’m not your publicist,” said Prianka, smoothing the pleats of her suit-jacket. “I don’t work for your publicist and I don’t speak for your publicist, and if you want me to speak to your publicist for you, you’ll have to give me a raise.”

“I believe you already make more than my publicist,” said Eames, “But you can have any kind of raise you want. Just handle it, please, because I want to make out with my boyfriend in the backseat of a limo before I have to give him back to his bookstore.”

Arthur grinned and ducked his head.

“God, this is officially a rom-com,” said Prianka. She gave Eames the most exaggerated eyeroll Arthur had ever seen and turned deliberately away to text Penelope Rider.

Eames beamed at Arthur, day-old scruff and bleary red-eye look and stale clothing, all of him beautiful.

“You’re dropping me off?” Arthur asked. “You could come back to my place.”
“Nah,” Eames said. “I’ve got too much contract work to do tomorrow, I need to be back in the hotel suite. And you’ve got the open house in three weeks, I don’t want to get in the way.”

Arthur refrained from responding that the open house felt like it might as well be three years away, for all the thought he’d given to it during the two weeks he was away. He wondered if he’d find the place transformed, if Ariadne had managed to work her magic in every nook and cranny.

Instead he said, “Better not lose any time, then,” and leaned in to kiss Eames, deep and lush, pressing him into the leather upholstery, losing himself in Eames’ mouth and trying not to think about anything at all until the car finally pulled up before a tiny bookshop in Notting Hill.

“You keeping Christmas hours already?” said Eames when they finally pried themselves apart. Arthur turned. It was past well past nine in the evening, probably going on ten, but there were lights on all over the new wing of the store.

“Construction,” said Arthur. “I don’t know why they’re working so late.”

The paps who’d diligently followed them all the way from the airport prevented Eames from getting out of the limo. The security held them at bay when Arthur got out and got his luggage, but the camera flashes were really fucking annoying, and Arthur told them so.

“Welcome back from vacation, mate,” called one of them, snapping his picture.

“Jerk,” Arthur muttered. He dug out his keys from the bottom of his backpack and stepped inside the Robie House, legs suddenly wooden, eyes suddenly barely open.

The work lights from the antique store addition cast an eerie light into the room, but apart from the long shadows of the bookshelves, everything looked just as it had when he left. Even the window display was the same. Arthur was mildly disappointed. He peered into the work room. Sawdust and construction tarp was everywhere. Ariadne’s whiteboard had been moved to the second floor, conveniently perched by her prized new alcove. It had considerably more red markers and angry emoticons than it had when Arthur left.

A lone workman was sanding wood on a sawhorse in the middle of the room, while two more were hammering nails into a new bookshelf apparently taking shape out of what used to be the outer wall.

“Hey,” he said to the worker by the sawhorse. “Why are you here so late?”

“Foreman’s got us here until ten every night this week,” said the man, dusting the sawdust off his pants. “Orders from the architect. She usually stays here to manage things and lock up after we leave but she said she couldn’t stick around tonight, said you’d be back.”

Arthur nodded. “Go home,” he said. “I’ll talk to her tomorrow, make sure you aren’t overworked.”

The man cast him a skeptical look. “This has a project deadline in three weeks, yeah?”

“I’ll handle it,” said Arthur. “Go get some sleep. I am.”

He killed the overhead lights and locked up after they left. As he looked around, he couldn’t really tell what kind of progress they had made during the two weeks he’d been gone. He supposed he should have been asking Ariadne for pictorial updates or something, but it hadn’t really occurred to him—just as it hadn’t really occurred to him to keep an eye on Eames’ publicity issues. He hadn’t been paying attention.

Not that anyone could blame him.
Tomorrow, he thought, stumbling upstairs to bed. He’d get caught up tomorrow.

He kicked his shoes off and fell into bed without bothering to change clothes, divebombing straight into a pillow.

He fell asleep to the constant pinprick of flashbulbs exploding behind his eyes.

The next morning, Arthur awoke to the blissful sounds of lorry honks and cars on asphalt. He drifted for a few moments in cheery confusion, enjoying the wispy threads of his dreams and the jarring but welcome intrusion of London traffic upon his sleep as he tried to remember where he was and why there was no warm body curled up next to him. He lay still for a moment, waiting for the memory to come, and then it wafted over him: the smell of bound leather and aging paper. He was home again in Notting Hill.

He dragged himself from beneath the covers and forced his feet to meet the cold floor. He missed the warm sunshine of Villingili, and the heat of Eames at his back, and he still felt as if he were lying on the beach dipped in sand. He fumbled for his phone and stared at the time for a few seconds, trying to figure out if 11:09 was a good number. Was that early? What day was it again? He could hear a faint murmur below his feet, like the rattle of a nearby train, and it took him a moment to work out that it was the sound of people moving about beneath him. Another moment and he worked out that meant the store must be open. What time did the store open on Saturday? No, wait, today was Monday. Ten. No, nine. He opened his store at 9:00 am sharp every morning.

Shit. He was 2 hours late.

Moments later, he was brutally savaging his gums with his toothbrush while the tepid water of his shower doused him fully awake, when it occurred to him that if he wasn’t downstairs to open the store, there shouldn’t have been people milling about. If there were people milling about, that could only mean that someone had opened the store. Without his knowledge or permission.

He was going to kill Ariadne.

He slipped and nearly collided into the wall in his haste to scramble out of the shower and into his clothes. He tugged on the first thing he came to, which worked out to a pair of flannel sweats and an oversized t-shirt he immediately realized belonged to Eames. He stumbled downstairs, acutely aware of the way Eames’ cologne still clung to the edges of the fabric, the way it practically swallowed him even though they were almost the same size apart from muscle mass. Did Eames slip it in Arthur’s suitcase when Arthur wasn’t looking? Maybe he’d wear it over to Eames’ hotel later and—

Sunlight caught him in the eyes as he reached the landing of the stairs up to his flat, and he stopped short in shock. The landing opened on to the second floor catwalk of Arthur’s bookstore—or at least it had two weeks ago. Now, with the exception of the bookshelf he’d briefly glimpsed last night, the entire wall of the landing was gone.

In its place was open space connecting the Robie house to his newly-purchased antique store. Dust motes spiraled everywhere in the radiant morning light of the skylights newly installed overhead. The construction workers were back—they’d apparently been at it for hours, because the din of table saws and Sanders had been Arthur’s soundtrack ever since he woke up. But instead of relying on the scaffolding or teetering along the narrow catwalk, they were working atop a completely new second floor. They’d torn out the catwalk and completely replaced it with a wider second level, still open in the center, supported with long, hefty broadbeams that now criss-crossed the length of the entire
building. It was less a second floor and more like a broad thoroughfare around the building, one story up. It extended from the new wing into the old wing, and Arthur didn’t know how he’d missed all of this last night. He’d peered into the new room the night before, but he’d kicked out the contractors and gone straight upstairs to bed without even stopping to check on the bookstore.

And from below, his view obscured by the scaffolding all around, he hadn’t been able to see the extent of Ariadne’s miracle-working: where the divider wall used to be, about six feet below the second-floor landing where Arthur now stood, Ariadne had constructed an entirely separate loft space. She’d created a broad hardwood landing that cut a thick swathe right through the center of the new half of the building, in counterpoint to the giant crossbeams that criss-crossed above it. Wherever the new lower half-level ran into the supports for the second floor, she’d used the sides of the beams to brace thin shelves. In the wide spaces between Arthur saw chalk marks where coffee tables, chairs, sofas and yet more bookshelves would be.

He stood gaping at it. She’d just given him room for 50, 60 more customers. She’d promised him a whole new floor to work with and she’d done it, exactly as she said she would. He had no idea how Ariadne had replaced the catwalk in two weeks all without closing the store, but she’d done it. She must have hired two teams of contractors and unearthed a hitherto unknown talent for slavedriving, or else he was paying a fortune in overtime. Christ, he could hang a film screen at the far end of the room and have the perfect setup for a movie night with the second floor serving as a balcony, god, she’d thought of everything, he was going to give her the biggest Christmas bonus. It felt like Christmas already.

And then he turned around.

In the wing that belonged to the Robie House, customers were swarming all over the second floor.

No: customers were swarming everywhere.

Arthur’s jaw fell open and stayed there.

In the three years Arthur had owned the Robie House, the place had never been busy in the morning. Even after Eames’ interview, customers had trickled in slowly, or stayed long enough to justify having some complimentary coffee before leaving again. It had never been full before noon, much less packed the way it was now.

Arthur shuffled along the new, broader second-floor walkway, dazedly apologizing when a little kid ran into his legs and then kept going, zooming around the landing like an airplane. Then he bumped into a guy with a backpack whose arms were full of books on zoology. There were easily twenty people lining the walkway upstairs. He couldn’t even get a headcount on the number of people downstairs.

He took it all in, unsure what he was feeling, and then his eyes landed on the three people currently browsing his Buckminster Fuller collection, and he realized that what he was feeling was horror.

It was gone. His Buckminster Fuller collection was gone. Well, okay, not gone, but ransacked, books missing and stacked in messy piles, rearranged, pilfered through. Arthur’s heart thuddered in his chest for a moment. Oh, god, had he inventoried all those titles? Had he inventoried any of those titles? He hadn’t ever expected people to buy them. How would he ever replace the collection? His thoughts turned to his painstakingly cultivated shelf of three-word-titles next, and he was halfway down the stairs to the first floor in a growing panic before he remembered that the store wasn’t even supposed to be open without him.

He maneuvered his way past the customers on the lower level—he was right, the three-word-title
collection was equally decimated; they’d taken everything, even *Sex, Drugs & Gefilte Fish: The Heeb Storytelling Collection*—and to the register.

“Can I help you?”

Arthur had never seen the girl behind the counter before. She was seated on Arthur’s favorite swivel stool, and she didn’t look up from the computer. Arthur saw that the screen was open to a page of spreadsheets. It took him another moment to realize it was his inventory records.

He coughed politely and she looked up. “Oh,” she said, pushing her dark hair back from her shoulders and straightening. “Are you Arthur?”

“One and the same,” he said, trying to sound friendly.

She broke into a wide smile. “You’re back!” she said. “Great to meet you, finally!”

“Sorry,” said Arthur. “Am I supposed to know you?”

Her face fell. “I’m Ji-min,” she said. “I’m the new assistant.” Arthur stared. “You can call me Jia?” she tried again. “Ariadne said she told you I was coming.”

“No she—” Arthur thought of the many messages Ariadne had left him, still sitting on his phone. He hadn’t gotten around to listening to them yet.

“She said she told you to hire an assistant before you left, but you didn’t so she had to do it herself,” said Jia. “Oh, wow, you didn’t hire someone else instead, did you?”

Arthur shook his head slowly. Jia beamed at him again. “Good,” she said, “because I already told all my friends how great this place is, and I don’t want to have to look for another job, at least not til after Christmas.” She motioned to the shop full of people. “Though between you and me, I don’t think this place is gonna slow down any time soon.”

“I,” said Arthur. “You opened the shop?”

“Oh, yeah!” said Jia. “I’ve been opening it for the last two weeks. She hired me for part-time work during the afternoons three days a week, but she asked if I could swing by in the mornings, just til you got back. But it’s okay, she researched all my references and everything so she knows I’m trustworthy. Business has been pretty steady but after all those photos came out of you and Eames on vacation—” she broke off and whistled. “I guess you had a good time, huh?”

“What?” said Arthur.

“You were all over Tumblr,” she said. “That was so weird. There was this whole wank about how people should respect your privacy because you weren’t a public figure, but a few people were like, but he’s already in the tabloids, plus he hangs out with movie stars, and that’s what you get when you date Eames, and then this other person was like—”

“Sorry,” said Arthur again. “Do you have the inventory records for the Buckminster Fuller collection?”

“Oh, totes,” said Jia. “Ariadne called me and Ty and Jorby and Manuel in last week to do a massive emergency inventory because your records were, well.” She sighed. “She bought us pizza and we had item-tagging contests.” She sighed. “She’s amazing.”

Jia raised her eyebrows. “He’s one of the MIND kids. Ariadne asked them to send us an extra one because she didn’t want Ty and Jorby to get overloaded before their mid-terms, so they’re alternating the days of the week.”

Arthur said, “Oh.”

Jia frowned. “You okay?”


“Um, sure,” she said. “There’s gonna be a huge line later, though, and, oh, hey, we almost ran out of coffee this morning so I ordered some more, I hope that’s okay?”

“That’s—sure, fine,” said Arthur. “I just have to—”

And then he left.

When he got to the Goring, where Eames was staying, he’d been expecting to have to barter his way past security in case there was a Royal staying there or something. Instead, the concierge took one look at him and sent a bellhop hurrying over to ask if there was anything they could do for Mr. L—and let him know that he could go right up to the executive suite where Eames was staying. In the lobby, someone snapped his picture, and in the elevator the girl standing next to him took a selfie with him prominently in the background. By the time he actually knocked on Eames’ door, he was weirded out and grouchy and mildly confused.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t a feeling that went away when Eames opened the door. “Arthur,” he said, clearly surprised. “Come in, come in. Thought you were dying to get back to your bookstore.” He was wearing a terry cloth bathrobe from the hotel that hung open over his boxers, and Arthur immediately wanted to nudge it off of him. But that wasn’t happening, because Eames had a bound looseleaf script in his hand.

“No bodyguards?” Arthur asked, coming into the room. Papers were spread out on the fancy writing desk by the window—he guessed those were the contracts Eames needed to sign for the Buckminster Fuller film. On the sofa was a large box, and inside it, as far as Arthur could tell, were more drafts of scripts like the one Eames was holding.

“Nah,” said Eames. “After all that business yesterday, I figured everyone deserved a day off. Wasn’t planning on going out since I knew you’d be busy with the shop, and I had paperwork, and...” he trailed off. Arthur glanced up at him and saw his expression going all slanty. He frowned.

“And what?” he asked.

Eames hesitated. Then he dog-eared the script he was holding, closed it, and passed it to Arthur, who saw that there was a post-it note on the front. In a lazy print scrawl, it read:

*You can have your pick. You know what to do. —R*

A chill ran over Arthur. “Is this from Fischer?” he asked. “Are all those in that box from Fischer?”

Eames looked as though he very much wanted to reply differently, but he winced and nodded.
“No way,” said Arthur. “No. Why are you reading them? Why not just send the box back unopened?”

“Arthur, they’re scripts,” Eames said, a note of glee entering his voice despite the apologetic look he sent Arthur. He ran his hand longingly over the title page of the one in Arthur’s hand. “He just wants me to read them, see if there’s a project that piques my fancy. It’s harmless.”

“It’s not,” said Arthur. “You’ve already told him you don’t want to work with him again. He needs to respect that.”

“He just inherited one of the biggest studios in Hollywood, Arthur, I doubt he’s thinking about much more than wooing the best talent he can find back to the fold.” Eames sat down next to the box and started fidgeting. He looked uncomfortable. “If I like one of the scripts, all it means is that I could open negotiations with the studio. It doesn’t mean I have to work with Fischer directly. Hell, he’ll probably be too busy trying to fill his father’s shoes to remember that I exist.”

“He wasn’t too busy to take secret photos of the two of you together, sit on them for six years, and then release them when he thought they would help convince you to give him what he wants without hurting himself,” Arthur said. He was aware that he sounded a little frosty. Eames tensed.

“Arthur, I do appreciate that this all looks a little...” he waved his hand, as if that could encompass the discovery that an ex-boyfriend had just leaked revenge photos onto the Internet six years after you were together. “It’s not as if there’s anything to be jealous of. These scripts are more like a peace offering, if anything—”

“He’s manipulating you,” Arthur said flatly. “I’m not jealous. I’m upset because you don’t realize it.”

Eames frowned. “It’s not that simple,” he said, and for the hundredth time Arthur wondered what on earth Eames had in his past that he was so desperate to keep buried—what it was that could give someone like Fischer such a hold on him.

Wondered, but didn’t ask.

“Shouldn’t you be reading the script for your next film?” he asked instead.

Eames brightened. He stopped drumming his fingers against his shin and settled back against the sofa cushions. “Haven’t got it yet,” he said. “Won’t til my agent finalizes the contracts and sends them to the studio later today. Besides, production doesn’t start for another six weeks, plenty of time to learn lines.”

“Six weeks?” Arthur blinked down at him.

Eames blinked back. “January 16.”

“But that’s...” Arthur trailed off. It wasn’t soon, exactly; but it was a deadline, a looming reminder that this surely couldn’t last. “That’s not long after Christmas.”

“Oh,” said Eames. “That reminds me.” He stretched up and took Arthur’s hand, tugging him down to lean over the back of the sofa. “I was wondering if you’d like to come back to Hollywood with me for the holidays. Give us a little more time to be together before the production starts.”

“Would... wouldn’t we be together after?” Arthur faltered.

Eames blanched. “Oh, darling, no, I’m not breaking up with you,” he said. “But they’re going to need me at the studio and I just assumed you’d have to be here.”
At Arthur’s blank stare, he added, “To run the bookshop.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, slightly surprised that the thought hadn’t even occurred to him. “Right. Yeah.”

“Why aren’t you over there?” asked Eames. He ran his thumb over Arthur’s knuckles. Arthur shivered. “Is anything wrong?”

“No,” said Arthur. “Of course not.”

“How is it?” Eames asked. “How’s the space? Did Ariadne work miracles? Did you take pictures?”

“Couldn’t,” said Arthur. “There were a lot of people there.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it? It bodes well for your remodel. And the open house, of course.”

“No, yeah, it does,” said Arthur. He swallowed. “I guess it was just a lot... after yesterday...”

Eames’ face fell. “I’m so sorry about yesterday.”

“Eames, it’s fine,” said Arthur. “You already apologized, don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“No, but I should have chartered a private plane,” said Eames. “I know how it can get, and I know what a hermit you are. I was an idiot.”

Arthur pulled away and stuck his hands awkwardly in his pockets. “Yeah, well, if you’d talked to me about it, I’d’ve told you that was a ridiculous idea.”

“Well,” Eames said, raising his eyebrows, “hypothetical me shouldn’t listen to hypothetical you. You can’t even be in your own bookstore when it’s a little crowded. You shouldn’t have to deal with a mob of people, at least not unprepared.”

Arthur laughed. It started out as a nervous bark, but then gripped him and kept going. Eames stared at him. Arthur laughed harder. “I can’t—” he gasped when he found a breath—”I can’t deal with crowds but I’m expanding. I can’t deal with the press so I’m dating a movie star. Celebrities make me nervous so I’m throwing them a party.” He bent over the side of the sofa and pressed his forehead into the plush cushion. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe evenly.

A moment later he felt Eames stroking the top of his head.

“Arthur,” he said softly, “You started all of this because I came into your bookstore that day back in April. If it’s not what you really want, then you don’t have to do it, any of it.”

Arthur shook his head. “No, I do,” he said. “I do want it. At least—a part of me does.”

“And the rest of you wants to run away in terror,” said Eames.

Arthur cracked open one eye and squinted at him. “Did you really steal a Fragonard?” he asked.

“I do know a thing or two about trying to become someone you’re not,” Eames said. “On top of doing it for a living, I used to be a scared kid who would do anything to hide the fact I was queer. I kept to myself, didn’t have any friends at all til I got to Royal Dram. Outside my family, I was a scared, jumpy little rabbit.”

Arthur refrained from observing that Eames was still pretty jumpy. “So what changed?”

Eames shifted to rest his chin on his arms next to where Arthur was leaning over the sofa.
“People weren’t meant to live in caves and rabbit holes,” he said softly. “Not even the ones we make for ourselves.”

“You think I came all the way to London to build myself a cave?” Arthur asked.

“I think you’ve been building something amazing,” Eames replied. “Something that’s all your own.”

“Did you like it when you first saw it?” Arthur asked. “The bookshop? Would you have even given us a second thought if you hadn’t been put on the spot? If I hadn’t given you that Bradbury copy?”

Eames tilted his head and slowly crept his fingers over to nudge Arthur’s chin. “Remember when I asked you why you named it the Robie House, and you told me it was because Frank Lloyd Wright said that it all went together, the furnishings and the architecture? How you liked the idea of a space where the books and the shelves and the building they were in were all part of the package?”

Arthur nodded. Eames fingers trailed up his jawline.

“Well,” Eames continued, “You’re a part of that, too. I might not have remembered the books, by themselves, or the building, by itself. But put them together with the pleasant, soft-spoken bookstore owner in the “Call me Trim Tab” t-shirt who gave me a rare book for free and signed it for me—I’ll remember all of that forever.”

Arthur stared at him. His heart had started thumping heavily in his chest.

“You remember how you signed it?” Eames asked him.


Eames smiled at him, then hopped off the sofa and went into the bedroom of the suite. When he emerged, Arthur saw that he was holding the beloved copy of *Switch on the Night*, its carefully nurtured cover and pages looking just the same as they had when Arthur last saw them half a year earlier.

“Told you it lived with me,” Eames said. He crossed to the sofa and leaned next to Arthur. “This,” he said, opening the front pages. Inside, opposite the title, Arthur had written his inscription. “You said, ‘from Arthur,’ here, but you signed it as the Robie House. You’re a part of each other.”

Arthur looked down at the book. He smoothed the page, thumbed the ink of his inscription. He couldn’t utter a word.

“I don’t expect you to adopt some kind of celebrity lifestyle, Arthur,” Eames said. “You could have stayed in Boston if you wanted to play rich kid. I don’t expect you to come with me to California. But I do expect people to want to see more of you, more of the Robie House, without any of that. They may have come to start with because I told them about the place, sure. But they kept coming back, they told their friends, they followed you on Twitter, because they loved what they saw of you once they stepped inside.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. He thought of Mal, coming in one afternoon and then returning almost every day since. All this time he’d thought she’d felt slightly sorry for him. Maybe she had; but then again, maybe she’d just really liked his bookstore.

“I should… I should go back,” he said. “I left Jia all alone and out of coffee.”

“Who’s that?”
“Ariadne hired an assistant for me.”

“Well thank god someone’s looking after you,” Eames said, pulling him into a kiss.

“I do want to come with you,” Arthur told him when they were done making out a few highly pleasurable minutes later. “I mean, for the holidays. If you want.”

“I do want,” said Eames. “But you’re going to be busy after the open house.”

“I know,” said Arthur. “But it’ll be okay without me for a few weeks. Hell, I came back from vacation and it’s doing better than ever.”

“Ariadne really did earn that raise,” Eames said. “How is she, by the by? Stressed?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I haven’t talked to her,” Arthur said.

“Tell her I said hello,” Eames said. “Sure you don’t want to stay and help me read scenes? There’s one in the pile called Dungeons and Demons.” He leered. “I’ll let you be the demon.”

Arthur laughed and declined. He’d leave Eames alone about Fischer for now, he decided. Whatever game Eames was playing with him, he obviously seemed to think it wasn’t anything that concerned Arthur.

And if Arthur were being honest with himself, it wasn’t.

Arthur tried to focus on his work. He honestly did. For the next week, he armed Jia with coffee in the mornings, and wore earplugs when he wasn’t helping customers to drown out the noise of the construction. He even locked himself in his office and tried to learn the seamless inventory system Ariadne had created in his absence.

But the crowds kept coming, and when they weren’t making him nervous by buying his books they were surreptitiously snapping photos of the store and of his wary face behind the counter.

A few days after his arrival, Kate Winslet met Mal and Philippa there to drop off Joe for a playdate, and even though it was mid-afternoon, when normally fewer people were around, she and her son had to fight through a small mob of autograph-hunters to get past the front of the store.

“At this rate you won’t actually need to have an open house at all,” she laughed, cutting off Arthur’s apology after he finally forced everyone to scatter. “You may need to hire security for this place.”

Before Arthur could wrap his head around what hiring security might involve, it happened: a short girl in a checkered cap and a trainee uniform showed up the next afternoon. “Your assistant said you needed someone part-time,” she said. “I got a flyer from the police academy. Called yesterday and she told me to show up.”

Arthur stared at her. He’d been meaning to ask Ariadne why she was hiring people without talking to him, but the truth was that he hadn’t actually seen her since he got back. By one or two every day Arthur usually had to leave because he’d had all he could take of the combination of saw dust, construction noise, crowds, and the disarray of his carefully arranged bookshelves. Ariadne had taken to leaving him frazzled Post-its on his desk barking out instructions like “Decide caterer” and “Mail zoning permits!” and once, just, “FLOWERS!” underlined three times without explanation. He was starting to think of her as less assistant and more a fairy who breezed by while he was looking the other direction and left gifts in the form of paperwork and a steadily climbing number of
unanswered voice mails.

And part-time security, apparently. He looked at the girl. “You’re here to work security?” he asked. She nodded, flicking him an unimpressed look from underneath her police academy cap.

“But you nearly stole a book from me a few months ago,” Arthur said. “I gave you Biological Exuberance instead.”

“Yeah,” said the girl, without changing her expression.

He stared at her. She stared back.

“Your touching act of kindness made me see the error of my ways and put me on the path to redemption?” she volunteered after a long moment.


“You’re a bit weird,” she said, stepping through the doorway. “You should really move that display case and unblock this entryway, it’s a fire hazard according to Section 3 of the building regulations.”

Arthur walked to the bookshelf she was pointing at and dropped his head against it with a thud.

One of the customers snapped his photo.

Mal took to helping his MIND kids reshelve in the afternoon whenever she stopped by. “Should I be paying you?” Arthur asked her one day.

She cast him a dark look. “You’d never afford my benefits. Besides, you’re already paying me.”

“I am?”

She nodded. “Unless you want your guests to be staring at blank walls and no furniture, you need an interior designer after the workmen have left.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Are you offering your services?”

“I’m not exactly volunteering,” Mal said, watching him carefully. “I am very busy, you know.”

“I know,” Arthur said enthusiastically, wondering what she was driving at.

“But I do favors for my friends,” she said. “When they ask me nicely.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Mal, would you please—”

“Not you,” Mal said, cutting him off with a wave of her hand. “Ariadne already asked.”

“Of course she did,” Arthur muttered. Mal squinted at him for a moment before returning to the decimated display shelf of Carl Sagan and Neil DeGrasse Tyson.

In the months before Eames had wandered into his life, Arthur used to knock off work sharply at 6:00 unless there were still customers in the store. Sometimes he would retreat upstairs to the sanctity of his bedroom. Sometimes, if Ariadne had been working that day, Arthur would buy her dinner or let her drag him to a nearby happy hour. If Mal was there the three of them would knock off early and head over to Mal’s favorite French cafe.

After Eames had changed everything, after the remodeling and the new hires and the part-time high
schoolers and the art students and their window displays, Arthur had still tried to keep to this schedule as much as possible. But it had gradually gotten harder. Now, ever since returning from the Maldives, he’d been seizing any opportunity he could to leave earlier and earlier. He and Ariadne’s ships passed in the night; Mal stayed late to help Ariadne and the part-timers whenever she could. Mal didn’t ask him for his opinion on her interior design choices, which was fine with Arthur. What he wanted least of all at the moment was another decision to make.

For the first time since he moved to London, Arthur found himself in the bizarre position of seeking out the rest of the city in order to hide from the Robie House, instead of the other way around.

He felt as though he still had sea legs from his vacation; when he stood still too long, the heat of the crowds in his store, the din of the construction, and the thought of the to-do lists he still needed to cross off for the open house all threatened to overwhelm him. He wondered if he should cancel the open house; if he should call off the construction and clear out the crowds flocking to the shop; if he should flee the premises and let someone else deal with the pressure of having a bookstore that actually sold books.

But every night when he returned to Notting Hill, the construction workers had made considerably more progress, the new rooms looked ever more polished, and Ariadne’s design wove itself ever more fully into the space. And as the construction entered its final days, more and more of Mal's interior design began to appear: cut paper light fixtures extending from the high ceilings; a shadowbox of Paris at night, glowing in Ariadne’s much-coveted alcove; a Stieglitz print just for Arthur; a carefully stenciled black-and-white cityscape along one wall, growing taller and more labyrinthine each day, detailed and intricate and like no city on earth that Arthur could name.

Maybe, just maybe, they would pull this off yet.

Generally, when he left for the day, he inevitably found himself heading to Eames’ hotel. He knew it was maybe a little clingy, but honestly Arthur didn’t see any reason not to get in as much one-on-one time as he could with Eames if Eames was going to be leaving the city in another month anyway.

Eames, however, had different ideas. After he’d finished reading all Fischer’s scripts, he was restless and fidgety, wanting to be out of doors instead of in.

“One of my friends is having a party at the place he’s rented,” he said to Arthur a few days after they’d been back. “Nothing too big, just some people in town. We should go. Robyn’s going to be there and she might do a song or two.”

“Friend?” said Arthur, made dubious by the too-innocent tone of Eames’ voice.


“Oh,” said Arthur. “Well, that doesn’t seem too bad,” he said. “I can probably handle James Franco.”

Arthur could not handle James Franco.

“Was he flirting with me or with himself?” he spluttered to Eames as they left. “He kept going on and on about soap-making! He kept calling you Maestro! He kept greeting me! He kept offering me vaporized pot! I think he spiked my martini!”

“Arthur, Arthur,” said Eames soothingly, touching his elbow as they dodged the paps waiting outside Franco’s party near their limo. “Breathe. You’re in a Franco-free zone now.”
“He invited me to come on a Nepalese backpacking trip with him! A soap-making, pot-vaping trip!”

“He’d’ve instantly regretted upon realizing that no amount of Nepalese backpacking can make you zen enough to use inferior soap,” Eames said, leaning in and nuzzling his neck. Arthur harumphed at him but arched his neck. He’d all but closed his eyes before he registered the presence of Eames’ bodyguard, Martin, sitting awkwardly in the corner of the limo, eyes averted.

He knew it was foolish to be bothered about being watched, but he couldn’t help going still and pulling away from Eames. “Hi,” he said.

Eames looked over at Martin. “You know, no offense, Martin, but I hardly even notice you and Prianka anymore.”

“I have a bodyguard now, too, you know,” Arthur told Martin. “She steals things from me.”

“I think maybe he did lace your martini,” Eames said, failing to stifle a laugh. Arthur glared at him.

“No more James Franco,” he said.

“No more,” Eames agreed. “How about a nice normal date next time, hmm?”

But normal had become impossible. Arthur had neatly avoided the photos people had taken of the two of them on vacation, largely by ignoring supermarket tabloids and the internet, but ever since their return to London, the crowd of paparazzi that had met them at the airport seemed to emerge whenever he and Eames went anywhere together. Eames was generally fine by himself, but whenever Arthur came along, the glare of cameras was omnipresent.

And it was getting worse for Arthur, too. Once two men came into the shop and hammered Arthur with questions about his sex life until his new security guard—he had eventually found out her name was Ursula—forced them outside, leaving him jittery and a little shaken and more than a little grateful that Ariadne had found her. When he called Eames to tell him about it, Eames sighed. “At least it’s a good thing you’re handling it so well,” he ventured.

“I’m not handling it well,” Arthur snapped. “They asked me about the size of your—”

“This is the kind of thing you have to deal with, Arthur,” Eames said. He sounded tired.

“I’m sorry my sexual harassment is annoying you,” Arthur said as blandly as he could.

“It’s not you I’m annoyed with, darling,” said Eames.

“Look, how about getting out of there and coming on a run with me, yeah? Hampstead Heath, just like last time. I’ll send the car round if you like.”

So Arthur left the bookshop at mid-morning and met Eames at the park, feeling gangly and awkward in his sweatsuit next to Eames’ full thighs and the way Eames’ shirt hugged his abs. As soon as they started Arthur realized his mistake: he was so hyper-aware of how scrawny and unattractive he must look compared to Eames that he could barely concentrate on anything else. After they’d jogged together for a minute or so, Arthur felt their companionable silence growing stiff. “Did you find anything you liked?” he tried. “Among the scripts?”

“Nope,” said Eames tersely.

“Oh,” said Arthur, realizing this was a horrible subject of conversation. “Have you gotten the shooting script for your film yet?”
“No, not yet,” said Eames. “Have you seen Ariadne yet?”

“No,” said Arthur. “Not yet.”

“You know she called me the other day, right?” Eames asked.

“You?” Arthur turned to gape at him and almost stumbled over a dip in the pavement. “Why?”

“She was trying to pin down a DJ for the party, wanted to know if I could help.”

“Why didn’t she talk to me if she was having issues?” Arthur asked. “She shouldn’t be calling you. Sorry, I’ll talk to her.”

Eames scoffed. “Oh, please, Arthur, she was just doing her job. She didn’t talk long, just told me what she needed. I told her I’d find someone amazing for you and made sure she knew I’d do anything I could to help.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, relaxing a little. The thought of having to pin Ariadne down for some kind of awkward talking-to wasn’t something he relished. “Thanks.”

Eames sent him a smile. “You should know that, too,” he said. He took a breath, then seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say.

“What is it?” Arthur asked.

Eames shot him a narrow look. “Arthur,” he began, “are you sure you’re not—”

“Oh, you have got to be shitting me,” Arthur blurted. They had rounded a turn along the pavement, and found themselves facing Highgate Road—and the horde of photographers gathered near the park entrance. Arthur slowed his steps and wondered if they could take a trail further into the park without being followed.

Next to him, Eames’ face flickered into that strange mask he’d worn that day at Heathrow. He touched Arthur gently on the elbow, soothing but firm. “Just smile and wave,” he said, and kept running.

So Arthur clenched his teeth, smiled, and waved.

He smiled and waved through the run, and through dinner that night, when Eames spontaneously decided to take him to Dabbous, which miraculously had a corner spot for them despite their notoriously long reservation list. The paparazzi that followed them from the hotel snapped pictures through the windows of the restaurant the whole time they were eating.

He smiled and waved when a group of fans came to the store en masse for a shopping trip. They smiled and waved back. “We’re fans of you both,” one of them told him at the register. “We met on a fan Tumblr for the both of you. You should totes check it out.”

“I totes will,” said Arthur, through gritted teeth.

He smiled and waved when the Guardian decided to send a reporter to the Robie House for an article. “I tried to make an appointment with your assistant, but she hung up on me,” the reporter told him, sounding annoyed.

“She does that,” Arthur answered, wondering how many times in a year he could give Ariadne a raise. “Don’t take it personally. Cost of fame, you know.”
“Right,” said the reporter.

He smiled and waved, and waved and smiled, and then somehow, miraculously, it was Thursday, one week before the open house, and the construction workers were all gone, and the furniture was arriving, and Arthur’s brand-new espresso machine sat behind the brand-new counter of his bookstore’s brand-new complimentary coffee kiosk, and Eames came over to help Arthur figure out how to make French roast, and someone snapped him wiping off Arthur’s foam mustache, and Arthur started the week before his open house by gracing the cover of the *Star*.

When he arrived back at the store the following Monday, someone had left his computer browser open to the *Guardian* website—specifically, to his article.

The Robie House’s owner Arthur L— has rapidly become a media darling after his relationship with Eames went public earlier this month. But inside the trendy science bookstore, it’s L— who holds everyone in thrall. To watch the nervous 28-year-old endlessly shelving and reshelving books amid the constant ebb and flow of unruly customers is to realize that fame doesn’t always come to the greedy. Despite his asperity and his clear annoyance at the intrusion of public life upon his quaint little bookshop, however, L— deploys a certain charm. It’s as if *Seinfeld*’s Soup Nazi sired a bright-eyed hipster who doles out anxious glances instead of public humiliation. We can see why Eames—and the customers—keep coming back for more.

Ask him whether his recent success has anything to do with his love life, however, and the charm instantly drops away.

“Of course it does,” L— snaps, obviously wearied of this conversation. “We’re an independent brick-and-mortar bookstore in the 21st century. A niche bookstore, even. We rely on miracles just like all the other bookshops out there.”

Before he can elaborate on precisely how miraculous Eames’ presence in his life has been for the store, L— has to excuse himself: one of his customers wants an autograph.

He sighed and closed the tab. Also open was the Google Doc spreadsheet Ariadne had made at some point with a list of last-minute expenses for him to approve. He left it for later and found Mal upstairs in the new wing, crossing things off Ariadne’s crowded whiteboard. Her hair was pulled back and tied with a checkered scarf that he was pretty sure she’d borrowed from Ariadne, and she was frowning.

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““This is all amazing,” Arthur said, coming to stand beside her. “I can’t thank you enough for all your help.”

“Don’t thank me,” she said. “Really.” She sounded tired, and Arthur noticed that she looked pale, even for her. He wanted to tell her to go home, get some rest, but something about her expression made him think better of it.

“You’ve sent out the invitations?” she asked, studying the hastily scribbled to-do items that lined one corner of the board.

Arthur nodded. “Last week. Jorby kept getting paper cuts from the mailing labels.”
“And flyers.”

“Done.”

“And the caterer?”

“Yeah,” said Arthur. “We’re fine.” He took the marker from her hand and crossed out some of the items on the list. “Seriously, you don’t have to worry.”


Arthur blinked at her. “You think so? I think it’s all fantastic. We got the deal with that pastry shop you like, by the way. So we’ll have fresh cupcakes every day until they run out.” He laughed. “Or, you know, until I run out of money.”

She shook her head and kept looking at him. He felt himself blush.

“If... if you mean Eames,” he said, “it’s too soon to talk about it. He’s going away—going back to L.A., I mean, to do his film.”

Mal’s gaze softened a little. “Oh, Arthur,” she said. “You really are in love.”

Then she patted him sharply on the face and snapped, “Wake up.”

Arthur gaped.

“Eames can’t be your whole life,” she said. “You still have a job to do. You still have other people to care about.”

“I know that,” he said. “Why do you think I’ve been doing all of this?”

“I don’t know,” Mal said. “I don’t know anymore. I just want this week to be over with so we can all go back to normal.” She tugged the scarf off her head, crumpled it into a wrinkled ball of linen, and closed Arthur’s hand around it. “Give that back to Ariadne, if you ever see her again.”

“She’ll be in tomorrow,” Arthur said.

“No,” said Mal. “She’s taking the week off. Did you even notice she wasn’t in today?”

“No,” said Arthur, a little stunned that Ariadne would just take off like that without telling him—but then when would they have seen each other? “But it’s okay. It’s good. She needs a vacation. You should take one, too, you know.”

Mal gave him a blank look, then let out a strangled noise and stomped out without a word. Arthur was left, as often happened with Mal, feeling like they’d been having two completely different conversations.

By the time Arthur had straightened the bookshelves, resorted all the misplaced titles he could find, and poked at his new inventory software, he was inexplicably annoyed. He couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that everyone around him was trying to tell him something and he just wasn’t getting it. He wondered if Ariadne was having the same problem and that’s why she’d taken the week off. He’d have to ask her at the open house. He wasn’t sure he could do this without her in the store, but then he hadn’t seen her since he got back anyway. He and the after school kids could survive a few more days—it wasn’t as if he had much choice.
When Eames rang up, Arthur invited himself over to the Goring without really even considering bringing Eames back to the store. If Eames thought it was strange, he said nothing, but as Arthur showered and changed into what he was starting to regrettably identify as evening wear, he found himself annoyed by the idea that Eames might find it odd. Eames pretended not to be wounded by Arthur’s cross little moods, Arthur knew, but he often was. Arthur didn’t know what the point was of bringing Eames to the Robie House when every time he showed up paparazzi converged upon them like ants. He’d see the place in a few days anyway, along with all of his celebrity friends.

Who would soon, Arthur supposed, be Arthur’s friends. The thought made him feel twitchy and claustrophobic, like the time he’d gone as a mummy for some costume party and then had to unravel himself half an hour in because he couldn’t breathe. He knew he was overreacting, but still the thought combined with the new suits lining his closet and the fancy invitations papering his office desk to make him feel like he was trapped in a flimsy disguise all over again.

When he got to Eames’ hotel suite he was irritable and out of sorts. Eames opened the door, took one look at him and said, “What’s the matter, darling?”

“Hello to you, too,” said Arthur wryly, reeling Eames in and kissing him. He toed the door closed and started tugging Eames towards the bedroom of the suite. Eames seemed a little startled, but went with it, snaking his arms around Arthur’s waist and kissing him back, grabbing the few inches of loose fabric at the small of Arthur’s back.

“Funny,” Arthur said against his lips. “Ordinarily I’d be pissed at you for wrinkling my suit, but now I just want you to get it off me.”

Eames hummed in his most delectably dirty British schoolboy voice. “I suppose that can be arranged.” He slid his hands down over Arthur’s hips. Arthur shifted, and they bumped against the door frame to the bedroom. Eames bent his head and traced his tongue over Arthur’s clavicle, licking the tendons in his neck until Arthur gasped. He threaded his hands in Eames’ hair and tugged him up again, scraping his teeth against Eames’ stubble.

Eames smelled neat and clean, like ice chips—freshly showered, evidently, but unshaven. “Is this for my benefit?” he murmured, nipping Eames’ jaw.

“No,” Eames said, his voice pitched a bit high, “but I might have been hoping you’d notice.”

“I noticed,” said Arthur, running his hand over Eames’ chin. He kissed Eames again, unable to resist a soft bite to Eames’ ridiculously plush lower lip. He could feel the tension and strain of the day ebbing away, but it still wasn’t enough. He wanted—

Arthur turned and pressed Eames back into the door frame. He thrust their hips together and pinned him there, his legs bracketing Eames’ massive thighs. Eames let out a surprised noise but went with it, relaxing against the wood and letting Arthur hold him in place while he had his wicked way with Eames’ mouth. Something about Eames being pinned between him and the door frame, letting Arthur hold him there, all that muscle and hardness and strength made vulnerable just for him—he wanted more suddenly, fiercely.

After a few moments of groping and grinding, he stepped back and tugged Eames into the bedroom. He shoved Eames back towards the bed, taking in Eames’ quizzical look with a bit of annoyance. Arthur had never really directed things with Eames before, but he didn’t see why it should be a big deal now. He pushed Eames back down to the bed, then straddled him, unable to resist grinding down against the bulge in Eames’ jeans. He wanted so much more than that now, though. An angry fire hummed in his veins as he leaned down to unbutton Eames’ shirt. Eames sat back on his elbows and looked at him, which just made Arthur more eager to get down to business. He raked Eames’
skin with his fingernails as he pushed off Eames’ shirt and got to work on his jeans next, noting in annoyance that Eames continued to watch while he tugged them down over his hips. “It’s even better when you help,” he muttered after a moment, when Eames finally kicked them off the edge of the bed.

“You’re Lauren Bacalling me during sex?” Eames said. He sounded amused and fond, which for some reason just made Arthur more aggravated.

“I wouldn’t actually say this was during sex, would you?” He thrust his hips sharply down against Eames. “Thought you were gonna wrinkle my suit.” He reached down to palm Eames’ erection.

“I was,” Eames said, “but—”

“So get on with it,” said Arthur. “There’s a lot I want to do to you.” He grabbed Eames’ cock through the fabric of his boxers and gave it a few rough jerks to get the point across. “I want to fuck you,” he said, his voice low and raw, and he kind of expected it to get Eames more into the game.

Instead, Eames arched an eyebrow and shifted where he lay propped on his elbows. He reached up to cup Arthur’s chin in his big hand, and Arthur couldn’t help but snap, “What?” He knew he sounded peevish but couldn’t quite bring himself to care. Eames just shook his head and stroked his thumb up the side of Arthur’s jaw. Arthur tensed. He didn’t want tenderness, or whatever Eames was offering right now.

“Arthur,” Eames said. “I would love to do this with you—and I would absolutely love for you to fuck me—but not when you’re this stressed and not for the wrong reasons.”

Arthur frowned. “In other words,” he said, “you’re too much of an alpha male to hand over control for once?”

Eames winced and went rigid beneath him. Arthur’s stomach plunged.

Eames looked down and away. “You know that’s not true,” he said, but his voice dropped, and he looked as though Arthur had just—christ, had just hit him or something.

Arthur’s anger evaporated in a wave of alarm, just as rapidly replaced by overpowering shame.

Immediately he slid off of Eames and on to the bed. “Shit, I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean—fuck, that was—christ, I don’t know why I said that. I know that’s not you. Eames. Eames, please look at me.”

Eames darted him a sidelong glance, then sat up fully, leaning back into the pillows propped against the headboard. He didn’t exactly curl into a ball, but his hands were smoothing the comforter in agitated little movements, and Arthur felt like shit.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said again, helplessly. Eames chewed on his lip for a moment. Sensing he was putting words together very carefully, Arthur held his breath and stayed very still and waited.

“I know that we haven’t really ever talked about what sort of relationship this is,” Eames said after a moment, still not looking at him. His voice was very measured, and the tone of it made Arthur want to touch him somehow, so he did, leaning in and settling his head against Eames’ shoulder. Eames finally looked at him, then, and Arthur felt his throat close up at the open worry he saw.

“I know that I’m going back to L.A. soon and this... neither of us knows what will happen next,” Eames ventured. “So maybe I don’t have the right to ask this of you, and if you feel that way, then that’s fine. But Arthur, any idiot can see something’s got you angry and tense and on edge.”
Arthur started to reply and then realized he had no idea what to say. He had no idea why he was angry, or why, right at that moment, just when things should have been going better for him than ever, he felt so wildly scared and out of control.

“I want us to be able to talk to one another when things get bad, not just fuck it out,” Eames said. “And—and I want you to want to fuck me. Not want to... to take your anger and stress and bad days out on whatever body you happen to be with.”

Arthur’s jaw fell open. He pulled away and stared at Eames. “I would never do that to you,” he said. “Not ever.”

Eames looked over at him, affectionate and weary. “Not intentionally.”

Arthur stared at him for a moment longer, and then it clicked. “Jesus, Fischer again? What the fuck, what did he do?”

Eames gave him a rueful smile. “Nothing that didn’t seem reasonable at the time.”

Arthur’s heart sank. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “God, I’m such an asshole,” he said. “I should have asked you, I shouldn’t have just—fuck.”

“Arthur,” Eames said. “It’s fine. It’s really okay. I’m good. I just... I don’t handle other people’s stress well.”

“Other people shouldn’t be taking their stress out on you,” Arthur said, trying to wrap his head around the realization that whatever emotional abuse Eames had suffered when he was with Fischer, it went far deeper than he had ever before realized. Suddenly dozens of off-hand, self-deprecating comments Eames had made here and there came careening into perspective. Had he felt that way for all the years since his relationship with Fischer? That his partners were just with him for sex or convenience or to satisfy their own needs?

He swallowed. Given that Eames generally moved in very elite circles, the terrible part was that undoubtedly, some of Eames’ partners probably had only dated him for the wrong reasons. The thought of Eames carrying that fear around with him for all the months they’d been seeing each other made him move in close and link his arms around Eames’ waist.

“Eames,” he said, laying a kiss on Eames’ shoulder, “you do have the right to ask me to talk to you. And I wouldn’t—I would never have made you do something you didn’t want. I wouldn’t have forced you into—”

“Arthur,” Eames broke in. He was giving Arthur a look of such earnestness that at any other time it would have made Arthur feel self-conscious. Now it just made him feel terrible. “Darling, I know that. I know you wouldn’t.”

Arthur opened his mouth to protest, and Eames shook his head and cut him off with a kiss. This time Arthur held on, letting it linger, trying to let go of his horror at himself.

“I trust you,” Eames said when he finally broke the kiss. “Of course I do, Arthur, christ. If I didn’t, you wouldn’t have gotten as far as pinning me to the doorframe.” He bit his lip and looked away.

It dawned on Arthur all at once that he’d spent so much time obsessing about all the secrets Eames hadn’t trusted him with that he’d failed to notice how much Eames had trusted him with.

“Oh,” he said dumbly. They sat in silence for a moment while Arthur contemplated ways to crawl into the earth. “I trust you, too,” he ventured finally.
“Arthur,” Eames said. “Have you thought about getting treatment for anxiety? You’ve been under so much pressure lately, it’s enough to make anyone get a little stressed.”

Arthur fought the urge to laugh. Instead he tucked his head in the crook of Eames’ shoulder. “Nah,” he said, closing his hand around the curve of Eames’ bicep. He wanted to keep him there forever. “I’ll be fine once the open house is over with. Just three more days.”

“But you know,” Eames said, and Arthur had a feeling he was trying to sound spontaneous and unrehearsed. “It won’t be over after the open house. The open house is just the beginning of all the publicity, all the crowds, all the attention.”

Arthur swallowed. “Yeah,” he said. “I know that.” But the thought made panic spike through him.

“What if we just hung out tonight?” Eames said. He ran his fingers through the curls at the base of Arthur’s neck. Arthur breathed in Eames’ cool, crisp scent. “Stayed right here and ordered really expensive room service and talked?”

“Yeah,” said Arthur, breathing in, breathing out. “Yeah, okay.” He closed his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Shh,” Eames said. “You’ve nothing to be sorry about. And I really do want to try switching.” He turned and pressed a kiss to Arthur’s forehead. “Just not when you clearly have other things on your mind.”

Arthur sighed. “What if we just...” he trailed off. “Can we just not talk about the bookstore or the open house tonight?” he said unevenly.

Even saying it out loud felt like a betrayal, as though miles away the Robie House had heard him and fluttered the pages of old books and newsprint, scandalized and broken-hearted and abandoned.

“What if we just...” he trailed off. “Can we just not talk about the bookstore or the open house tonight?” he said unevenly.

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“Did something happen?” Eames ventured.

“No,” Arthur said. “I just...” he sighed. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me. Everything’s coming together. Ariadne’s been working her ass off.”

“Maybe you just need a break,” Eames said. “Let’s order pizza and watch terrible pseudo-cult documentaries on Netflix.”

“Netflix has terrible pseudo-cult documentaries?”

“It does when you’ve managed to convince it you’re a Scientologist.”

“Are you a Scientologist?” Arthur asked doubtfully.

Eames grinned at him and linked their hands together. “Let’s watch TV and find out,” he said.

“Well, is he?”

“Is he what?”

“A scientologist.”

It was the next day, the Tuesday before the open house, and Arthur was calling Yusuf from Eames’ hotel room while Eames was out for his morning run. He should be getting along to the bookstore,
but Eames had ordered him to run up an exorbitant charge on his hotel bill. The only thing Arthur could think of was putting in a phone call on the landline to Australia. And he kind of thought Eames would get a perverse kick out of the fact that he’d charged a call to his ex-boyfriend to his current one.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We wound up watching the *Mighty Ducks* instead.”

“All three movies?”

“It’s something of a family tradition given the whole ice sports thing to do the whole marathon. I think we fell asleep halfway through two, but there’s always next time.”

“Huh,” said Yusuf.


“It’s just that now that I know what it’s like, I can magically tell when two people are completely mad for each other,” Yusuf said.

Arthur wasn’t sure what absent note he’d been expecting to hear in Yusuf’s voice, but if pressed he might have come up with nostalgia or maybe a touch of wistfulness. They’d been together for two years, after all. They’d been serious about each other, too, Arthur had thought—until it turned out he’d been wrong and Yusuf hadn’t really been on the same page at all.

“You’ve been dating that guy a while,” he asked.

“About nine months, yeah,” Yusuf said. “Alex. I’m thinking of, well, we’re thinking of moving in together.”

He sounded tentative, and Arthur waited to feel something, a pinprick of jealousy or the same longing for what might have been that he wanted Yusuf to feel. It didn’t materialize.

“That’s great,” he said. “Tell him I said hi, will you? Make him throw you a housewarming party.”

Yusuf laughed. “If we do, I’ll expect you and your extremely rich partner to send us a lavish and over-the-top gift befitting your power couple status.”

“I don’t think I’d go that far. We may not even be together in a few weeks. When he goes back to L.A.”

“Oh, please. He’s crazy about you.”

He thought about Eames leaving in just over a month. He thought about how they hadn’t really talked about it yet, how Arthur had been so preoccupied with the open house, and Eames had been preoccupied with Fischer’s pile of scripts.

“Is he?” he said. “I don’t know.”

Yusuf scoffed over the line. “The internet has informed me the two of you are madly in love and ready to settle down together and have kittens. Would the internet lie?”

“I just mean...” Arthur thought about the secrets Eames still hadn’t opened up about, the way he’d nearly shut down yesterday. “Sometimes I’m not sure I know him at all.”

Another noise of disbelief, this one mixed with what Arthur suspected was Yusuf trying very hard not to laugh at him.
“Arthur,” Yusuf said, “You are literally the biggest Eames fanboy on earth. Forget about your relationship for a second and zoom out. You probably already maxed out the limit of Eames-related knowledge when you were 14 and reading Usenet. You probably already know everything about him you’re ever going to know.”

Arthur snorted. High school seemed a lifetime ago, but he could still remember logging on to IRC chats and searching Expedia—Expedia!—for websites and mailing lists. He hadn’t heard from any of those people in years, but he could still remember some of the best moments, highlights from ancient forum threads full of fans trying to one-up each other over who had the most knowledge about the secretive actor from Bristol who—

Arthur dropped the phone.

“Arthur?” Yusuf said from the floor, tinny and far away. Arthur stared blankly at the phone for a moment before reaching down.

“Hey,” he said. “I have to go.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just—I just remembered I have to, uh. I have to go do research.”

“Research,” Yusuf echoed uncomprehendingly, but Arthur was already ending the call and moving to the desk in the living room of Eames’ suite, where Eames’ Mac lay open with the browser still up.

Arthur sat down and started typing.

An hour later, Jia yanked him out of the Internet Archive by calling him to ask him if he was coming to the bookstore. “It’s just really backed up here and the Open House is in two days and people keep asking me questions about the new space that I can’t answer because you’re not here and Ariadne’s not here. If you’re not going to be around in the mornings any more, maybe you should hire a second person to cover the floor, especially since we’re getting bigger.” She stopped and took a breath. He could hear chatter in the background.

“I can’t, something’s come up,” Arthur answered. “Actually, I have to go out of town and I need you to watch the store while I’m away.”

“What, all day?”

“And tomorrow.”

“You’re going out of town,” Jia repeated. “Your open house is in two days.”

“I’ll probably be back tomorrow evening, maybe even sooner. Ariadne can help you with anything you need.”

Jia scoffed. “Oh, yeah, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled.”

“Look, I’ll pay you overtime for the hours you’re not scheduled,” Arthur insisted. “Whatever you need to do, if you need to hire an assistant—”

“I am the assistant!” Jia said. “I’m not a manager, I’ve never closed before—”

“Just kick everybody out and turn the lights out,” Arthur said. “You’ll be fine. Look, I have to go.”

“Okay,” said Jia, as if nothing was okay. “Okay, fine, but this better be important.”
“It is,” said Arthur. “It’s really, really important.”

“More important than your open house?”

“I’ll be back in plenty of time for the open house,” Arthur said. “I have to go.”

He rang off and grabbed his phone. *I’ve got an errand to run out of town*, he texted Eames. *May not be back til tomorrow.*

_Something last-minute for the open house?_ Eames texted back as Arthur was closing out all his open browser windows and repositioning Eames’ computer where he’d found it on the desk.

_Yeah, Arthur texted back. Late coming._

“And long overdue,” he muttered on his way out the door.

“So what was it?” Eames said when Arthur was back the next evening. He had invited himself over to the Robie House after Arthur had returned and settled in, presumably so he could help with any last-minute preparations for the Open House.

Arthur had arrived to find Mal busy fretting about furniture angles, directing Jia and Jorby to move a couch here, a coffee table there. The bartender they’d hired was helping Manuel and one of the other MIND kids spec out the place for the DJ, who wasn’t there but who’d asked for a special booth with all his equipment to be set up in the back of the second floor landing for the next night. Arthur’s new security guard was sitting on the front stoop smoking. She’d eyed Eames when he showed up and waved him in with a flick of her cigarette.

“What was what?” asked Arthur. He’d taken one look at the industry around him and settled for dusting the bookshelves.


“Oh,” Arthur said. “Documentation. Very boring.” He remembered the building permits Ariadne had been pestering him about for months. “Permits that had to be notarized by an official who was out of town, so I had to go to them. You know.”

“Oh,” said Eames, cocking his head. “You’ve been dusting that shelf for the last two minute. It’s probably clean.”

“I’m trying to frighten future dust away at this point,” Arthur said.

Eames let out one of his surprising barks of laughter. Arthur leaned against the bookshelf and gave him a weak smile, taking in the look of frank affection on Eames face as he opened his arms and reeled Arthur in for a kiss that was almost painfully sweet.

The Thursday of the Open House dawned clear and crisp and cold. The bookshop closed at mid-afternoon, and Arthur gave everyone free cider and told them to come back in a few hours for the fun part. “How many people are you expecting tonight, anyway?” Jia asked as she finished the day’s inventory.
“Oh, I dunno,” said Arthur. “If we can bring in around 60, 80 people, I’ll be excited.”

A whistle came from the door. Arthur’s security guard was giving him a flat stare.

“You were just in Time Out again,” she said. “It was one of the best weeknight bets. This is a bookstore. Don’t any of you read?”

“So... we should expect more than 80 people,” said Jia.

“Oh, god,” said Arthur.

Five hours later, a mob of suits and cocktail dresses lined every inch of the Robie House and spilled onto the street. The bartender was nearly out of everything and had sent Dom to the nearest Tesco for ice and grenadine. The amazing DJ Eames had located had decided that the best atmosphere for a bookstore party would be a lethal cocktail of Britpop, Kesha, and something Eames described as “Seapunk” that involved flashing strobed images of Lisa Frank art on the walls. At least 16 people had asked Arthur for his autograph, and he had finally, definitively established that his security guard’s name was Tabitha when she threatened to walk out over the decomposing bodies of the paparazzi trying to get in at the door unless he tripled her pay rate on the spot. When Eames had arrived, his bodyguards had surveyed the line out the door, her face, and the room. Then they’d exchanged glances and told him they’d “handle it from here.”

Arthur had let them handle it. Arthur had locked himself in his office and was having a panic attack while Eames rubbed his shoulders and Mal paced back and forth glaring at things. The closed door and the blinds reduced the noise of the party to a dull throb, but the constant flashbulbs and strobe lighting still filtered into the room.

“Take deep breaths, Arthur,” Eames said. “Remember, this is what you wanted, what you’ve spent months working towards.”

“I’m an idiot,” said Arthur. “Who thinks it’s a good idea to give alcohol to three hundred people and then unleash them on a stockpile of books?”

“Well, but it wouldn’t have been quite the same aesthetic if we’d just served tea, darling,” said Eames reasonably. Arthur was not feeling reasonable.

“Why didn’t I hire bouncers? Why did I invite Zoe Saldana? Why didn’t I invite normal people? Did you see the way that couple in the matching pinstripes kept glaring at me every time they saw us together? You shouldn’t have even come tonight, it’s a bloody circus.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Eames ventured, his thumb working the pressure point beneath Arthur’s temple.

“I don’t think some of these people have any interest in applied science,” Arthur huffed.

“Arthur, really,” said Mal. “We’ve all worked day and night to make this event a success, and now you’re unhappy because it’s a success.”

“But—but I thought we’d just have a nice mid-sized group of people and we’d all have wine and cheese and I’d make a short terrible speech and Ariadne could finally spend some time chatting up David Tennant,” Arthur said miserably.

“You can still make a short terrible speech!” said Eames. “In fact I’m certain that’s your legal right as the party host. And—and I can sneak out the back way if you really want me to leave.”
“No,” said Arthur. “No, I don’t—where is Ariadne anyway? I haven’t seen her in weeks. I called her earlier but she didn’t pick up.”

“I told you, she took the week off,” said Mal.

“But I didn’t expect her to miss this,” Arthur said. “This was all her! I was going to introduce her and give her her bonus tonight. I had, you know... plans and things.”

At this Mal let out a tiny huff of laughter. It sounded incredulous. Arthur frowned up at her and found her staring at him.

“I needed her here,” he said. “I’m going to call her again.”

“You needed her,” Mal echoed. Her voice was cold. “Have you listened to your voice mails since you got back from your vacation, Arthur?”

Arthur blinked. “Yeah?”

“Have you listened to all of your voice mails?”

Arthur thought back to the two weeks of island and water and Eames. He rolled his eyes and dug his phone out of his pocket. Only a few people had his personal cell phone, but he had a sinking feeling Mal wasn’t talking about the office phone. He scrolled past voice mails from Eames, a few from Jia or Jorby, one from the construction foreman, and then there they were: a long column of bold, unheard voice mails from Ariadne. The last one had come on the last day of his vacation. He hadn’t seen or heard from her at all since he’d gotten back.

He listened to the oldest one, sent on the first day he’d flown out.

“Hey, Arthur! Call me when you get this, I just have a quick question about seating for the Open House—I think I have a way to give us a little more space on the second floor, but I need to go over your copy of the building permits first and I don’t know where they are. You did send them in, right? Give me a call. Thanks!”

The next, sent two days later.

“Hey, Arthur, it’s Ariadne. The construction workers are doing really well but I’m starting to think we need to negotiate an overtime rate for them if we’re going to be done in time. Call when you can. Bye!”

The next, the following day:

“Hey, where are you? I have questions! Get off that luxury hotel bed and give me a call, buster.”

He pinched his nose and scrolled past the next four messages. The fifth came near the end of his vacation, and it was almost four minutes long. He pressed play.

“Athu—Ariadne’s voice was clipped; he could hear the sounds of construction in the background. “I don’t know what’s going on. I’m assuming you’re not dead because I haven’t seen your name in the tabloids lately, but you know what? I’m starting to think that might be better for everyone, because at least then I wouldn’t be left to—to flounder all by myself while you and your Hollywood boyfriend frolic on a beach or whatever the hell you’re doing. You know what, Arthur? I’m pretty sure they have cell service in the Maldives, and I’m pretty sure they have email. And if you didn’t want to do this, if you didn’t want to commit to your damn open house that you decided you wanted, you could have just said so. Instead, I’m here, and you’re not, and, and my entire semester, my last
semester of university, has gone to total shit because I had to go to my thesis advisor and beg him to let me use this, this total architectural disaster, as part of my doctoral candidacy because my thesis was in the can because, I don’t know, I thought that I could do my regular schoolwork on top of this. But you know what? I couldn’t, because you’re not here, and I’ve had to run the cash register, and call the caterer, and make flower arrangements, and fill out paperwork, and hire more people—oh, yeah, by the way, I hired a new girl, I’m sure you’ll like her if you ever come back from cloud nine and meet her, and, and I had to buy the construction workers coffee and donuts to get them to agree to work overtime instead of going on strike like On the Waterfront or something, and I can’t do it, I can’t—”

She broke off, and Arthur heard her snifflle as she said something muffled in the background, either to a customer or whoever was working the counter. Then she was back.

“And it sucks, Arthur,” she said. “It just sucks. You suck.” She took a deep breath. “Please check your messages. Please call me back.”

The call ended.

Arthur sat with his phone to his ear for a moment.

“Arthur?” Eames asked.

“Let him listen,” Mal said.

There was only one call left, the one Arthur now remembered getting, and ignoring, the morning they left the Maldives. It was short. Arthur opened it.

“Arthur?” She sounded exhausted. “I just wanted you to know that I, I think you’ve been really selfish, and, and a bad friend, and I don’t—I don’t want to work with you anymore. I’m going to stay and finish up what I need to do architecturally, but when my part of this is done, so am I. Right. So. If you ever hear this, I just wanted you to know that. Bye.”

Arthur sat his phone down on his desk.

When he’d first moved to London he hadn’t known anyone; he’d set about opening his bookstore and he’d intended to stay holed away inside of it. Ariadne had shown up one day in a panic that quickly transformed into a flurry of delight over his architecture section. He’d given her a place to study during mid-terms. He hadn’t even had to ask her to start working for him; she’d just showed up and helped out until he insisted on paying her and giving her a schedule. She’d introduced him to Yusuf. She’d been his lifeline to the rest of the world when he squirreled away and forgot to leave the bookshop. She’d put up with him being brusque and fussy and never doing inventory and never letting her commandeer his sound system in order to play browsing music, not even Bowie.

She’d been his first and best friend, and he’d just treated her like shit. He’d just spent months treating her like shit.

“I can’t do this,” he said quietly.

“Oh, Arthur,” said Mal.

“No,” he said. “I can’t, I can’t do this. I can’t do it anymore.”

“Can’t do what, darling, the party?” Eames said from behind him. He put his hands on Arthur’s shoulders again and Arthur flinched away.
“Any of it,” he snapped. “The open house, the party, the celebrities, the celebrity dating, the expansion, the Hollywood thing, none of it, I can’t—I can’t.”

He turned around. Eames’ lips were drawn. “I don’t even, I don’t even know what this is. It’s not me. None of this is me. I’m not—I’m a hermit, I don’t do any of this. It’s all you, this is all you.”

“Excuse me,” Eames said sharply, drawing back and straightening. Mal looked between them and then turned and left the room without a word. “I thought you wanted to do this. I never asked you to change, I never asked you to—to open a new wing of the bookstore, why would I—that was every bit you, Arthur, because you wanted something more and I was an excuse.”

“I didn’t want any of this!” Arthur said. “I didn’t want to become someone who treats his friends like crap and avoids them to spend more time with his boyfriend who’s just going to leave me and go back to his scumbag ex anyway.”

“Arthur,” Eames said, hurt filling his voice. “You’re upset and you’re not thinking rationally. Why would I ever do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Arthur said, keeping his voice level. “Maybe because now you wouldn’t have to hide it from anyone. Maybe because he’s been trying to blackmail you.”

“You already knew that,” Eames said. “You know I wouldn’t go back to him just because his father died, Arthur, what kind of logic is that?”

Arthur hesitated. Eames had worn a black dress jacket to the party that night, over blue with a hideous yellow tie. He looked amazing. Arthur thought about the last time they’d kissed, yesterday. He tried to hold on to the memory of Eames’ face in that moment, full of warmth and fondness.

He was an idiot to think they could have worked.

“Maybe because he knows you weren’t born in Bristol,” he said.

Eames’ mouth fell open.

“Funny thing,” said Arthur. “About stories. If it’s a story we all believe and someone comes along to discredit it, it’s easier to discredit them than the story. When I was fifteen, sixteen or so, I used to hang around this fan forum dedicated to you. It was mostly for gossip but I checked in a lot. It was mostly just people digging around for info on who you were dating, the usual.

“One day this kid comes in, says he knew you growing up in Croydon. Swears up and down you never lived in Bristol. Says you were in and out of school with him up through 6th grade or so, that he knew your real name and it was—well, you know what he said it was. He said he used to pull petty theft in corner shops with you in primary school. We laughed at him. Everybody knew you were born and raised in Bristol. That you got involved in acting at school and went from there to the Royal Dramatic Academy. It’s in all your bios from back in your stage days, and if it weren’t true someone would have said something before now, right? We thought he was crazy, so we just ridiculed him til he got fed up and left. It’s funny, how you can remember something like that and it sounds so insane at the time, but when you hear it years later, it suddenly makes everything click into place.”

Eames’ face had gone pale. He stood silently, staring at Arthur.

“I did some research the other day,” Arthur said. “I don’t really talk about it much, but I’m actually really good at that, at research.”
“How good?” Eames asked.

“Scarily good,” Arthur said. “And like you said, it’s been hiding in plain sight the whole time, right? It didn’t really take that much diggin’. All it took was someone to come along and ask the right question. Like why a picture of you and Fischer just sitting around in Bristol would be so significant he’d hang on to it all this time and then send it to you as some kind of a threat. It’s because that’s where you told him, isn’t it?”

Eames swallowed.

“I mean, you didn’t just tell him. You probably took him to Bristol to meet your aunt so she could confirm everything you told him about how she’s been covering for you all these years. How you dropped out of school after your older brother OD’d in 1990, how you drifted around helping out your dad until he was convicted of fraud three years later. You were sixteen, too old to be placed, so you dropped off the map after that for a year or so. Except then you got into the local amdrams. You got the lead in a performance of Picnic—there’s actually a review of you in the Broad Green Gazette—October 1995. It says you were ‘virile and surprising.’ Only it doesn’t list you by a name anyone would recognize, not now, anyway.

“Your director, Paul, was impressed so he got a friend of his at RADA to come and see you in that performance. She liked you so much she set up an audition for you at the university, and there it was, your way out. But you couldn’t get in without a school record.

“So how did you get from no transcripts, no school records, no acting experience, to being admitted into the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1996?”

Arthur paused. Eames took a deep breath.

“The first day we met, when you came in here,” Arthur said, “You joked about your dad committing forgery. I looked up your dad’s record. It wasn’t a joke. He got twenty years for fraud and counterfeiting, and I think he taught you the tricks of his trade before he went away.

“I think you decided to forge an identity as a Merchant Venturer student. The school was in Bristol, where your mom’s sister lived. It was posh, especially for the area, which could have given you a boost over other applicants. You forged transcripts, forged letters of recommendation, and created a school file for yourself using her last name—Eames. You used her address as your home address. It’s a big school, easy for a student to go unnoticed—and no one from RADA was going to look too closely at a good transcript and stellar letters of recommendation after you blew them away at your audition, right?

“You told me once that the only person who’d be able to corroborate your secret for you was an old man from Bristol. I think that’s the school clerk who validated your transcript, probably because you paid him off or tricked him into thinking you’d been attending the school all along. The reason I think that is that I went to the school yesterday—it’s been renamed to Cotham now but the class pictures are still on the walls. Under your year there’s a name, Eames, and no photo. That tells me you must have found a way to get your name onto the school roster somehow. They have a record of you graduating. All it takes is someone willing to put your name on the list, and no one caring enough to ask questions.

“After you got accepted into RADA, I think you went to your aunt and her son—the cousin you call your brother these days—told them what you’d done, and begged them to help you, to back you up in case anyone ever asked: that you’d grown up living with them in Bristol, that you’d gone to school in Bristol. They would have wanted to help you. You and your cousin were always pretty close, at least if your mention of your “brother” in interviews refers to him and not your real brother,
who died when you were pretty young. And it’s not like it was a stretch to convince people that you were your aunt’s son and you’d grown up in her house. Any time the press came calling wanting childhood photos, you could just whip out a picture of the two of you from your visits to her house, and there you were, smiling and laughing. Who’s going to question that? If her neighbors ever asked about it she could just tell them you spent some of your childhood living with your dad—which was true, wasn’t it? Your dad died in jail in 2006, right before you started filming L’Hopital—and I’m sorry, by the way—so he’s not going to be talking to anyone.

“I think the reason no one knows anything about your childhood growing up is that you refuse to talk about anything that doesn’t explicitly reinforce the lie. I think your childhood education was so spotty no one back in Croydon even remembers you except for that one guy we all thought was crazy. I think you still insist on auditioning for every role you take because you’re still trying to convince yourself you earned your way into this life and didn’t just fake it, that you really deserved the life you made for yourself. I think Fischer dumping you was the worst thing that could possibly have happened to you because you trusted him and then he judged you for everything you told him, and now you think no one else could possibly love you if they knew the truth. But I’m here, and I know now, and it hasn’t changed anything about the way I feel.”

Arthur stopped and took a breath. Eames’ cheeks were slowly turning from pale to red.

“Your aunt says hi, by the way,” Arthur added. “She says you should call her.”

At that, Eames gave him a nod, almost perfunctory. He put his hands in his pockets, then took them out again. Then he twisted them together, clenching and unclenching. The whole time he stared at Arthur, not saying a word.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said. “I know that I crossed a line. But I had to know.”

“You crossed several lines, in fact all of them,” Eames said tightly. “And no, you didn’t.”

“I wanted to know who you really were,” Arthur said. “I think I deserved that much.”

“Maybe you did,” Eames said. “But you should have asked me.”

“I did,” Arthur said. “You told me if I knew I’d hate you.”

“Well, now you know, and I hate you for it, so there we are,” Eames said.

Arthur said, “Oh,” more quietly than he meant to.

“I hate that you used this, this mad rush to find out my secret,” Eames said. His voice was surprisingly soft and calm, but his jaw was clenched and Arthur could see the hollow at his temple flaring in and out. “You used it as a way of avoiding the open house, avoiding Ariadne, avoiding dealing with anything. You chose to invade my privacy, stalk me, and pay what must have been an extremely alarming visit to my mother—and yes, I do call her my mother, the only mother I’ve ever really had. And now, after doing all that, now you’re using what you found as an excuse to lash out at me, to drive me away because you’re angry with yourself.”

He took his phone out of his pocket and dialed. “Prianka? Can you meet me in the back? We’re leaving. Thanks.” He looked up. He didn’t look angry, only resigned, and it was this that drove home to Arthur exactly what a mess he’d made of his life.

“Most of all I hate that it worked,” Eames said. He looked around the office for a moment, and Arthur had the bizarre thought that he seemed to be looking for a handhold. Then his eyes lit on Arthur’s face once more. He held Arthur’s gaze for a moment, and Arthur let him.
“Goodbye, Arthur,” he said finally,

“Goodbye,” Arthur said dully. Then, as Eames reached for the door, he blurted, “Wait.”

Eames paused without turning around.

“You—” Arthur scrambled for something to say to make Eames to take his hand off the doorknob. “You don’t want to leave.”

“Why not,” Eames said flatly. Arthur feared Eames would turn around and show him a face full of things he didn’t want to see, so he kept talking.

“Because I’m asking you not to. Because I’m sorry. Because I will never do anything—anything—like that ever again. Because you’re right—you’re right about all of it. I was terrified, and I’m still terrified, and I didn’t know until right this second that I was this terrified, but I don’t—I don’t care, because I love you.”

He stopped, startled at himself. Eames’ hand clenched around the door handle.

“Because you’re still standing there, and I know you love me. Eames. I know you love me. Stay. Stay and be in love with me.”

Eames closed his eyes and sighed.

Then he walked out the door and shut it quietly behind him.

Ten minutes later, the fire marshal arrived and threw everyone out of Arthur’s open house because Arthur hadn’t mailed the building permits for the new expansion and they were violating the fire code.

Arthur shuffled outside with everyone else and stared dully at his bookshop while a man with a bullhorn ordered stragglers onto the street and his security guard glared daggers at him. Someone near him swore and dropped a bottle onto the sidewalk. It crunched by Arthur’s feet.

“Oh, Arthur, it’s you.”

He looked up and saw Helena Bonham Carter breezing her way through the mob of people on the pavement. “Just wanted to let you know,” she said. “On second thought, I don't think Tim wants to film the Steampunk Borrowers here after all. It's a bit too mainstream.”

“Oh,” said Arthur.

“Ta!” she said, and left him standing on the curb, with alcohol seeping in between the soles of his shoes.
Chapter 2

The thing about London that Arthur hated most was that if you wanted to disappear, everyone would let you, without stopping to realize that maybe what you really wanted was an excuse not to—that maybe what you really wanted was an opportunity to be someone other than the person who walled themselves away from the world.

Oh, sure, they might throw you concerned looks and scold you for not coming to their latest party; they might advise you to be careful or rest more or say things like, “Oh, Arthur,” and “Don’t be a stranger” and “Are you sure everything’s all right?”

But if you wanted to wreck yourself, to totally fucking swim in a lonely sea of self-created disaster, no one would stop you. No one would even realize you needed stopping, because everyone had their own lives, and besides, you were an independent adult capable of not drowning in self-denial, right? Not a terrified overgrown teenger perpetually torn between wanting to embrace the world and wanting to hide from it.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” his mother told him matter-of-factly when she came for the visit Arthur hadn’t wanted her to make. “Nonsense,” she’d told him when he’d insisted he really needed to work and keep the store open and she’d probably have a terrible time. “Your boyfriend just dumped you and your big night was a disaster and it was all over the news, and that terrible woman Cady Simms actually said to me, ‘oh, you must be so disappointed,’ as if her own sons aren’t all blowing their trust funds on cocaine and yachts and trips to Dubai. Of course I’m coming to visit, what kind of mother would be if I didn’t come to gawk at, I mean, aid you through your distress?”

So Arthur had accepted his mother’s inevitable visit, and put her to work behind the counter of the bookshop as soon as she arrived.

“You don’t understand, mom, I took so much time off before the Open House,” he explained in-between showing her how to work the register. “I can’t leave Ty and Jorby and Jia alone to deal with the holidays, they’d kill me.”

“Oh, I understand,” said his mother. “Your other assistant quit because you overworked her and now you’re swimming in guilt and trying to make up for it by overworking yourself.” She rang up a copy of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, a bit viciously, Arthur thought, and added, “and me.”

“It’s retail,” Arthur said. “And the holidays. Everyone in retail is overworked during the holidays.”

“Remember last year,” she said, “when hardly anyone at all came into the store?”

Arthur grimaced and tore off a sheet of gift wrap.

“Oh, Arthur,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Arthur was excellent at gift-wrapping. His wrapping was precise and meticulous, with perfectly even scissor cuts and geometrically perfect corners.

“But you really, and I’m going to insist upon this, need to see a therapist,” his mother said, and Arthur accidentally sliced through the bow.

Arthur might have ignored his mother, except that earlier, when he’d gone to Ariadne’s apartment in an attempt to apologize, she’d stood just inside the door and yelled, “No!” and “Get therapy!”
And also Yusuf, when Arthur had called him to confess what he’d done: “Yikes. Time to break out the therapy, mate.”

And also, when Arthur had gone to Mal’s house the evening after the Open House to hopefully be miserable in company: “Don’t be ridiculous, Arthur. The breakup probably wasn’t all your fault but the Open House certainly was—and it really wasn’t as bad as all that. The best thing you can do is sort yourself out in therapy and introduce yourself to a lovely little thing called benzodiazepine as quickly as you can.”

And also Kate Winslet, dropping Philippa off at the store after a play date because Arthur had volunteered to watch her for Mal for a few hours: “Arthur! So sorry to hear about you and Eames. He does like to be dramatic, that one. I hope you don’t mind, but Mal and I were talking and, well, I’ve got a lovely therapist who’s helped me through all my worst breakups. I’ll get you her card.”

Kate Winslet’s therapist was 72. She had bright orange hair and no eyebrows and wore white-rimmed glasses with gold brocade hoops dangling from the sides. She sounded vaguely European and said things like, “You keep twisting your hands together. Why be nervous?” and “The point of therapy is not to earn forgiveness from your friends and/or your ex-boyfriend,” and “Just because you’re paying me to coddle you at the moment doesn’t mean you can expect the rest of London to do it for free.”

Arthur kind of hated her and kind of loved her. He made himself go twice a week, mostly because he hated going at all. Pretending is just something most people do until they don’t have to pretend anymore, Eames had told him—and so he went, and did the things she told him to do, and pretended to be getting better.

The second time he tried to apologize to Ariadne, she opened the door and attempted to step on his foot. He seized the opportunity and thrust a note into her pocket.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s a list of reparations,” Arthur replied.

She opened it. Inside, he had written:

**Things Arthur has to give Ariadne:**

– an apology  
– Christmas bonus  
– a retroactive raise  
– a glowing reference to any job she wants  
– a bookstore cat  
– signed letter from Arthur’s therapist proving that Arthur is seeking therapy for his tremendous social anxiety and also general douchebag-ness  
– time to accept apology (hopefully)  
– Christmas present  
– ?????

She read it, then stared at it, then narrowed her eyes at him. “You were a total asshole,” she said. “I’ll take my Christmas bonus first.”

Arthur duly handed her another envelope, this one containing a check, which she glared at but stuck in her pocket. “Ugh,” she said after a moment. “What are you going to name the cat?”
“I dunno,” he said. “I guess that depends on the cat. I was thinking maybe Ethel Purrman or Joan Pawford.”

She laughed. “Pawdrey Hepburn. Pawsalind Russell.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Arthur said. “That’s very good.”

“Meow West,” said Ariadne. “Kim Meowvak.”

“Reaching,” said Arthur.

“I’m still mad at you,” said Ariadne. “Go away and come back tomorrow.”

Tomorrow became Friday, became the Monday before Christmas.

Arthur went to the animal shelter and selected a motley calico cat who kept swatting his nose and who did not in any way remind him of Eames. Then, because two cats could keep each other company when he was off making messes of his and other people’s lives, he got a grey striped tabby with an impeccable coat and a standoffish demeanor who did not in any way remind him of himself.

Arthur tried hard not to wallow. He did. He felt as though he’d achieved a grim kind of clarity, and he stuck to it: he’d done everything to himself, and to Ariadne, and to Eames, and his lovely bookstore. It was his job, and no one else’s, to make things right with Ariadne, to let all his other assistants know he appreciated them, to make sure his patrons got the most out of the expansion, and to... to be the person Eames had thought he was once.

Okay, so maybe he wallowed more than a bit. But Arthur had never been in a breakup where the other person was simply gone from his life immediately and completely. He couldn’t have tried Eames’ cell phone even if he had wanted to be that invasive, because Eames had to change his cell phone regularly anyway to keep the number from getting out to fans.

If he’d thought it was surreal dating a movie star, life after dating a movie star was even more bizarre: an endless string of moments when his heart clenched and his breath caught just because he saw Eames’ picture on a tabloid or the side of a double-decker bus promoting *Mayhem 2*. To everyone else, Eames was just that movie star whose life they had the same access to they’d always had. But to Arthur, Eames was the person who’d known exactly how he liked his tea, who’d loved reading things aloud to him, especially if he could use ridiculous accents in the process, and who’d always let Arthur brush his teeth in the morning before being kissed because he knew the idea of getting kissed in any other state but minty perfection made Arthur anxious. The world didn’t know that Eames, but they still acted as though they did, and Arthur felt constantly confronted with the difference. The rather glib image of the Eames everyone else thought they did know—the one he’d been so sure he’d known only a few months ago—followed him everywhere. Eames was in newsstands, on the internet, on talk shows, on the BBC; he was everywhere promoting *Mayhem 2* before he left for the states, and nowhere talking about his breakup with Arthur.

The world was still in love with the idea of his dating Eames, even if Eames wasn’t; he found himself faced with questions routinely from people in his shop, asking him about the breakup. On Twitter, most of the replies to the bookshop’s account were from people with weird names like “arthurneamesieluv” wanting to know if he’d heard from Eames, or, bizarrely, whether the breakup was all a result of some nefarious and clandestine conspiracy on the part of Eames’ publicist.

“Good,” Ariadne said the fourth time he tried to apologize.

“Yes, deal with and embrace those people,” said Kate Winslet’s therapist. “It’s good for you to
confront your deep-seeded anxieties and the colossal size of your own fuckups in the form of people being nosy little shits.”

“But if I confront them won’t that make me look clingy?” Arthur asked.

“You confront them by ignoring them,” said Kate Winslet’s therapist. “That is, you confront the truths they’re telling—but you don’t let them know they got to you because they’re idiots, who cares about them, right? Anyway, it’s a new year! Write off the last one and start over.”

Arthur had no idea if Eames was even still in London or if he’d already returned to L.A. as he’d planned to do for the holidays. Not that it mattered. He knew, rationally, that he was never going to see Eames again. Still, he couldn’t help the way his breath caught any time his phone buzzed or a broad-shouldered man in a hoodie entered his field of vision.

Kate Winslet’s therapist insisted this was a natural part of the healing process. “It’s okay for you to wonder if you’ll see him again,” she said. “Everybody wonders. Just don’t let yourself let wondering turn into hope, or hope turn into an expectation. I’ll tell you the same thing I told Jennifer Aniston. ‘Jen,’ I said, ‘if your life paths are meant to cross again they will, but you can’t force a river to flow backwards.’ You keep flowing, flowing, flowing forward.”

Incredibly, Arthur found that it was remarkably easy to survive December as long as he never stood still for too long, and focused on the bookstore and nothing else. Since the waves of Christmas shopping had rolled by, the press over the Open House had passed, and the news of his breakup with Eames had taken hold, his customers had gradually dwindled to the point at which Arthur felt he could safely say he knew who his new patrons, the real ones, actually were. And since Kate Winslet’s therapist had instructed him not to ignore the little niggling chimes of worry ringing in the back of his brain, Arthur was listening particularly hard to the one that said he really needed to find an investor before the clientele got a bit smaller and he really did wind up throwing away all his trust fund. He read stupid E-How articles on things like “how to find an angel investor” and “how to woo a V.C.,” but couldn’t help thinking they all sounded like terrible pieces of dating advice.

Now that the stress of the Open House was over he found himself constantly marveling at the way Ariadne’s redesign had opened up the space in the Robie House. The architecture, with its new cantilevered second floor loft space, felt alive and present now in exactly the way he’d envisioned when he named his bookstore to begin with. He had twice as much light even on cloudy days, and at least forty percent more bookshelf space in addition to all the browsing areas she’d worked in and the area they’d designated for presentations and movie nights. When he put together a special book display showing off a selection of books related to some of the architectural aspects of the redesign, he sold the entire collection. She’d managed to reflect and amplify everything he loved about the bookstore. Ariadne was a genius. He’d never appreciated that about her, either.

“Have you talked to Ariadne lately?” he asked Mal a few days after Christmas. She’d stopped in ostensibly to ask him what he wanted to eat for the New Year’s Eve party she was hosting in two days; instead she’d been sitting on the edge of his desk playing with the crochet kit she’d given him over the holidays—a way of welcoming his new life as an old maid, she’d said. She straightened and uncrossed her legs. “No,” she said. “Not since before the Open House, why?”

Arthur looked up. “Really? I thought you two were friends. Weren’t you going to hire her after she graduated or something?”

Mal’s eyes widened. She looked away, a little uncomfortably, Arthur thought. “Arthur,” she said. “I’m not entirely sure, because again, I haven’t talked to her in a while, but... I think there’s a possibility Ariadne had to repeat her final semester in order to shore up her graduate thesis.”

“Didn’t she mention it to you?”

“She said something about her semester going downhill on one of her messages,” Arthur said. “And she tried to step on my foot. Oh, god.”

“I think you should really try to talk to her,” Mal said. “Not just offer her tokens of your guilt. Really try and find out what’s going on.” She hesitated. “I’d like to know she’s okay, too. But it’s more important that she talk to you.”

“Yeah,” said Arthur, already reaching for his phone.

“What?” said a testy Ariadne. Arthur suspected she’d picked up just before it went to voice mail.

“Hey,” he said. “Listen, I know you’re busy but I’d really like to take you out to dinner so we can talk properly.”

“I... I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said. “The last thing I need is for the Tatler or something to decide I’m your rebound date after Eames,” she said.

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Uh, sorry, that’s, um--then, what if I pick up Chinese or something and bring it over and we can eat in? Or I can eat while you work or whatever you need to do.”

“Arthur...” Her sigh was audible over the phone.

“Please, Ari,” he said. “I know I’ve been a terrible friend, but I really want to make things right. I’ve been thinking if I could just, uh, get you to forgive me, we could talk later. But maybe we should talk first.”

“Well,” she said.

“You have massive amounts of student debt and I’m offering you free food,” he said.


“I’ll bring you the whole menu,” said Arthur.

He didn’t quite manage the entire menu, but he managed to get a jaw drop from Ariadne when she opened the door that evening and saw the amount of food he was carrying.

“You are so obscenely literal,” she said, holding open the door and, finally, inviting him in.

Ariadne lived in a studio just off Bedford Square near the architecture college. Arthur had only been there once before; it struck him that they were similar in that they both occupied tiny rooms near the hub of their respective worlds. If he knew Ariadne, she’d splurged a bit on the rent for the flat that came with the big beveled bay window at one end. She’d traveled a half-hour three days a week across London to get to the bookshop. He hadn’t appreciated that. He hadn’t appreciated anything.

“I brought dim sum, egg foo young, beef rolls, mei fun, orange beef, drunken chicken, uh, hor fun, steamed wonton, and crispy duck,” Arthur said, bypassing the futon and sitting cross-legged in front of the window. She joined him, parking herself opposite the cartons he proceeded to lay out in a neat row in front of him.

“Okay, but I hope you brought something for yourself,” she said, grabbing a pair of chopsticks and
opening a random carton. He laughed, and then immediately frowned because the sound startled him. It felt like the first time he’d laughed in weeks.

She looked up and caught the expression on his face. “So,” she said. “Hey, I guess.”

“I also brought vodka and red wine,” Arthur said, reaching into his backpack. “I figured it might help.”

“You’re getting better at this,” she said. She drew her knees up and said around a mouthful of pork, “but you said you wanted to talk, so. Talk.”

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said promptly.

She waved her chopsticks at him. “I got that part,” she said. “Do you even know what you’re sorry for?”

“Yes,” Arthur said. “I completely took you for granted. I didn’t appreciate how much I was asking you to do even though you tried to tell me, and I totally abandoned you when you needed me. I didn’t understand how hard I was asking you to work, I didn’t understand how much I was leaving you to do all alone, and I definitely didn’t realize what it was doing to the rest of your life.” He swallowed around a mouthful of dumpling. “To your semester.”

She squinted at him. “What do you know about school?”

“I talked to Mal a little today,” he said, and she stuck her chopsticks straight into the communal container of soy sauce and said, “Woah, woah, what? You talked to Mal about me? What did she tell you? What’d she say?”

Arthur blinked at her. “Nothing—not much, just that she thought you might... might not have finished your candidacy on schedule.”

Ariadne’s eyes went wide. “That’s all she said?” she asked. She suddenly looked young and lost, and Arthur had the feeling this was the first glimpse he’d gotten of what Ariadne had been feeling during his long absence.

“Is it true?” he asked.

She chewed her lip and then gave a curt nod. “My thesis advisor needs me to present the work I did on the Robie House in the form of a dialogic and analytic addition to my focus on urban renewal. I had to reschedule my defense for the end of May, which means I can’t interview for jobs anywhere until then.” She looked away, flustered.

“Okay,” said Arthur. “That part I can help with. It’s my fault you didn’t finish on time. I can cover your final semester’s tuition and then you won’t have to worry about paying for that and rent while you’re working on finishing, and—what?”

Ariadne was shaking her head. “No way,” she said. “No, I can’t let you do that.”

“But it was all my fault,” Arthur said.

“No, stop saying that,” Ariadne insisted. She picked up her chopsticks again and swatted at him. “You gave me an amazing—a really amazing opportunity, Arthur. And I took it knowing it was going to be a challenge to do everything, and I just—I shouldn’t have said yes to begin with. I just got so excited, and you were so excited, and the whole thing with Eames and Mal, and I just—” she cut herself off abruptly and bit her lip again. “I let myself get distracted,” she said firmly. “That’s all
“No,” Arthur said, “You could have handled everything if I hadn’t left you alone to deal with it all by yourself.”

“I wasn’t totally alone,” she said, and then to Arthur’s astonishment, she said, “I had Mal’s help the whole time,” and then burst into tears, great gulping sobs that paralyzed him with terror for a moment until he remembered he also had tissue in his backpack. “Sorry, sorry,” she gasped between sobs while he offered a packet to her. She took a handful and promptly buried her face in them and cried even harder.

“Hey,” he said, carefully scooting around the tray of crispy duck and tucking her under his arm. “It’s okay.” She turned and leaned into him, and he held her like that for a long moment, grateful that she was letting him show her any affection at all, and hating himself a little for it.

Half a bottle of bordeaux later he had the whole story.

“Nothing happened!” Mal said the next day upon seeing Arthur’s expression when she walked into the store. “Almost nothing!”

Arthur grabbed her arm, pulled her back to his office, and let the door clack loudly shut behind them. “I distinctly remember telling you not to seduce my friends!”

“I didn’t seduce her!” Mal said. “If you’d actually been here I doubt it would have happened at all.”

“Don’t blame this on me,” Arthur said. “She’s practically still in college.”

“She’s a doctoral student who’s already sought-after and she’s only, what, five years younger than you are? Six? For god’s sakes, Arthur, she was stressed out of her mind and I was doing whatever I could to help her. I like her, I wanted to help her. She was trying so hard to deal with the mess you’d left her and she was in over her head. I had no idea what was going on with her until—” she stopped.

“Until you made out with her,” Arthur said. “Here! In my office!”

“Fine, yes, until two consenting adults got carried away and made out in your office,” Mal seethed. “What do you want me to say?”

“Uh, that you’re married and it shouldn’t have happened,” said Arthur.

“I didn’t know it was happening until it happened,” said Mal. “And of course it shouldn’t have happened. I told her that night it was a mistake, and I loved my husband, that I’d just gotten carried away. She said—she told me she didn’t think she should be around me for a while. Why do you think I haven’t talked to her since the week before the Open House?” She dug her nails into the flesh of her arm just above the wrist, leaving sharp half-moon indentations. “I’ve been going over and over the whole thing in my head, trying to figure out if I did something to lead her on. I didn’t know, Arthur, I honestly had no idea.”

“She idolizes you,” Arthur said. “Now she can’t even work for you. God, I fucked everything up. I just.” He sat down and let his head drop on the desk. Mal took up her usual perch on the edge.

“I knew you’d react this way,” she said. “You’re just mad because it happened right in front of your nose and you were too over the moon and absent to see what was going on.”

“I’m mad because you hurt my friend,” Arthur said.
“And because I didn’t tell you about it,” Mal said. “But it wasn’t my place. It had to come from her.” She hesitated. “Just tell me,” she said. “Did I—did I break her heart?”

Arthur gave her a cold look. “I’m sure she’ll be fine,” he said.

She let out a noise of exasperation. “Oh, thank you, that’s very helpful.”

“You should have known,” he said. “I can’t believe you sometimes.”

“Oh, I should have known?” said Mal. “You mean like you should have known Ariadne was drowning in the work you’d left her and avoiding you deliberately for weeks because she was furious?”

Arthur swallowed.

“Don’t go down that road, Arthur,” Mal said, “because it’s a path that ends in the two of us yelling very harsh things at each other, and we’ve both lost enough people we care about these last few months, haven’t we?”

Arthur sighed. “I haven’t lost Ariadne,” he said. “You haven’t either. She’s going to be fine.”

“The point is for all of us to be fine together,” Mal said. “As a family. Or else none of this is any good at all.” She stood and adjusted her scarf. “Will we see you at the party tonight?”

Arthur hunched his shoulders. “I think I’m going to spend New Year’s Eve with Ariadne,” he said.

“Oh.” Mal looked away, and then said, “Well, that’s all right. It’s good for you to be in touch with one another.” She gave him a quick kiss. “Happy new year, Arthur. I have a good feeling about this one. You’ll see.”

It was already getting dark when she left, and since it was the last day of the year, the shoppers had mostly come and gone. He was contemplating whether to close early when Prianka walked in.

For a moment, raw panic struck Arthur before he gathered himself. If Eames were in trouble, or if something had happened, no one would be calling him; he’d be hearing it on the news or on twitter, just like everyone else. Maybe she just wanted to buy a book, he thought, and had to smother a burble of hysterical laughter.

He stepped out of the office and threw her an awkward little wave as she stood looking around for him. “Oh, hi,” she said, heading towards the back of the store to meet him. “I guess I can tell you I love what you’ve done with the place.”

“Not me,” he said immediately. “Ariadne did it all, I just, uh, did my part to screw everything up.”

“So she told me,” Prianka said, and Arthur remembered that Ariadne had had Prianka’s contact info since the first morning he and Eames woke up together, surrounded by paparazzi.

“I’m seeing Kate Winslet’s therapist,” he blurted.

Her eyebrows went up, but to her credit, she didn’t so much as smirk at him.

“Eames was going to give this to you the night of the Open House,” she said, reaching into her bag. She pulled out the copy of *Switch On the Night* he’d given Eames the day they met. Arthur’s heart sank.

“He was going to return it?” he asked blankly. “Why?”
Prianka shrugged. “I think he was hoping the two of you would keep exchanging it back and forth to mark special occasions,” she said.

“Oh,” Arthur said.

“He wrote a new inscription in it for you,” she said, holding it out to him. Arthur blinked at her. “Well, don’t look at me, I didn’t read it,” she said.

Arthur took it. It was still in pristine condition, the way he’d kept it since happening across it in a secondhand bookstore whose owner clearly didn’t know what a treasure they had on hand.

He ran his hand over the cover and felt Prianka watching him.

“He wanted to make sure you got it back before he left for L.A.,” she said.

“Thank you,” Arthur tried to say. It came out extremely hoarse.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Prianka said. “I know you two were—well, you know.”

Arthur looked up, suddenly burning with questions. Had Eames told her what happened? Had Eames mentioned him at all? Was he mad, angry, hurt? Had he already moved on?

He swallowed them all. Kate Winslet’s therapist would tell him to accept that he was out of Eames’ life and stop looking for excuses to stay in it. Eames giving the book back was a clear sign of that.

Instead he just said, “I hope—I hope he’s okay.”

“He’s Eames,” she said, as if that were answer enough.

After she’d gone, Arthur took the Bradbury into the office with him. The cats, who after some consideration he’d named Mandy Pawtinkin and Purrnadette Peters, sniffed at it with interest and then left him alone.

He thought about opening the cover and reading whatever Eames had written. Then he thought about the fact that it was New Year’s Eve, and he was looking forward to an evening with his equally broken-hearted friend, and quite possibly an even lonelier year ahead.

In his head, he heard Kate Winslet’s therapist telling him not to be a putz—to open the damn book, see what was inside it, and then get over it, whatever it was.

“I regret giving you both names that remind me that my philosophical life goal at the moment is to move on,” he told the cats. Purrnadette blinked at him disdainfully. Mandy licked his paw and walked away.

He pulled the book over to him from where it still lay at the edge of the desk. With a sigh, he turned on the desk lamp and opened it.

About halfway down the page, below the inscription where Arthur had originally thanked Eames for his patronage and signed as the Robie House, Eames had written:

For Arthur,

I wanted to give you a gift to celebrate your Open House, and then realized that possibly the best gift was to give you what you gave me so many months ago when you gave me this book—a picture of myself as someone
real and honest and brave. That’s what I see when I look at you, you know. You set out to do something tremendous, and you did: you gave yourself an adventure. Since I’ve known you, I’ve seen you challenge yourself to do so many things that terrify you, and then pull them off the way no one else ever could. I love that about you, and I can’t wait to be there for whatever you do next.

Love,
Eames

“Okay,” said Arthur. “Right. I’ll just move on now. Happy new year to me.”

He closed the book, put it gingerly out of reach, and buried his head in the nearest box of Kleenex.

“Here’s to not falling in love with married women in the new year,” said Ariadne later, downing a tall shot of Grey Goose and wincing.

“Here’s to not driving away the person you love most by invading his privacy, stalking his relatives, and violating his trust,” said Arthur, following suit.

“Here’s to—wow, you really did that?” Ariadne said. “To Eames?”

Arthur grimaced and poured himself another shot.

“You need so much therapy,” Ariadne said. “Here’s to therapy.” She drank.

“I’m getting therapy from Jennifer Aniston’s therapist,” said Arthur. He drank, too.

“Did she ever really recover from the Brad thing?” asked Ariadne, pouring one for each of them.

“I don’t know, but I do know that her river only flows one way,” said Arthur. “Forward.”

“To Jennifer Aniston’s river,” said Ariadne. They clinked glasses and drank again.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” said Arthur. “I think Eames told me he loved me, sort of. The day I made him dump me.”

“Shush,” said Ariadne. “No more of that, you’re a forward-flowing river, remember.”

“A forward-flowing river of vodka,” said Arthur.

“The best kind,” said Ariadne, and then, “Happy new year, Arthur,” before passing out on his arm.

“Happy new year, Ari,” he said, tucking a blanket around her shoulders. As the clock passed midnight, the bright lights and noise of London sliding into a new year bled through the walls and cast a mottled glare on the carpet. Arthur drank his remaining shot of vodka, and didn’t think about Eames, celebrating somewhere in the city, maybe trying not to think about Arthur.

The first day of the new year that the store was officially open found Ty and Jorby huddled together around the front register computer. While they were out of school for the holidays they’d each been coming in and working longer hours in the afternoon. As much as Arthur tried to tell himself this was a sign he wasn’t a total failure as an employer, he suspected it probably just meant they were afraid he’d be a hopeless mess without them.
They saw him, straightened, and sent each other the same nervous glance.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Jorby.

“We should just tell him,” said Ty. “He’s gonna know the next time he checks Twitter anyway.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t check Twitter for a while,” said Jorby, squinting at him. “Shit, have you been crying?”

“Just tell me,” Arthur said, “so I can know and then get over it.”

“But how can you get over it if you’re constantly getting updates about him?” asked Jorby.

“He just got a Twitter account,” said Ty, spinning the computer monitor around. “Verified and everything.”

“But it’s probably going to be run by a ghostwriter,” said Jorby hastily. “Most celebrity twitters are.”

Arthur looked at the screen. Eames had somehow procured the name “eames” as his Twitter handle. His first tweet wished everyone a happy new year. The second was a shout-out to Sir Derek Jacobi, who had apparently challenged Eames to make a Twitter account after having just made his own as a challenge from Benedict Cumberbatch, who had apparently just created his as a New Year’s challenge from JK Rowling while promoting one of her charities.

Eames’ third tweet read: Thank you all for the well wishes. Looking forward to a happy and productive New Year. Can’t wait to play Bucky. Below it were three articles with headlines clarifying that Eames was not playing the Winter Soldier in the upcoming Avengers film.

Arthur glanced at Eames’ replies before he could help himself.

“Are you and Arthur still together?” asked the first one. It was favorited 21 times.

“Eames! Don’t forget to follow @robie_house!” read another.

“ilu an i know u luv Arthur to stay strong u will find ur way back 2gether,” read a third.

Arthur closed the window.

“So,” he said, feeling dazed. “Okay. No checking Eames’ twitter while I’m around. No telling me what Eames’ twitter says. No following Eames on twitter from the Robie House account.”

“What if he follows us?” Ty asked. “What if he mentions you?”

“He’s not going to follow us,” Arthur said. “He’s not going to mention me.”

“You have been crying,” said Jorby.

“Allergies,” said Arthur. “And all of those tweets are from him.”

January came, and kept coming, and went. Arthur began to mark off a space for that organic rooftop garden he’d been wanting ever since he bought the place. And, of course, he got his movie nights: every Thursday at 9:00, a nice neat schedule of movies hand-picked by him and projected onto a scrim he hung in the back of the new space. Tabitha the security guard proved especially interested in working late those nights, so he bought a popcorn popper and stood it in the corner by the coffee
kiosk. Together the two of them figured out how to work it, and Arthur shoveled the popcorn into bags and she stood by the door weekly handing out free popcorn, scowling a bit at anyone who refused to take a bag.

The first month, Arthur showed what he felt was an eclectic mix of art-house, cult film, and modern masterpieces. More people turned out for *Galaxy of Terror* than *The Last Picture Show*, which Arthur considered a personal affront to the legacy of cinema, but then he had a totally packed house for *House of the Devil*, so he figured that was all right.

After the fourth viewing, a kid with curly hair and hipster glasses approached Arthur as he was sweeping up spilled popcorn. “Hey,” he said. “I’m not saying you should host our movie club, but if you were interested in hosting our movie club, we’d handle the concessions and let you borrow our 35-mm projector.”

“Done,” said Arthur instantly.

Except: “Oh,” said Mal, a sad look crossing her face when he handed her his potential schedule for February. “No, Arthur,” she said. “You can’t.”

“Can’t what,” he said, even though he knew what her next words were going to be.

“You can’t host *L’Hopital*. That’s Eames’ film, right?”

“I love that film,” Arthur said. “It’s so underrated.”

“You can’t,” she said, reaching out and patting his hand. “You’ve seen how people pounce all over any detail you give them. Word will get out that you hosted a showing of one of Eames’ films and the next thing you know there’ll be a writeup in TMZ or a flood of people bombarding both of you with tweets, and you can’t. It will be too awkward for both of you, and extremely unfair for him.”

Arthur stared at his schedule. He’d wedged *L’Hopital* in-between *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *Sweet Smell of Success*, and it didn’t really fit, but then it didn’t really fit anywhere. He sighed.

“Fine,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose to stop his eyes from stinging. “The movie club is going to give me a whole new list anyway.”

“I want you to know you’re being very brave through all this,” she said.

“Not really,” Arthur said. “This is my job. This is what I wanted. I just got sidetracked for a while.”

“Love isn’t getting sidetracked,” Mal said. “Love is why we do everything else.”

After the third time the curly-haired guy with the hipster glasses stayed late, once to argue with him about the collected works of Harold Ramis, once to discuss whether the film oeuvre of Ingmar Bergman was the cinematic equivalent of Beethoven, and once just to help him sweep up the popcorn after a particularly rowdy showing of *Barbarella*, Tabitha said, “That guy’s trying to ask you out, you should just put him out of his misery.”

“No he’s not,” said Arthur. “He’s too young for me. And he’s a film nerd. We’re being nerdy. That’s what nerds do together.”

“You’re so weird,” said Tabitha.

“My security guard says this is your roundabout way of hitting on me,” Arthur joked the fourth week. It was almost Valentine’s Day, and he was getting nervous in that way he always got nervous...
around Valentine’s. Possibly his nervousness was compounded by the fact that whoever ran the main Arthur and Eames Tumblr had made a final farewell post two days before noting that they couldn’t be in a fandom anymore for a couple who were apparently over forever—and besides, they were really into something called Ereri now.

The curly-haired guy, whose name was Colin, looked up from where he was putting away the projector. “I mean, kind of,” he said casually. “If you’re interested, it would be cool to go out some time. You’re pretty into film and I know a couple of out-of-the-way theatres you might not have been to.”

“I, uh,” said Arthur. “I’m not really.” In his head he heard Kate Winslet’s therapist screaming at him. “Sure,” he said. “That’d be cool. But I’m not really looking for anything serious. Or, really anything at all.” He fidgeted with his cufflinks. “I’m sort of getting over a really intense relationship and I—”

“Your ex, right,” said Colin. “Yeah, I read something about that.” He shrugged. “We could just hang out,” he said. “Nothing high-pressure.”


Colin was a very nice guy, and he seemed smart, and it made no sense that when Arthur was around him he was more miserable than ever.

“Of course it makes sense,” said Kate Winslet’s therapist. “You’re in love, everyone you meet will remind you of the thing you lost.”

“Then how am I supposed to get better?” said Arthur, wondering if it was acceptable to bring alcohol to these sessions.

For the first time, Kate Winslet’s therapist looked mostly fondly at Arthur instead of just exasperated. “You accept that you feel what you feel,” she said. “You accept that it’s the worst thing you’ve ever felt and that you’re going to be stuck with it for a while. And then you do what you need to do anyway.”

“Do I need to start dating again?” said Arthur dubiously.

Kate Winslet’s therapist sat back and lit a cigarette. “Well, we’ve seen what you do when you isolate yourself,” she said, tapping it out against an ashtray, “so what do you think?”

Arthur kept dating Colin. Colin kept being quite nice about everything. Arthur even managed to have perfectly satisfactory sex once or twice, and his knees didn’t even shake.

At Jia’s suggestion, he started to host tutoring sessions three days a week for girls in STEM coursework. The only stipulation was that the tutors were also girls, which was how he found out that despite being a surly thief Tabitha had taken A-level Maths, and how he happened upon Ariadne and Mal sitting at the same table one day arguing over the best way to teach an intimidated-looking Geometry student the best way to prove a Euclidean theorem.

“I loaned out my copy of Rebel Cities and the university bookstore was all out,” Ariadne said, throwing him a look that clearly warned against questioning her life choices. “I was a geometry tutor in high school, you know.”

“Arthur, be a dear and fetch us some coffee,” said Mal. “How are the students supposed to learn without caffeine?”

“And my book is under ‘H’ in Urban Renewal!” Ariadne called after her.
Arthur felt that if Ariadne could muster her courage and inhabit the same space as Mal once again, the least he could do was be a better non-boyfriend to Colin. But Colin was perfectly affable about Arthur’s tentative approach. “I get it,” he said, the first time Arthur tried apologizing for his lackluster affections. “We’ve all been there. I’m really too busy to want something intense and involved, anyway.” But after the first few weeks of non-relationship-having, Arthur felt too awkward to let things continue. By then February had rolled into March, and the air was starting to simmer into something warm and tepid again. Babies were starting to appear in high-class prams on the sidewalks of Notting Hill; their nannies bussed them about with an air of superiority that pressed on Arthur if he stayed still watching them for too long. Get busy living or get busy making your romantic partner’s life miserable, they seemed to say.

“You’re probably right,” Colin said the last time Arthur apologized to him for his lackluster affections. “There’s this really hot guy who’s been flirting with me over at the university coffeeshop for the last week. We could try casual dating?”

But Arthur didn’t really want to do casual dating. He had a bookstore to run, and movie nights to plan, and tutoring sessions to oversee, and Easter to get through, and assistants past and current to coddle. By now the internet had caught the gossip that he had been seen dating again; his bookstore’s Twitter account was routinely besieged with heartbroken fans wanting to know how he could get over Eames so quickly. He ignored them all as he’d ignored all the previous iterations of despair from his adoring far-away fans, though once he did catch Ty composing an anonymous Tumblr ask to a persistent follower to tell them to bugger off and mind their own.

For himself, Arthur expected that Eames would start dating Fischer again. It seemed the only logical thing considering Fischer clearly wanted him back and Eames clearly wasn’t immune to being blackmailed into returning. He tried not to pay attention to celebrity gossip, but even if he had been completely able to avoid hearing about Eames from every well-meaning store patron or eagle-eyed newstand vendor, there wasn’t really anything to tell: Eamas was filming the Scorsese biopic; Eames was enjoying spending time in Northern Mass. with his co-stars and film crew; Eames was almost done filming. That was it. Fischer stayed ensconced in L.A.; the only news Arthur gleaned about him was related to his dispensation of his father’s affairs and his plans for the studio’s new direction.

Philippa turned seven, and Mal threw her a grand party at Kensington Park. Kate Winslet came with her son, and a few paparazzi snapped photos of the two of them and Arthur. At the time, he’d been balancing Philippa on his knee and teaching her and Joe how to breathe fire like a dragon as he blew bubbles just over their ear. When the picture turned up on JustJared it made him smile.

“I’m glad she has you in her life,” Mal told him later when he showed her. “There are worse things she could be than doted on by a family friend who blows bubbles for her and paints her face and takes her to movie premieres and helps her befriend celebrities.”

“Not a friend,” Arthur said. “You adopted me, remember?”

Mal laughed. “Yes, we did,” she said. “In sickness and in health, for better, for worse. That goes for both of us.”

“Is that why you started coming back to the bookstore after the first time?” Arthur asked. “Because you felt sorry for me?”

Mal put down the book she was browsing and gave him an odd look. “I’ve always wanted to know,” he said.

Mal continued to stare at him for so long he started to feel foolish. Then she replied, “I kept coming back because I loved your bookstore.”
“Oh,” said Arthur.

“Oh,” said Mal, rolling her eyes. “Now are you going to ring this up or must I build your self-esteem some more, you silly child?”


In the end he never knew what prompted it. He was sitting in the window of his flat one day towards the end of March reading the latest issue of Asimov’s when his phone buzzed. He didn’t recognize the number, but something about the photo that came through as an attachment made his heart jolt in his chest.

It was a photo of three vintage watches, each polished and in extremely good condition. They were wrapped around the same display case but they were each set to three different time zones.

As Arthur was still trying to figure out what he was looking at, a second text came through from the unknown number:

*Last day on set—Bucky’s great-grand-niece brought these in*

This was Eames.

Eames had texted him.

Arthur promptly dropped the phone.

When he stooped to pick it up, his hand was shaking. It’s okay, he thought. I’m accepting what I feel.

What he felt was a giddy sense of apprehension when he went to reply.

*Did you show her the pocket watches?* he texted back.

*YES*, came the reply a moment later, followed by a new image: a silly picture of Eames’ two pocket watches next to the row of three belonging to Buckminster Fuller.

*Excellent*, Arthur replied. *Better than an Oscar.*

*I wouldn’t go that far*, came the response.

After a moment, Arthur responded, *Easier to carry around in your pocket, though,* and received a :D and no more.

He sat looking at it. It was just a stupid emoticon, a colon, a capital D, and it still made him feel like his heart was going to float out of his chest and sail away.

:D

He stared at it for a good fifteen minutes further, wondering if he should say something more, if this was Eames’ way of opening up the lines of communication between them. If it was Eames’ way of telling him he was forgiven. If it meant that—

But no. Kate Winslet’s therapist was right. He could wonder, but not hope. And definitely not expect. He didn’t expect anything from Eames, least of all forgiveness. He hadn’t done anything to earn Eames’ forgiveness, and he knew now that it would take more than a flimsy hastily uttered apology to do it. And with Eames on another continent, that wasn’t likely to happen.
Still. Eames had sent him a picture of Buckminster Fuller’s three watches. He’d seen them, and he’d thought of Arthur.

Somewhere, some part of him still cared.

Arthur closed his eyes. For now, and quite likely forever, that would have to be enough.

He stored the photos in his phone, and saved Eames’ number to his address book. Just in case.

If Arthur had been laboring under the misapprehension that eventually life after the Open House would settle down, spring brought with it a swift end to his delusion.

He didn’t hear from Eames apart from that initial text. Instead, just a week after filming wrapped on the biopic, he heard about Eames: specifically about the new film he’d agreed to do with Fischer.

“Do I need to start filtering your news feeds?” Jia asked him as he nudged her out of the way of the computer monitor. Devin Faraci had declared the rumored collaboration was all but a done deal. Arthur recognized it, vaguely, as one of the scripts Eames had gotten excited about when Fischer had sent him the whole box full months earlier. Tentatively titled The Wake, it involved two estranged brothers returning home to divide up their family estate following their father’s funeral. Directed by Fischer, it seemed to be the spiritual successor to L’Hôpital, and critics were already divided on whether it was the gutsiest creative reunion since Herzog and Kinski, or the stupidest.

“No,” he answered after a moment. “It’s just like any other movie announcement.”

The oddest thing about the news was that Eames and Fischer would both be filming in the UK—specifically, around the Croydon area. Strange, Arthur thought, that he’d agree to film there—that he’d let himself revisit one of the worst parts of his life, especially with Fischer so close by.

He told himself that he had no right to be disappointed in Eames for going through with it, for letting himself be blackmailed. Eames wasn’t a part of his life anymore, and Arthur knew that what he’d done to Eames was almost as bad as what Fischer had done. But he couldn’t help bristling with anger when he thought of Fischer trying to blackmail Eames, or of Eames thinking that he had to let Fischer do it. The idea of Eames believing that his career wouldn’t withstand the scandal still rankled even months after Arthur supposed it should have stopped bothering him.

He thought about texting Eames, even though he had no idea what he could say that wouldn’t make him look like the jealous ex. He had no right to express concern over Eames’ choices, he told himself, and expressing support would seem intrusive at best, disingenuous at worst.

Instead, as the days went by, all of the initial rumors that Eames and Fischer were surely dating again evaporated into nothing. Having seen what their on-the-ground-sleuthing looked like, he was fairly confident that if Eames were dating anyone, the remnants of the Internet community around his former relationship with Eames would be the first to sniff it out—and if they didn’t, their bitter rivals the Eames/Fischer shippers undoubtedly would.

Not that he was checking their Tumblrs or anything.

The night he found out about Eames and the new movie, Arthur found himself dining alone and thinking about love. He was eating linguini and drinking cheap moscato in an Italian restaurant near the bookshop, and making himself more maudlin with every bite. He’d always liked this place, but he hadn’t been to it since before he’d dated Eames. Somehow eating at a dimly lit Italian restaurant with his movie star boyfriend had seemed like the most cliché thing on earth; but just at that moment,
he was the only person dining alone, and he was thinking about it—about dining with someone else, about dating again.

It was time, he thought. Time to really move on, time to prove to himself that he could do it—not just something casual, but a real relationship.

The issue, of course, was that his heart still seemed to crumple in his chest at the thought of getting intimate with anyone who didn’t also come with warm arms and coiled muscle and a grizzled chin and a faint tenor voice and an astonishing array of terrible shirts and a future Oscar nomination. It just wouldn’t be fair to anyone else, he thought, a little stubbornly. No one would want to be the person who dated him after Eames.

 Except that was an excuse. Arthur sighed and stabbed his linguini.

_Pretend until you aren’t pretending anymore_, he thought. Find someone you like, really like, and try to be good to them. If you trip and fall and fail, try again. You did it once, after Yusuf. You can do it again.

Okay, he promised himself. When I meet the right person, I will.

April came, and movie nights continued apace; Arthur showed films he loved like Kiarastomi’s _Ten_ and Waititi’s _Boy_ and Bunuel’s _Exterminating Angel_ and Keaton’s _Sherlock, Jr_ and Tati’s _Playtime_, and then at the end of April he showed a different Tarkovsky film every night for a week, followed by the entire _Infernal Affairs_ trilogy, just because he could.

“Why don’t you ever get science lectures and things?” Tabitha asked him one night. Arthur paused from where he was cleaning the coffee dispensers and looked up. She grabbed a not-quite stale bagel from the kiosk counter and shrugged. “You’re a science bookstore. Don’t bookstores usually have talks and whatnot?”

Arthur frowned. He’d honestly never thought about it. He’d never been big on book signings—those were for chains, or bookstores that actually wanted to sell books. Then again, he’d been selling quite a lot of books lately.

“And you’re a bit famous now, right?” she said. “You could probably get someone cool, like—”

“Brian Cox!” said Ty the next day. “That’s Brian Cox! In our store!”

“Don’t be so loud,” hissed Jorby, “You might scare him away!”

“But he’s Brian Cox,” said Ty. They were elbowing each other back and forth when Arthur finally walked over.

“We have a few of your books in stock,” he said by way of greeting. “Why does E=mc²? and _The Quantum Universe_. We’d be honored if you’d autograph them for us.”

“Ah, you’re the owner,” said Brian Cox. “I have a professor friend who was telling me about this place, said you’d had some sort of grand open house that got all kinds of attention. Really nice space, isn’t it? I was looking to cover a few books on particle and quantum physics for my next BBC special, and one of the producers mentioned this spot might be good to film in. She called it the celebrity bookstore on Notting Hill. We could film you, too, if you like, talking about a few of your
“Oh,” said Arthur. “That’d be cool.”

And it was. Cox had asked Arthur to talk about a few of his favorite science and engineering books, so he took them on a tour of the Robie House’s section on urban development—specifically, the giant note informing customers that they weren’t allowed to buy copies of Jane Jacobs’ The Death and Life of Great American Cities unless they also promised to buy and read its spiritual successor and strident critique of gentrification, Sharon Zukin’s Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places. Feeling very American, Arthur explained the context and background of both books and their examination of various cities, particularly New York, at the mid-century and in the Aughts. He was aware he sounded dorky and a bit obsessed with urban planning, but he didn’t much care. After that, he threw in shout-outs for Buckminster Fuller, *Six Easy Pieces*, and *Nightwork*, a book about the history of hacking at MIT. When he was done, Cox said, “Nice job, great selection,” and gave him a thumbs up.

The cameraman, a man whose tapered hips and muscular arms had been distracting Arthur for the last half hour, looked up and said, “Hey, do you happen to have a copy of that hacker book here in the store? Someone recommended it to me a while back but they didn’t have it on Kindle, so.” He shrugged.

Arthur laughed and said, “Yeah, we’ve got a few. I’ll try not to hold your fear of analog technology against you.”

The cameraman winked and said, “Just wait til you get me started on filming on digital, mate.”

His name was Djibril. Arthur let himself flirt, let himself lean in, let himself feel interested enough to ask him out after the session was over.

Djibril was from Mali by way of Marseilles, and it seemed as though everything he owned came in shades of blue. He carried himself as though everything around him were a ceremony and he were the emcee. “You don’t do this much, do you?” he asked when Arthur found himself blushing through the first date. Then, before Arthur could explain he was a little rusty, he leaned in and captured Arthur’s hand. “It’s okay,” he said, with a rich, throaty laugh. “I’m nervous, too.”

Arthur doubted that very much, but he smiled and said, “So this can be a dress rehearsal for the real first date, then.”

“I like that,” said Djibril. “Don’t laugh at me if I forget my lines.”

“I should probably tell you that I’m getting over someone,” Arthur said.

Djibril’s eyebrows went up.

“How recent is this someone?” he asked.

“Five months,” said Arthur.

“Ah,” said Djibril. “You must have been together a long time.”

Arthur swallowed. “We were actually only together for two months,” he said. Djibril’s eyebrows went up even further. “But we met a year ago, and things sort of... started happening,” he said. “You might say it was a slow burn.”

“That’s an intriguing way of putting it,” said Djibril. He leaned in.
Arthur leaned back. “You might also say he was Eames,” he said.

Djibril’s eyebrows reached peak lift status. “Eames, the Eames?” he said.

Arthur could feel his cheeks flaring. “Yes,” he said.

Djibril settled his chin in his hand. “Tell me everything, minou,” he said.

So Arthur did.

The BBC program aired two weeks later, by which point he’d seen the inside of Djibril’s posh apartment in Hammersmith, and the inside of his even posher bedroom. Djibril had only spent a bit of time in the bookstore after filming there, but the final edited version of the special spent a flattering amount of time canvassing the shelves and delivering sweeping zooms up into the lofts and sunlit rafters.

Arthur was very liberal with his gratitude. Djibril took him for baguettes in the morning.

“This is good,” said Kate Winslet’s therapist when Arthur worked up the nerve to tell her about it. “Don’t chicken out now.”

If he’d thought that the press attention over the past year was intense, it was nothing to the impact of being shown on BBC1, or the immediate surge in customers who found the store in the weeks that followed. Now instead of wondering if he could get lecturers in the store, Arthur found himself fielding an endless string of requests to host various events at the Robie House. After his inbox built beyond the point he could tolerate, he spent an evening staring at his budget and then hired Jia the next day as his first full-time employee.

The niggling feeling that Arthur really should look into finding an investor now became a matter of some urgency. The expansion had pretty well depleted most of Arthur’s reserve, and while the bookstore had been doing quite well lately, all of the business advice Arthur had been reading of late told him that he needed to have a much larger financial cushion on hand if he wanted to survive the economic downturn, much less sell print non-fiction at a time when only genre e-books were doing their part to save the publishing industry.

It had been a year since Eames first came into his shop. A year ago, none of this had mattered to Arthur; the bookstore had been an excuse, something to do while he was busy hiding from the world, from life.

Now, the bookstore wasn’t just his refuge, the place where he lived and ate and slept and breathed; it was Jia’s livelihood. It was one of the most stable environments Ty and Jorby and the other kids who volunteered from MIND had in their lives. It was where the college students who tutored their teen counterparts in geometry and physics and astronomy and calculus came to bond over high-pressure college environments and a love of science and math. It was where children stopped by to gawk at the new art displays each month. It was the place where he’d watched Tabitha go from a surly shoplifter to a dependable assistant who never looked away from the screen during movie nights. He’d spotted her reading a book on applying to film school two nights after he screened Chungking Express. It was the place where Ariadne had launched herself into the air and flown. The Robie House had done all of that.

It didn’t belong to him anymore—not just to him. He had to find new ways to keep it sustainable, for all their sakes.

“But the investors I’ve talked to don’t care about the store—they just want me to expand to more
locations,” he told Mal glumly over dinner at Ariadne’s. Her defense was swift approaching, and she’d been recruiting Arthur increasingly to fetch takeaway, critique her modeling video, help her rehearse her presentation, and remind her to use phrases like “Yes, I’m aware of that debate” and “I concur with the seminal literature in the field.” Mal had volunteered to act as a kind of practice examiner, which mostly meant she spent lots of time saying “no, be more specific,” and Ariadne spent lots of time grinding her teeth and revising her thesis and making faces at Mal when her back was turned.

“I don’t want to become a chain franchise,” Arthur griped. “Who even thinks that’s a good business plan for a bookstore right now anyway?”

“Why don’t you just do a crowdfunding campaign?” asked Mal. “Everybody’s doing it. And after that BBC thing you’d have plenty of attention. Now’s a good time.”

“But he can’t just ask people for money,” Ariadne said. “He needs some sort of project to tie the funds to, so people think there’s an actual occasion and reason to contribute beyond just ‘we need money.’”

“That’s only on Kickstarter,” Mal said. “If you use Indiegogo you can get away with anything.”

“I don’t want to get away with something,” Arthur said. “I just want to make sure the bookstore can sustain itself.”

“Why not do what rich people do when they need money?” Mal asked. “Hold a fundraiser.”

Ariadne said, “No, no more formal events. Arthur is banned from all formal events for at least another six months.”

“Agreed,” said Arthur. “Crowdfunding it is.”

Mal folded her hands beneath her chin. “Why don’t you ask Jia or one of the others? It’s not as if Ariadne will be around forever, and they all practically live there now.”

“Excuse you,” said Ariadne haughtily, “I shall live for a thousand years. All shall love me and despair.”

Mal sent her a small smile. “Let’s hope we can keep Arthur’s bookstore around that long so you can continue to wield your dominion over it.”

The next day, Arthur gathered all his assistants around him in his office.

“Oy!” said Tabitha. “We can’t all fit in here!”

“Right,” said Arthur.

Arthur re-gathered all his assistants around him behind the front counter.

“I need you to tell me what you’d like to see the store do next,” he said.

They all stared at him.

“You mean like, other than sell books?” Jorby asked.

“Projects and things, right?” Ty asked, and then, “Wait, are we going to be cut if we don’t give the right answer?”
“No,” said Arthur, “nothing like that.”

“Do you mean like the store expansion?” asked Jia. “It seems like we’re pretty well set for a while, yeah?”

“Think beyond the space,” Arthur said. “Think about the books, the community, the people who come in and what they might want next. Think bigger.”

“You should donate science books to underfunded schools,” said Tabitha.

They turned and stared.

“What?” asked Tabitha. “He likes to give books away.”

And so, Jia came to spend her first week as the Robie House’s first full-time employee calling local schools and finding out whether they had any textbook shortages.

“Wait,” said Djibril when Arthur tried explaining what he was thinking about. “I don’t understand how giving books away is supposed to help you make money.”

“We can take in more than we give away so we raise awareness, get people interested, do something good for the community, and raise support for ourselves,” said Arthur.

“But what’s wrong with just having a fundraiser?”

“The last time we threw a public event here things got out of hand.” Arthur explained, briefly, the Open House disaster.

“Honestly it sounds like it was a fun time,” said Djibril.


Djibril laughed. “Well, the clientele is mainstream even if you aren’t.”

“Don’t say that,” said Arthur. “Anyway, public appearances and things—I think I just have to ease into them again. I haven’t had a panic attack in a while and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Huh,” said Djibril. “Fair enough, but I still think it’s your loss.”

Arthur’s hopes for an easy book giveaway were soon thwarted, however.

“None?” Arthur stared. “You mean nobody wants free science books?”

“None!” Jia fiddled with her nails and looked annoyed. “One of the clerks actually said to me, ‘London hasn’t had a textbook shortage since the ‘80s, it’s the teachers we need, not the books.’”

“But I thought every school needed books,” Arthur said. “Aren’t textbooks expensive?”

“Yeah, but that’s partly because schools are using them less,” Jia said. “Another one told me even if they get a bulk textbook donation they can’t really use them in the classroom because the books have to be approved by the school council, and they usually just wind up sitting in the library for most of the year.”

“Huh,” said Arthur.

“And the students hate them because they’re heavy and hard to lug around, and the teachers say half
the time they’re outdated anyway, especially if it’s a subject like geography or physics, so often the books will just be used as a secondary resource that students can check out from the library if they need to.”

“I feel a bit outdated myself right now,” said Arthur.

“It’s true, though,” said Jia. “In my secondary school we almost never used text books, everything was from lesson plans.”

“Huh,” said Arthur again. The tiny voice in the back of his head was murmuring. There was something there, something important, if he could just wrap his head around what.

Before he could figure out what it was, he heard muttered cursing coming from the front register.

Arthur approached. “Something wrong?”

Ty and Jorby exchanged glances. “No,” Jorby said uncertainly.

Arthur grimaced. “That usually means we’re getting hammered on Twitter,” he said.

“Not exactly,” Ty said.

“It’s just a picture,” Jorby said. “I don’t know if you should—”

“Budge over,” Arthur said, and nudged them both aside to get a better look at the computer.

It was an Instagram post that had been re-posted to an endless string of Twitter accounts and Tumblrs.

“Ran across a picture I nabbed of these two on the Heath last fall,” it said. “Nice, thought I’d share.”

There they were, Eames and Arthur, walking along the jogging path Eames used to drag Arthur on in the mornings. Arthur knew exactly which morning it had been—a chilly Thursday morning when a shower the previous night had turned everything into slush. Eames had given up trying to do a normal run after slipping and nearly twisting his ankle on the mud-strewn path. Arthur had taken his arm after one almost-fall, and Eames had kept it, linking his with Arthur’s and insisting that Arthur didn’t at all look like an alien, toting an umbrella for two while wearing spandex jogging shorts and trainers. Arthur had snorted and wrapped his scarf around Eames’ neck, looping it so they each had one end.

The photographer had snapped it just as Arthur was drawing back with his end of the scarf and Eames was leaning in to recapture his arm. They seemed momentarily wrapped up in each other, quite literally, scarf and umbrella entangled, hands drifting towards each other.

Arthur stared at it a moment, remembering the way the wind had nipped at his legs and the way Eames had distracted him from the cold weather by attempting to strike up earnest conversations with the pigeons as they passed. Eames had been warm and solid beside him. On the way back to Arthur’s, he’d stopped at a coffee shop and bought Arthur the sweetest, hottest mug of white hot cocoa Arthur had ever tasted.

Arthur said, “I don’t think that’s anything to worry about.”

Ty and Jorby exchanged that strange look again.

“It’s just the picture—it’s this,” Ty said, clicking over to a different image. It was a twitter
screencap, a picture of what other people were doing on the site.

The “eames” twitter account had favorited someone’s upload of the picture, and someone else had screengrabbed it and circulated it.

That was all—just a little gold star beneath the tweet. Arthur let out a rush of air and clicked over to Eames’ twitter account to make sure it wasn’t just a photomnip. Eames only had a few favorites, so the tweet was still there at the top of the page.

“Oh,” he said.

“Oh, god, don’t cry again,” said Jorby.

Arthur pinched the bridge of his nose and ignored the way his eyes suddenly stung. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he said. “It’s fine. Just ignore this and any questions we get about it. It’ll be like we never saw it.”

When he got back to his office, he dug out his phone. After a moment’s consideration, he sent a text:

*It was a nice day. I never thanked you for the hot chocolate.*

He stood thumbing the keypad for a moment longer and then put it away again. That was probably a bad idea, he thought. Kate Winslet’s therapist might say he was attempting to insert himself back into Eames’ life. But Eames had started it. Anyway it was just a text. Eames’ favorite was just that, a single tweet favorited for any number of reasons. It could mean anything. It could be another overture at conversation, and if it was, well, Arthur had made one of his own. It wasn’t obsession. Just... reciprocity. So there.

It might not even be Eames’ number any longer, anyway.

He busied himself googling for information about textbook shortages instead of thinking about the picture or what Eames could have meant by favoriting it. Jia was right; there really wasn’t anything out there about textbook shortages in the UK, though there was plenty of need throughout the developing world. Arthur considered that; it would be easy enough to start regularly donating books to Kenya or the Virgin Islands or somewhere else with a severe book shortage. He could arrange it and make it happen without needing to crowdfund for the bookstore. And he would, he decided. But it still wasn’t quite enough, not quite what he wanted.

In a weird and possibly cliché way, he thought, what he really wanted was to make the books on his shelves mean more to the people who wandered into his store—the ones who came because they’d heard he’d been on TV, the ones who came for the market and then wandered further up Portobello Road and wended their way in. The thought of schools abandoning textbooks for more hands-on teaching made a world of sense, but it saddened him, too. Books weren’t meant to sit sterile on shelves, un-debated and unread. Least of all were the books he sold in the Robie House. Despite the fact that the store was roughly 200 percent more active and busy than it had been a year ago, Arthur still had to talk himself into selling books to customers who didn’t look as though they fully appreciated what they were getting their hands on at least once a day. Sometimes more than once a day if there was a new article about Carl Sagan somewhere. He’d focused a lot on making sure people understood that his bookstore was special. But so were the books on his shelves.

But he had no idea how to translate all that into an investor pitch, or a crowdfunding campaign, or anything.

He’d stopped googling and was contemplating this when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He looked
down.

*I never thanked you for a lot of things.*

Arthur straightened in his chair. He set the phone down on his desk and placed both hands flat atop it, gathering himself. He didn’t feel particularly anxious, he noted. That was good. That was great. He felt... he felt okay, actually.

He texted back. *Please don’t. You don’t owe me anything.*

Eames didn’t text back for so long that Arthur’s stomach started to sink in disappointment.

He was about to start inventorying things in annoyance at himself when his phone buzzed again.

*Do you have a moment to talk?*

*Yeah,* Arthur replied before he could remind himself that talking to Eames was a terrible idea, talking to Eames was making the river flow backward, was—

His phone was ringing.

“Hi,” he answered, trying and failing not to sound a bit breathless.

“Arthur,” said Eames, and his voice was warm and liquid and everything, everything Arthur had missed.

He was already sitting down, so Arthur let himself sink down into the seat as far as he could reasonably go without sliding off all together.

“I was in a terribly crowded corner shop in Tottenham,” Eames said, “I wanted to get somewhere quieter for this.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Hotel?”

“Suite,” said Eames. “Prianka is pulling a face in the corner—that’s her way of saying hi.”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Hi.”

“Hello,” said Eames, his voice settling into a soothing kind of purr. Arthur closed his eyes. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been—we’ve all been doing well,” Arthur said. “Ariadne’s about to defend her dissertation. I’m about to launch a crowdfunding campaign, I think.”

“Why?” asked Eames. “I thought things had been going well.”

“They have been,” said Arthur. “But I’d really like to have a better way to bring in cash without depending on media windfalls, and I think—I don’t know, I want to do something more, something—something bigger.”

He heard Eames draw in a sharp breath. “Of course you do,” he said. He sounded so... he sounded so much like himself.

“Eames,” said Arthur, doing his best to keep his voice steady. “I wanted to thank you for the book,” he said. “For—for what you wrote.”
“Oh,” said Eames, sounding thrown off guard. “Likewise.”

“And—and I want you to know I’ve been seeing a therapist regularly since the Open House. Twice a week, actually. Kate Winslet’s therapist, actually.”

“Oh,” said Eames. “Wow. That’s great. That’s—that’s fantastic and I’m happy to, to hear it, but—you don’t have to tell me, Arthur. I didn’t call to make you feel like you had to explain or apologize—”

“No, but I want you to know,” Arthur said. “You tried to tell me before I fucked everything up and I didn’t get it. I get it, all of it. I was an asshole, to you, to Ari, to everyone. But things are better now. They’re a lot better.”

Eames was quiet for a moment. Arthur listened to him draw in a breath, then another.

“I’m sorry, too,” he said after a moment, and Arthur blanched. Of course Eames would be sorry. Arthur knew far too well how he’d internalized the breakup with Fischer. God, all of the apologies needed to be on Arthur’s side.

“Don’t be,” he said. “You didn’t do anything that warranted what I did to you, Eames. It was all me. I mean it. Don’t blame yourself for any of it.”

“Arthur...” said Eames, and then he sighed audibly. “Look, I called because I wanted to ask you for a favor. There’s an interview coming out in the Guardian in two weeks, on a Friday, I think. I gave it to them a few weeks ago, just after I came back to London.”

“Okay,” Arthur said, not bothering to mask his confusion.

“Will you read it?” Eames asked him.

“That’s it?” Arthur asked, blinking. “That’s the favor?”

“Just that,” said Eames.

“Alright,” said Arthur.

“You’ll read it.”

“Of course I will.”

“Thank you.” Eames sounded, weirdly enough, relieved. “Would it be weird,” he asked, “if I said Twitter had informed me that you were dating again? I wasn’t keeping tabs on you or anything, only the Internet seems to be—well. I suspect you’re used to it by now.”

Arthur’s heart clenched. Eames’ voice was halting, and Arthur could hear the forced nonchalance, and oh, god. Eames was so much better at pretending than he was, but Arthur knew, with sudden surety, that this was Eames, Eames in the same place Arthur was: still muddling through like himself, both of them trying and failing to pretend until they didn’t have to pretend any more.

Arthur had been an absolute idiot. About so many things.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s only fair even if you were—keeping tabs, I mean. Turnabout, and all.”

Eames laughed, a little awkwardly—but it was a laugh, and if Arthur’s heartbeat stuttered and tripped, he told himself he recovered easily enough. “Quite by accident, I saw your BBC segment,”
he said. “It was the day after I got back to London. I was re-reading Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth as a kind of last hurrah to Bucky—and I suddenly looked up and there you were, on TV, talking about the book I was holding in my hands.”


“I mean, I’m not saying it was a fortuitous chance meeting or anything, but—well. There you were.”

Arthur closed his eyes. “Although I have to say as sendoffs go, you’d’ve been much better off reading I Seem to Be a Verb.”

“I know,” said Eames. “But the Operating Manual is a bit shorter, and I’d been thinking about the part where he talks about emancipating everyone so that we can all have a chance to go fishing.”

Arthur laughed. “Yeah, that’s right after he calls the United Nations a bunch of UFO cultists. He’s talking about creating universal learning opportunities, sort of, but, well.” He laughed again, and then, over the sound of Eames’ accompanying snicker, suddenly all the lights in his brain fired up at once.

“Lesson plans,” he said. “Lesson plans.”

“Come again?” said Eames.

“The crowdfund,” said Arthur. “I was going to give books away to area schools but none of them wanted them because they said textbooks were heavy and outdated and kids would rather learn from lesson plans anyway, and what if we—Eames, what if we made lesson plans and readers’ guides for the books in the store? Not all of them, obviously, but, I don’t know, a hundred or two hundred or so, the most important, the ones everyone needs to read, the ones that have ideas you could easily teach students. Like, I don’t know, A Pattern Language and Six Easy Pieces and Warped Passages and Gödel, Escher, Bach and A Brief History of Time and everything by Diamond and Zimmer and—and, I could do that. I could totally do that. Do you think people would go for it?”

“Yes,” Eames said. “I mean ordinarily, I’d say, no, because it’s hard enough to get kids interested in science anyway, much less books written and aimed at adults, but if you could simplify it all, make it fun, then I think it’d be a wonderful resource—and you could, I know you could.”

“We could focus on pulling out one or two main ideas from each book,” Arthur said, feeling himself overflow and not really able to help any of it, “then break each idea down into activities for kids. For the readers’ guides we could set up a display in the store, kind of like York Notes but shorter and personalized. Ooh, and we could have readers vote on a portion of the books so we don’t skip something that’s really popular. We could get help with the lesson plans from the STEM tutors—oh, you don’t know about them, they’re new—and I think we could probably get input from a couple of the book authors or the publishers. That’d be cool, right?”

“Yes, absolutely, but you’d have to make them available online, though,” said Eames. “And you’d probably want to sort the books and the lesson plans out by age level and reading level for the sake of all the parents and teachers.”

“Right,” said Arthur, already reaching for his moleskine and writing notes down in a feverish wave of excitement in what was probably indecipherable handwriting. “Right, sure, we could make a database for them on the website and offer them as PDFs or something. Shit, I’ll have to call the marketing boutique, I think they forgot I existed. We can get someone techy to code the list after we figure out what it is. Oh, and we’ll need to have an editable version in case teachers need to modify the plans. Do you think we can do a sub-section for women in science? Or maybe for uni students?
We should probably do separate guides for college students altogether—"

“Arthur, Arthur,” said Eames, and it sounded to Arthur as though he were grinning, “I don’t want to
deter you from any or all of these things, but before you get carried away, you need to think long and
hard about what you can actually afford to do without stretching yourself too thin. This sounds like it
will be a lot of work, and the last thing you need is to burn out.”

“Right, right,” said Arthur. “But, but that’s the beauty of a crowdfunding campaign, right? It keeps
me from going overboard because I can only do a pre-determined amount of work unless I set stretch
goals.”

“So you can start out lower than what you want to do,” said Eames, “say, make the project 50 books
instead of 100 books when the upper limit you’ve set is 200 books?”

“Yes, exactly,” said Arthur. “The last stretch goal should be the maximum amount of work we think
we can accomplish with all our available resources—that’s basically just me and Jia and probably a
couple of the tutoring volunteers at this point.”

“So, assuming you’ll do the work of two people because you will,” said Eames, “and leaving aside
the readers’ guides for now because you can probably write them in your sleep, you have about five
people working to create 100 to 200 lesson plans.”

“Maybe 250,” said Arthur.

“200,” said Eames. “So that’s roughly, what do you think, one to two hours per lesson plan?”

“Factoring in the time it takes to write and print them all, two is probably accurate—maybe two and a
half because some will also involve rereading portions of the book.”

“So a hundred hours of work per person combined with printing and design and website costs,” said
Eames.

“Stretched out over let’s say a six-month period—”

“Make it twelve, Arthur, don’t forget you’ll still have to deal with creating and running the campaign
for at least a month or two and then giving out perks on top of it. Oh, and make sure as many of your
perks as possible are easy ones—ones that don’t incur an extra cost, like, oh, offering a few free
tickets to your movie nights. Virtual ones are the easiest—a Skype session with someone famous—”

He broke off, coughed, and added, “I’m sure Winslet or Tennant would want to help.”

Arthur couldn’t help the smile that broke across his face. “Virtual deliverables, got it,” he said.
Arthur obviously wasn’t going to ask Eames to help, but the idea of him wanting to made something
loosen in Arthur’s chest, made him feel inexpressibly light. “So, a year for the total project, and let’s
say nine months for the actual work on the lesson plans,” he said. “That’s less than three hours a
week for everybody else and six for me assuming I do double the work. That’s easy. Eames, that’s a
cakewalk.”

“And that’s the stretch goal, yeah?” said Eames. “So anything extra can go toward the upkeep of the
bookstore.”

“And if we can sell the guides and lesson plans after the project, then we have an extra source of
income,” said Arthur.

“Arthur,” said Eames, “I think that sounds amazing. If anyone can get London excited about science
lesson plans, it’s you.”
“Thank you,” said Arthur, flushing.

“But don’t get in over your head, I mean it.”

Arthur laughed. “I think I can promise that,” he said. He was suddenly acutely aware of how long he and Eames had been talking, and how, even after all this time, Eames was still—well—

“Eames,” he said. “I—I need to, I mean, I want to go research some of this. I’ll read the interview.”

“Okay,” said Eames. “Maybe—maybe we can talk again afterward.”

“Sure,” said Arthur. “Maybe. Thanks for—you know.” He hoped his tone managed to convey that “you know” meant “everything,” more or less.

“Sure,” said Eames. After a tiny pause, he added “Right. Good luck,” and rang off, leaving Arthur with his head buzzing and his fingers already racing across the keys of his laptop.

By the next day Arthur had worked out a total plan for world domination—that is, he’d written a draft of his entire crowdfunding proposal, gotten feedback from Jia and the STEM tutors, and sent off requests to Kate and Brian Cox to do Skype sessions as perks. He’d calculated the cost for the approximate number of man-hours they’d need and the amount they’d need to raise to have a viable source of funding for the bookstore on top of the project itself.

By the day after that he’d gotten positive responses from both Kate and Brian Cox, who was willing to put him in touch with pretty much every famous scientist Arthur could wish for. Ty and Jorby were already making wish lists. Tabitha was already referring to him as the Nutty Professor.

“I think you might want to scale back,” said Djibril a few days later. Arthur had spent them all neck-deep in researching the ins and outs of marketing a successful crowdfunding project on social media—much to the delight of his PR firm—and now he’d moved on to the schematics of lesson plan design. He’d printed out about a dozen or so of his favorite science examples from secondary school plans, and even he had to admit that his office was starting to look a little mad scientisty.

Djibril, eventually realizing that Arthur was going to be buried in Kickstarter for a while, had finally accepted his invitation to come over and help out. Except apparently “helping” meant “distracting.”

“I know a great little French cafe near here,” said Djibril, massaging Arthur’s shoulders. “We could duck out for dinner? You wouldn’t even have to close those 28 tabs.”

“Nah, Mal brought us the leftovers from some university party she had for lunch,” Arthur said. “We ate like kings.” He’d also written out a list of goals to answer for each book:

— Why should I read this book?
— What did this book do for human progress?
— What will it do for me?
— After I read it, what can I do next?

After a moment’s consideration, he scratched out “What will it do for me?” and wrote “How can I understand it?” Then, next to it, he wrote, “Include a practical real-world application” in parentheses.

“That’s great,” said Djibril, “but you still need to come up for air.” He leaned in and whisked a series of kisses along Arthur’s neckline.

“But this is fun,” said Arthur, offering his neck anyway. “And the sooner I get the project going the sooner I can collect the funds.”
“I know,” said Djibril, pulling back, “but I have to say, you’re being a little obsessive about all of this.”

“That’s how I get, though,” said Arthur. He stopped typing and looked up. “It used to bother me,” he said. “Like I used to worry I was too intense for people. It’s not really bothering me anymore, though. Huh.”

Djibril frowned. “So, you’re saying this is just going to keep being a problem.”

Arthur laughed, which he later conceded might not have been the greatest response. “No,” he said. His inability to stop grinning probably wasn’t helping either. “I’m saying I don’t think it’s a problem at all.”

“I dumped someone!” he told Ariadne triumphantly later, because while ‘eating’ didn’t fall high on his list of things to leave the computer for, getting drunk with Ariadne did. “Me! I did the dumping!”

“That’s awesome!” Ariadne crowed. They clinked shot glasses. “Wait, why is that awesome?”

“Because I’m always the dumpee!” Arthur said. “I’m never the dumper!”

“Well, as long as you’re really happy about it,” Ariadne said, and her snort of laughter proved totally infectious.

“I think I am,” said Arthur. “I mean, even though he was nice,” said Arthur.

“Okay,” said Ariadne.

“And really hot,” said Arthur.

“Was he as hot as Eames? What? Oh, don’t give me that look, I know all about your phone call.” Arthur nearly dropped his glenlivet.

“I have a man on the inside, remember.” She held up her phone.

“Prianka?” said Arthur. “Shit, did she text you?” He made a grab for it. She jumped up and bounded across her studio, nearly sloshing her whisky. Arthur sat his glass down very carefully, and then did not at all wobble as he crossed the floor after her.

“She may have sent me a selfie showing her rolling her eyes while Eames blabs on the phone in the background,” she said. “And no, you can’t see it.”

“What? How is that fair!” She ducked under his attempt to nab the phone and darted out of reach.

“You’re a rolling river!” she screeched as he succeeded in grabbing her shirttail. “No flowing backwards!”

“He called me, that doesn’t count!”

“Because you texted him!”

“Because he sent me a clear personal message via his Twitter favorites!”

“You’re a psycho!” Arthur finally got a hand on the phone only for Ariadne to shove it down beneath her shirt. He let go and backed off like wildfire and she collapsed, laughing. Arthur joined her, flopping over on his side in order to retrieve his shot glass.
“Seriously,” she said, “you weren’t an asshole to that guy, right?”

“Djibril,” Arthur said. “I don’t think so. It was a very civil breakup. I basically told him I was finally at a place where I was okay with my overall weirdness, and it was okay if he wasn’t.”

“And he wasn’t?” Ariadne narrowed her eyes at him. “And this had nothing to do with you and Eames?”

“I’m sure. He just wasn’t dorky enough for me,” Arthur laughed. “That phone call was days ago, anyway. So you can totally let me see the selfie since it’s outdated.”

“I totally can’t let you see the selfie,” said Ariadne. “If I let you see the selfie, Prianka could find out because she knows all and sees all. And she could decide I’m only communicating with her because I’m spying on her boss for his crazy ex, and that would be bad because then she could cut off all contact with me.”

“I didn’t know you two were that close,” Arthur said.

Ariadne poured herself another shot. “We’re not,” she said. “But I’m hopeful.” She clinked Arthur’s glass and grinned. “Prianka has a sister who’s even hotter than she is.”

Arthur’s Kickstarter campaign was a mild success right from the start. The BBC and the Guardian both covered it, and his bookshop’s 6,000 Twitter followers ballooned over night to 10,000, and then again to 14,000. They hit their initial, quite modest goal within a number of hours, and then hit their first stretch goal within another day or two. Everything after that point would ostensibly go to make the lesson plans better and deepen the amount of time they could spend on each one. Arthur tried not to obsess over watching the Kickstarter barometer crawl upward but it was irresistible. He’d already started working on his favorite lesson plan ideas even though he technically wasn’t supposed to start until after the campaign ended in another three weeks.

On a bright Friday morning in June, Ariadne defended her doctoral candidacy. Arthur closed the bookshop early every night for a week beforehand in order to help her perfect her presentation.

The morning of her defense, Arthur left Jia in charge of the bookshop and met Mal at the university. “I talked to her external examiner,” Mal said by way of greeting, “and he’s very positive. He said her thesis seemed to be in extremely good shape.”

“Does she know that?” said Arthur.

Mal laughed. “No doctoral student ever thinks they’re in extremely good shape before the defense.”

Arthur wasn’t an expert on doctoral defenses, and at times Ariadne got a little over his head; but it was fascinating to hear his bookstore being spoken about as an ecosystem. Her thesis was applying the core principles of design science to concepts of urban and environmental renewal in a fixed ecosystem, as demonstrated by her renovation and expansion of the Robie House.

“The idea is that by marshaling what we call leverage points in a system,” she explained, “you can make a small change to effect a big change. So by, for example, switching out support studs with cantilevering and crossbeams, you add what Buckminster Fuller called tensegrity to the entire second floor—tensile-based strength and structural integrity—and suddenly you have more space and more support for more things. Through the redesign, we were able to add in shelves, a broader crosswalk, and the half-loft design.”
“Was the goal simply optimizing for space?” one of the examiners asked.

Ariadne shook her head. “No, see, the goal of this type of expansion is to create and energize a sense of holistic engagement with the space, so that the spatial design simultaneously invites people in and asks them, encourages them, to take ownership of it.

“So, for example, in the section where we constructed the bookshelves as a maze, you can’t just put a book back on the shelf because you first have to navigate your way back to that part of the maze. You become an active part of the environment.

“You also can’t just sit down and read the way you might at a Waterstones, because the chairs and bookshelves in the new expanded part of the store were designed to fit into the overall architectural flow of the space. So when you sit down to read at the Robie House, you’re reading books on architecture and applied science while you, yourself, are becoming a part of the architecture of the space.”

“That kind of incorporation of the body into architectural spaces has often been a part of the discussion around urban renewal,” the outside examiner asked her. “But I’m curious as to how you think this particular feature of the Robie House expansion reflects the idea of design science.”

Ariadne nodded. “So, obviously Buckminster Fuller synthesized the idea of design science. The core of design science is that there needs to be an overarching theme, a holistic engineering scheme in the approach to the work.”

She flashed Arthur a glance where he sat in the audience. “The owner of the Robie House, who’s in the audience today, is a huge fan of Buckminster Fuller and architectural philosophy in general. Last year was also one of huge change for him. I saw him actively seeking to turn himself into a more outgoing and involved member of his community, and he used his bookstore as a way to help himself do that. He started the renovation, he hired volunteers, he started art projects and reading groups, he made himself go to business meetings and Notting Hill entrepreneurial events. So he was already integrating the body into his immediate environment in a way that aligned with the principles of design science, whether he knew it or not. When he asked me to redesign the space, I did it with a single core philosophical principle, which I borrowed from Fuller.”

“Which was?”

She took a breath. “I seem to be a verb,” she said. “Everything in the redesign is done in a way to suggest constant motion and connectivity, from the continuous flow of the second-floor boardwalks to the way the broadbeams above the half-loft also function as bookshelves, to the way the second floor-landing can also double as a balcony for movie nights. I wanted to build a space that Arthur and the community around the bookstore could move with and evolve with. A space that would help him to keep moving and challenging himself.”

Next to him in the audience, Mal smiled. Arthur found that he was beaming, and couldn’t stop.

“Do you think it worked?” asked the examiner.


“Accepted upon submission!” she screamed when it was all over, diving straight for Arthur and enveloping him in a bear hug. “Do you know how often that happens? Never. That never happens!” She squeezed him until he said, “Ow,” and then released him and hugged Mal, who sent Arthur a
panicked look but gave her a kiss on the cheek and told her she was proud of her.

“We’re taking you to lunch,” she said as they emerged from the hallowed halls of the Architectural Association into the sunlight and Bedford Square. “Or rather, I’m taking you. And then Arthur can start working off your student loans.”

“Or maybe not,” said Arthur, in the middle of unearthing his phone from where he’d silenced it during the examination. “Jia left me five messages.” He glanced up to see Ariadne fixing him a stony-eyed glare. “I’m checking them!” he held the phone up as proof and put it on speaker just as Jia answered.

“Arthur! Oh my god!”

“Is that Jia?” Ariadne asked. “I didn’t know she was capable of inflection.”

“Check the Kickstarter!” In the background Ty and Jorby were laughing. One of them yelled, “Yeah, we’ll wait!”

Arthur pulled up the Kickstarter page and Mal and Ariadne gathered round.


“Are you seeing it?” Jia said.


“No!” said Jia. “It’s all from one donation! Look at the backer page!”

Arthur thumbed over.

“Holy shit,” said Ariadne.

“Right?!” said Jia.

“Holy shit,” said Ariadne. “Saint Gilmore, that’s a lot of zeros behind that five.”

“It’s from username trimtab,” said Mal. She looked up at Arthur, then at Ariadne, then at Arthur again.

“No,” said Ariadne. “No fucking way.”

“Is it Eames?” asked Ty in the background. “It’s Eames, right?”

“Shit,” said Arthur, finding his voice at last. “Shit, today’s Friday. Fuck. Okay. Fuck.” He handed the phone blindly to Ariadne and then crossed the road to the newsstand in Victoria Plaza.

Ariadne and Mal followed with Jia saying, “Wait, what’s going on?”

“I think Arthur’s in shock,” said Ariadne.

“It is Eames,” said Ty, “I fucking knew it, I told you they were getting back together.”

“You are so full of it!” said Jorby.

“No, shut up, you owe me twenty quid!”
Arthur was buying a copy of the *Guardian* from a bemused vendor. Eames’ face was plastered all over the front page.

“You’re shitting me,” said Ariadne. “Arthur, you swore nothing was going on!”

“He did the same thing last year, I don’t know why you fell for it again,” said Mal.

The headline read:

**EAMES REVEALS HE FORGED IDENTITY AT START OF CAREER**

BAFTA-winning actor says the Royal Dramatic Academy accepted ‘a student who never existed.’

Arthur’s jaw dropped.

“Arthur?” said Ariadne. She looked down at the headline, then back up at him.

“What’s happening?” asked Jia.

“I think Arthur’s going to have to call you back,” said Ariadne, ringing off to a chorus of “No!” from the three of them.

“I have no idea what’s going on right now,” she said.

“Maybe we should let him read the interview in private,” said Mal.

“Oh, no way,” said Ariadne. “Scoot.” She grabbed one side of the newspaper. “This says Eames gave them an exclusive interview... woah, he forged his transcript to get into uni?” She looked at Arthur. “Did you know about this?”

Arthur was riveted. “Not so much,” he said, reading.

The interview went on to detail Eames’ sordid and unknown past: how he had never really known his mother, who had died when he was young; how his mother’s death sent the family spiraling out of control. His father, a petty thief, had taught Eames the tricks of his trade—pickpocketing, purse-snatching, forgery, confidence scams. After his older brother died of an overdose, his father began drinking and turned absent. Eames was thirteen at the time and barely in school, but he had already gotten his first taste of acting and he didn’t want to lose it.

It was eerie how much of Eames’ story from there aligned with Arthur’s research even though he’d already known he’d been right. To get into the RDA, Eames had falsified his application, falsified his transcripts, listed his mother’s maiden name, “Eames,” as his family name, and his aunt’s house in Bristol as his address.

“I wrote my own glowing letter of recommendation,” he told the *Guardian* interviewer. “I was so desperate to get out of the life I was living at that point it didn’t even occur to me that I was risking my integrity for years to come. I just wanted so badly to act, and the RDA was offering me a chance.”

When the *Guardian* asked Eames why he was coming clean about the incident now, his answer was clipped:

“You really can’t hide anything that big in the information age. I was tired of carrying around the
secret and I wanted to make sure I was telling the story on my own terms.’’

The Guardian went on to speculate that the timing may have had something to do with Eames wanting to get the controversy out of the way well in advance of the marketing blitz for Scorsese’s Fuller. An editor’s note commented that at the time the interview was conducted, Eames’ rumored upcoming collaboration with Fischer was not yet known.

“Arthur,” said Ariadne, looking at her phone. “He announced this morning he’s having a closed press conference this afternoon to discuss the interview. It’s all over the internet.”


“It starts at noon,” Ariadne said. “That’s 15 minutes ago, you’ll just have to talk to him after—wait, what are you doing?”

Arthur was already starting to walk, then jog, south toward Tottenham Court. “I can catch the bus,” he called over his shoulder, breaking into a run.

“You can’t crash a press conference! You’re a psychopath!” she called back. “I’m telling Prianka!”

“Good luck, Sir Galahad,” Mal yelled, and her laughter followed him all the way to Bedford Avenue.

“Excuse me, sir, you can’t go in there,” said the man guarding the door to the banquet room at the Goring. Arthur had run all the way from Buckingham Palace after the bus he was riding became marred in traffic, and he knew he must look an odd sight. He had worn his very best suit for Ariadne’s dissertation defense and now it was more or less hopelessly disheveled. The run had jolted his hair out of its preferred position molded to his skull, and he wasn’t happy about it, but he was there, and the conference was still happening, and Eames was on the other side of that door.

“Yes, I can,” he said, dredging up his most authoritative tone. “Eames is a friend of mine.”

“Right, sure he is, mate,” said the security guard.

“No, really,” said Arthur, thumbing to the embarrassingly large phone gallery of pictures he had snapped of the two of them together last fall. The security guard gave him an impressive fisheye, ordered him to wait, and then stuck his head in the door.

Arthur contemplated judo-ing his way in. He did have a scholarship, after all.

The guard re-emerged. The door opened and a short woman slid around it, careful to shut it behind her. She was impeccably dressed in a neat black suit with a head tie, a cloud of burnt gold hair coiling out from beneath it. She was wearing the sharpest purple lipstick and the sharpest black stilettos Arthur had ever seen.

“May I help you?” she said coldly.

“Hi,” said Arthur, holding out his hand. “I’m—”

“Oh, I know who you are,” she said. “I’m Penelope Rider.”

“Oh,” said Arthur, instantly terrified.

“Yes,” said Penelope Rider. “Indeed.”
“I was beginning to think you were an urban legend,” said Arthur.

“If only I could say the same for you,” she said.

While on the bus tracking across town, Arthur had been swarmed with visions of grandly sauntering into Eames’ press conference and bringing the entire proceeding to a halt. Perhaps Eames would see him and immediately run into his arms. Perhaps Arthur would break through a wall of reporters with flashbulbs, calling Eames’ name until Eames heard him and met him in the midst of the dizzying fog. Perhaps Eames would simply facepalm while Arthur was promptly back outside again.

In none of these scenarios had he envisioned meeting Penelope Rider. He had no contingency plan in place for what to do in this situation.

“I,” he said. “Eames asked me to come today.”

“Oh, really,” Penelope Rider said. “He didn’t mention it.”

“It was more of a request sent telepathically,” said Arthur. “But I’m sure he’ll be happy to see me.”

Penelope Rider’s purple lips curved into the smirkiest smirk he’d ever seen. “Oh, I’m sure,” she said, as if that was the whole problem.

“Sir, I think you need to leave,” said the suit, emboldened by the unflinching presence of Penelope Rider beside him.

Arthur was about to say something stupid, like that he could just wait outside, maybe, on the offchance that he could dart in when neither of them were looking, when the door opened again.

“I just got this incoherent text,” said the speaker, poking their head outside, and then, “Arthur?”

Prianka’s eyebrows flew up and stayed there.

“Hi,” Arthur said.

Prianka looked at him for a moment, then at Penelope Rider, then back at Arthur.

She snorted, then covered her mouth with her hand and stifled a full-on giggle.

Penelope Rider seemed as baffled by this phenomenon as Arthur was. They looked at her in fascination while she leaned against the door and laughed and laughed, opening it up for him by degrees.

“Let him in,” she told Penelope Rider when she was herself again, sardonic smile firmly in place once more. “He’s having a meet-cute. It’s kind of their thing.”

And she waved him in.

The Goring was a small hotel, and even though the room was one of the hotel’s largest, it was no match for the crush of press who had squeezed into the space. It was a warm day, and the sliding glass windows had been opened to allow even more reporters to spill over into the patio that led to the gardens. Eames was sitting on a slight riser with an empty chair to his left, presumably where Penelope Rider or someone else had been monitoring questions earlier in the session.

The Archive Room was small, but it was packed with journalists standing in uneven rows next to their tripods. It was easy for Arthur to slip down the back row unnoticed and ensconce himself at the
far end next to the open glass doors leading out to the patio.

Eames was sporting the classily unkempt look, a faint edge of stubble lining his cheek and an uncharacteristic cashmere V-neck in dark green, worn over a tan gingham dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar. For once he wasn’t even wearing pleated pants. Arthur was so thrown off by this display of casual fashion sense that it took him a moment to register a wave of warmth at seeing Eames again, and another moment to focus on what Eames was saying.

“I was honestly worried that it would be a dealbreaker and that Hollywood would never call again,” he was saying. “But I actually heard from Marty earlier this morning. Just a short email, but he was nothing but understanding and supportive. He’s so loyal to his actors and so generous. I feel extremely lucky and humbled.”

“So you don’t think this morning’s information will impact the film release,” said a reporter near the front of the room. Eames shifted in his chair and smiled wryly.

“Well that all depends on you lot, doesn’t it?” he said. “I can only do so much. One of the reasons I wanted to make sure you got a chance to answer all your questions is so you got them out of your system now.”

A ripple of laughter went through the room, and Eames went on to speak more generally about the release of the Bucky biopic and how much he was looking forward to it. Arthur had never really heard him in a mode like this before; usually he was always a bit performative even at the most casual of times in public, as if he were considered every public context to have a wary audience of harsh critics. Now, though, he sat calmly in his chair, without the normal amount of fidgeting or head-scratching or pen twirling, or any of the other typically self-effacing things Arthur had seen him do in a crowd. If anything, he seemed more restful—settled—than Arthur had ever seen him.

A press monitor was passing around a foam mic flag that reminded Arthur of nothing so much as a kindergarten where you had to pass a stuffed animal in order to speak. The next reporter Eames picked was from the Telegraph, with a question about how Eames’ family was reacting to Eames’ decision.

Eames nodded as if he’d been expecting the question. “My mother and brother—well, biologically my aunt and cousin—have lived a very quiet life in Bristol all these years, at least partly for my sake, and they’ve been very supportive all this time. My cousin actually called me this morning and said that none of the women he wanted to date would go out with him now that he was only a cousin and not a sibling.” He laughed, and his face broke into one of those genuine face-splitting grins that made Arthur’s heart hurt. He wondered suddenly if this was all a huge mistake—if Eames would think Arthur showing up like this was yet another invasion of privacy, a sign that he was too obsessive.

He dug his phone out and texted Ariadne.

I’m here, Prianka let me in. Is this a bad idea.

Ariadne texted back immediately, and Arthur’s phone chirped. He silenced it but not before a few reporters glanced at him, annoyed.

Shut up I think Mal just offered me a job

Then again:

SHE DID HOLY SHIT MAL JUST OFFERED ME A JOB

ARTHUR I’M GOING TO BUILD SKYSCRAPERS
AND MUSEUMS AND CATHEDRALS

I’M GOING TO BUILD ST. ARIADNE’S BASILICA

SHE SAID WE’RE ALL ADULTS HERE AND SHE’D RATHER TRUST THAT WE CAN HANDLE THINGS THAN WATCH ME GET HIRED BY SOME OTHER INFERIOR FIRM

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Arthur tried very discreetly to type a one-handed reply conveying excitement and congratulations while holding a hand over his mouth and trying not to attract attention by grinning like a fiend.

I can’t handle today she wrote.

When Arthur returned his attention to the front of the room, a reporter from the Sun was saying to Eames, “Speaking of dating, there have been rumors swirling around Hollywood recently that the upcoming collaboration between you and Robert Fischer might be personal as well as professional. Would you care to comment?”

The briefest flash of annoyance showed on Eames’ face. “No, there’s nothing going on between Robert Fischer and myself,” he said, and then pointedly didn’t elaborate.

Hands shot up all over the room.

The next reporter Eames chose was from the Daily Mail, and Arthur was pretty sure Eames winced when he realized his mistake.

“Fischer has recently come out as gay,” the reporter said. “In November there were photos released of the two of you together while you were filming L’Hôpital in 2007. You chose not to comment on the photographs at the time, but now you’re collaborating with him again. Would you like to comment now?”

Eames frowned and considered the question. “No, no comment,” he said.

“Can I ask a follow-up?” Arthur willed Eames to say no, but Eames nodded, a bit warily, he thought.

“That picture was taken in Bristol, so does that mean Fischer knew about your real history?”

Eames’ eyes widened. The mood in the room shifted, as everyone registered that in fact a reporter from the Daily Mail had asked a useful question.

“Maybe you should be writing for the Guardian,” Eames quipped.

“Tell that to my editors,” the reporter shot back.

“Don’t tell that to my editors,” said a Guardian reporter on the other side of the room.

When the laughter had quieted down, Eames said, “Alright, sure. Fischer knew everything,” he said, and the buzz was immediate. Eames waited for it to die down again. “My own father died not long before we began filming L’Hôpital, and I was in a pretty rough place emotionally. I suppose you could say I turned to Fischer as a sort of spiritual confessor. So yes, he knew, I told him at the time.”

Hands flew high, and the questions came fast. At one point the square microphone cube got tossed from reporter to reporter.

“But you and Fischer weren’t involved romantically at the time?”
“No comment.”

“Have you spoken to Fischer since this morning?”

“No.”

“Did the decision to collaborate on a new film with Fischer influence your decision to come clean?”

“Yes,” said Eames, and he looked a bit surprised by his own answer. “Filming an auteur project like this is usually a bit harrowing and emotionally intense and I wanted to start it with a clean slate, so to speak.”

“So it had nothing to do with your personal relationship.”

“No,” said Eames. “No, and no.”

Three more questions followed, each from reporters trying to tweak their questions to get Eames to say something juicy about Fischer, and then:

“Kitty Kline from Sugarscape.”

Arthur knew Sugarscape vaguely as a gossip tabloid, but he didn’t quite understand the level of tittering he heard from the reporters around him. Kitty Kline was standing in the overflow area, on the steps leading to the patio and the gardens. Arthur realized all at once that she was one of the only women in the room.

If she knew the response she was garnering she ignored it. Instead she asked: “Are you and Arthur L — rekindling your relationship?”

Arthur’s stomach lurched, and Eames—Eames smiled at her, as though she were the only student in the room who’d worked out a difficult equation. Arthur’s stomach lurched again.

“I haven’t seen Arthur since returning to London, no,” he said.

Arthur tried to shrink back against the wall.

“That’s not what I asked,” she said, clearly trying and failing not to look smug. The buzz began again, and Arthur could practically see everyone else mentally rewriting their ledes.

“I don’t have an answer for you, I’m sorry.” Eames said. “Like I said, I haven’t seen him in months, so—”

“Oh, I think he’s here,” said someone near the back.

Arthur simultaneously tried to freeze and look around the room wildly, which resulted in what was more or less a flail.

Eames blinked. “What?”

Slowly, a hand rose like a spectral figure above the crowd and pointed in Arthur’s direction. Every head in the room turned. The reporters on the patio crowded in to get a look, while the ones immediately in front of Arthur cleared a space around him like he was a visiting dignitary.

Arthur felt his cheeks flame, and he forced himself to take a few deep breaths. Eames, craning his head for a better look, saw him at last. His jaw dropped.
They stared at each other. Immediately every flashbulb in the room went off in all directions, half aimed at Eames and half at Arthur. Arthur winced and ducked, but then gathered himself, forcing himself to breathe as evenly as he could.

“I’d like to ask you all to please don’t do that,” said Eames. “If we could enforce a no flash photography rule from here on out? It makes me feel terribly anxious. We can do photos outside later if anyone likes.” He flashed a winning, entreating sort of look at his audience, and Arthur realized belatedly that the entire speech had been for his benefit.

Eames refocused on him. “Hello, Arthur,” he said. He looked halfway between mystified and—and some other feeling that made Arthur wish they were the only people in the room.

“Hi,” he said.

They stared at each other some more, and after a moment, Eames said, sounding as though he were trying very hard not to laugh, “What brings you here today?”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Uh.” Abruptly the press monitor walked up to him and shoved the square mic box into his hands.

“I guess,” said Arthur, “I guess I just wanted to call you Trim Tab.”

“Ah,” said Eames, an odd smile beginning to meander its way onto his face. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Which, by the way, is the most insultingly obvious sockpuppet name ever,” added Arthur.

Off to the side of the room, he heard the Sugarscape reporter mutter a distinct “Called it.” From the blank looks everyone else in the room was shooting him, he guessed no one else had any idea what he was talking about.

“Excuse me,” said one of the monitors, grabbing the mic box away from Arthur. “If there’s not a question coming up soon—”

“No, shut up,” said Arthur, grabbing it back. “You could have at least made me have to work for it.”

“Even if I hypothetically knew what you were talking about,” said Eames, grinning openly now, “Hypothetical me probably wouldn’t have wanted to go creating a whole new identity right about now, would he?”

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Okay, point taken. But there’s no way I can accept it, you know that.”

“What?” said Eames, face falling. “No, darling, of course you don’t have to, but I--” he broke off abruptly as the buzz around the press room grew louder. Arthur nearly dropped the mic flag. Half the cameras went off, though blessedly this time none of them used flash.

“I don’t...” said Arthur helplessly, aware that he sounded as if he were in the process of melting into the floor. “I mean... if you wanted to help, you could just... just come back to the Robie House some time,” he ended.

And then suddenly he was smiling, and smiling, smiling and unable to stop; because he’d planned to ask Eames if there was a chance, if there was any way he still cared, if he wanted to come back to Arthur.

But he’d asked him to come back to his bookshop instead, and all he could hear was Eames’ voice in
his head from all those months ago, telling him: *You’re a part of each other.*

He thought of Ariadne designing a space that was all his own, one that he could grow and move and evolve in, a space that was continuous and ever-changing but still always comfortable, familiar, safe. She had seen Arthur, even back then, as he’d been unable to see himself: torn between breaking out of his comfort zone and shutting himself away in it. He could have both, he realized. The new space was about having both, about letting himself have something new and adventurous while still being able to remain close to everything that he knew and loved. Eames had known, too. The only one who hadn’t gotten it was Arthur.

“You can always come back,” he said. “If you want. Not because you’re repeating the past or because you’re, I don’t know, letting your river flow backwards, but because you can change and evolve but still—still want to read a book by Ray Bradbury.”

“Or Buckminster Fuller,” said Eames, softly, his eyes fixed on Arthur’s face.

“Yes,” said Arthur. “Or... books with only three words in the title. There’s a sale right now on *Climbing Mount Improbable.*”

“Richard Dawkins,” said Eames, still looking at Arthur. “No, thank you.”

“I knew there was a reason my bookstore liked you,” said Arthur.

Around him, Arthur was vaguely aware that the mood had changed in the room yet again, that it had shifted into something like a reverence as every reporter in the room tried to record or transcribe what was happening in front of them. He closed his eyes briefly and accepted the fact that his every word was currently frantically being videotaped and livestweeted.

It was okay, he thought. If this was the cost of starting over, he could handle it.

No, he could do one better: he could learn to live with it. After all, Eames had.

“Ms. Kitty Kline from Sugarscape,” said Eames, still holding Arthur’s gaze. “Perhaps Arthur here knows the answer to your previous question, if you’d like to ask again.”

A buzz went through the room.

“Mr. L—,” said Kitty Kline from Sugarscape. “Are you and Eames rekindling your relationship?”

Eames didn’t look away, but he took one of his pocket watches out of his pocket and spun it on its chain, once, then twice. Arthur took a breath.

He forced himself to walk through the crowd and join Eames in the empty chair next to him at the room.

“No” he said, giving the reporter a nod and then looking at Eames again. “I think we’re starting a better one.”

He took Eames’ hand in his, and the room exploded into noise and light, white and deafening and completely insignificant.

Eames laced their fingers together, as he’d done so many times before. “I forgot what a sap you are,” he said, his smile brighter than all the flashbulbs in the room combined.

“No you didn’t,” said Arthur, as dryly as he could muster while his heart threatened to somersault out
of his chest.

“Cards on the table,” said Eames, lowering his voice. “I want you to know I agreed to work with Fischer because I believed in his talent, not because he still had a hold over me. I thought if he knew I was agreeing to work with him even after I’d come clean about everything, he would finally start believing in himself. I wanted that for him, for his own sake, not for—not for any other reason. I hope you can understand.”

“I know,” said Arthur. “I get it. I do. And even if I didn’t get it, it doesn’t matter, because it’s your life, and have I mentioned I’m really sorry for stalking you and your whole family? I’m really sorry.”

“I know,” said Eames, thumbing Arthur’s cheekbone. “I should have told you everything earlier.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Arthur. “We figured it out.”

“I missed you,” said Eames, leaning in. “And I—I really, really missed your bookstore.”

Arthur burst into laughter, and Eames interrupted him in the middle, pulling him into an open-mouthed kiss, warm and spine-melting, Eames’ lips even plusher and sweeter than he remembered. Eames tuck ed his fingers into Arthur’s hair, and Arthur closed his eyes and wrote Eames’ name in the sand.

“Don’t look now, but we’re being filmed,” said Eames a few eons later, his voice reaching gently into Arthur’s fog of awareness. “I can tell them to stop, if you’d like.”

“It’s okay,” said Arthur. “I’m great. I’m approaching newfound levels of zen calm.”

Which was good, because two minutes later Ariadne texted him a GIF of their kiss, and Ty finally received Jorby’s twenty quid.

Arthur had begun to see the world in terms of luxurious mattresses and more luxurious mattresses. He knew it probably made him a terrible snob, but there was nothing quite like sinking into the kind of completely heavenly bed that you only found in luxury hotels and houses owned by the very rich: beds with multiple mattresses all full of ridiculous materials like flax and hand-teased horsetail that still yielded like sand and felt like settling onto clouds of gossamer and goose down.

At the moment, he didn’t even feel the vague twinge of guilt he normally felt about having upgraded his aging, saggy-in-the-middle bed to one that he was secretly convinced contained a layer of pixie dust. And he certainly didn’t regret removing the bed from its cramped confines above the bookshop to the sunlit quarters it now occupied a few blocks away, in a pristine four-story terrace off Powis Square that had instantly enchanted him with its landscaped gardens, unvarnished woodwork, wide, open floor plans, and window-lined rooms.

He stretched slowly and then flung an arm out to where his phone lay on the nightstand next to Switch On the Night. He thumbed it open to check the time, then rolled over to see about the bed’s other occupant—namely, the only person Arthur knew who would ever have been foolish and amazing enough to say “Yes, please,” when Arthur had taken one look and blurted out, “Shit, let’s live there,” three months earlier, before they’d even had a conversation about anything of the kind. He’d said yes automatically to Arthur’s suggestion to convert the garden shed into a hydroponic
greenhouse and install a solar power system for the house. He’d even said yes when Arthur asked if they could convert the gorgeous oak-paneled rec room into a second library adjoining the first, and then he’d insisted on turning one of the bookshelves into a secret panel that swung open to connect one library to the other, so that when they got bored they could re-enact scenes from *Clue*. Arthur didn’t think he was ever getting over it.

It was a chilly January day, and Eames was ensconced in an impressive pile of blankets, snoring a little. Arthur ran a hand over his bare shoulder and then down his side, pushing the blankets back gradually until they piled below the curve of his ass. Arthur took his time there, thumbing the ridge of Eames’ hip, running his fingertips over the soft skin, palming the fleshy part of his rounded cheek. Eames was on a weight gain regimen for the film he started shooting in three weeks, and Arthur trailed his fingers down over the slow rise of his abdomen, where his skin was silk-smooth and plump.

Eames stirred appreciatively without waking, shifting slightly to give Arthur better access to his cock, already half-hard and thickening. Arthur wasn’t ready to abandon his leisurely consumption of Eames’ ass, however, so he reached back to the nightstand for lube and then set to work coating his fingers and massaging Eames’ thighs and calves, brushing the pink pucker of his entrance and stroking his perineum accidentally on purpose enough to cause Eames to shift and work his hips, spreading for him. He moaned when Arthur entered him and stretched him with his fingers, a light, contented sort of sigh that was almost hotter than if he’d been on edge.

Arthur leaned down and kissed him, starting from the dimple at the base of his spine and working down, teasing and tasting as he finger-fucked him. He was already hoarding the hours they had together like this against the time Eames would be away filming, even though Eames was only going to Edinburgh for this production. He’d been able to snag a few high-profile international productions over the last year, ones that meant he hadn’t had to leave London, or Arthur, in a while. But after today—well, after today, Eames would be more in-demand than ever, and Arthur was already thinking ahead, about how much time he could feasibly take away from the Robie House, about whether Jia might be interested in taking over permanent store management, about—

“Mmm,” said Eames, voice low and rumbly and muffled by the pillow he was talking into. “Is something distracting you? I’m not complaining, but usually you’re up to at least three fingers by now, and I assure you the body is willing.”

“You’re so spoiled,” said Arthur, moving up from where he’d been tonguing Eames’ inner thigh and kissing him long and deep on the mouth. “You know what’s distracting me.”

“Hmm, I hope it’s this,” said Eames, grinning devilishly. He twisted beneath Arthur and tucked his ankles around Arthur’s calves, pulling them together and rolling his hips.

“Fuck, I take it back,” Arthur said, suppressing a hiss of pleasure. “I’m spoiled, god, that feels good.”

Eames reached a hand down and jacked him lazily. “Well? How’d we do? How far did the plan to stay up all night and have sex to the point of utter exhaustion take us?”

Arthur laughed. “We got pretty close,” he said.

“Close! How close, what does close mean?”

“It’s a bit past 12:30,” Arthur said.

“Damnit!” Eames sank his head back into the pillow and laughed, casually cradling Arthur’s hip and pulling him forward so Arthur was perfectly positioned to ride his cock. It stood fully erect now,
jutting up dusky and red. Arthur didn’t know whether he wanted to sink down on it with his mouth or his body, so he ground against it instead, turning Eames’ next words a bit breathless. “Damn bloody yanks and their U.S.-centric—oh, god, yes, please, more of that—bloody miserable—ah—time zones!”

“Pretty sure Americans didn’t invent longitude, Eames,” Arthur said. “Which you’d know if you’d read the book I gave you on the subject.” He tsked and canted his hips just out of reach of Eames’ next upward thrust. Eames groaned.

“Ugh, but darling, at that point, it was just history,” Eames explained, gripping Arthur’s waist and tugging him back into place. “It wasn’t going anywhere. At the time I wasn’t considering the direct impact it would have on the bloody Oscar announcements!”

Arthur slicked Eames’ cock with lube, then bent down for another kiss. “You’re ridiculous. You’re going to be nominated. You’re going to win. Everyone knows you’re going to win.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Eames said, giggling a little as he aligned his hips with Arthur’s and thrust up into him. “It’s not every day one may or may not be nominated for an Oscar, so I can make as much fuss as I want.”

Arthur sank into an automatic rhythm, meeting Eames’ thrusts with the steady glide of his own hips. His body was still loose and open from the previous night of letting Eames take him apart for hours, turning him inside out and putting him into a state of blissed-out submission that had lasted most of the night. After he’d come down from the high, he’d fucked Eames, a deep slow fuck that ended with Eames coming long after Arthur thought he’d lost the capacity to come again, with Arthur still inside of him, their hands locked together. Eames had seemed utterly exhausted, but here he was, muscles rippling and ready, his body directing Arthur’s as though as though it were a waiting receptacle for whatever Eames decided to put in it, and fuck, thinking about it made him shiver, made his cock twitch and jerk. Eames reached for it, catching Arthur on a gasp that turned into a moan.

“You’re definitely being ridiculous, but—fuck, fuck—don’t stop—I’ll allow it.”

“Because you love me,” said Eames gleefully, his eyes trained on Arthur’s with a soft light. He quickened his pace, and Arthur’s toes clenched.

“Because I make allowances for people who are about to shoot to the top of the IMDB star meter, oh, fuck,” said Arthur, and Eames laughed and replied, “I hope so, since you’ll be there with me,” and Arthur was coming, hard, as though he hadn’t just been drained the previous night, as though he were still in high school, as though he were head over heels in love.

He pumped come over Eames’ chest and stomach and savored the greedy look that drifted onto Eames’ face. Eames loved getting dirty during sex, and while usually Arthur only loved it when Eames was getting him dirty, he had developed a rapt appreciation for the way Eames blessed out when Arthur slipped fingers dripping with come into his plush mouth and ordered him to suck.

“Bet you could come just like this, baby,” he murmured, watching Eames slide his tongue eagerly over his fingers, eyes fixed on him. “Don’t you know you have me—you’ve got me right where you want me.” And if his voice went a little breathless, it was because of the way Eames’ cock felt when he came inside of him, and not because Eames having him was starting to seem like an increasingly, wonderfully permanent state of affairs.

Afterwards they cleaned up, Eames showering while Arthur stripped and changed the bedclothes, after which Eames got right back into bed, lying on the decadent mattress and checking his phone.
impatiently while Arthur showered. When Arthur returned to the bed he had a voice mail from Jia telling him she’d chased away a paparazzi who was at the bookstore trying to shoot a B-roll for a side segment on Eames’ great gay love story to air later that day. Yeah, Arthur thought. She would have no trouble running the place if he needed to leave it for a few months.

He slipped back under the topsheet and draped it over Eames, who was still naked. “You can’t just stay naked all the time hoping that nakedness will result in more sex for you,” Arthur pointed out, unable to resist sliding his hand over Eames’ bare chest.

“No, but I can stay naked on Oscar day in hopes that more sex will make the time fly by faster,” said Eames hopefully. He ceased endlessly refreshing Variety on his phone and leaned in for another kiss.

“You only have fifteen more minutes,” said Arthur.

“We can do a lot in fifteen minutes,” said Eames, grinning.

Arthur considered.

Thirteen minutes later, Eames said, panting, “I’m terribly glad we didn’t meet at a brothel that forced me to buy you out of sex slavery. You’re so time-efficient I don’t think I could ever have afforded your starting rate.”

“Well, you’re the one who wanted an eighth round,” said Arthur.

“Yes, dear, because of the Oscars,” said Eames.

“Is that just going to be your excuse from now on? You want something, it’s going to be, ‘but I was nominated for an Oscar, darling!’ or, ‘pleeease? After all, I did win an Oscar’?”

“You make it sound so calculating! As if I singlehandedly planned an entire awards season marketing campaign for a dark film hardly anyone saw—”

“Oh, please, everyone saw The Wake,” Arthur interjected wryly.

“—all just to get you to give me blow jobs.” Eames leaned in and nuzzled Arthur’s neck.

“You see? Now the truth comes out. Oscar doesn’t know the real you.” Arthur was smirking, but Eames looked up and his expression went suddenly earnest. He took Arthur’s face between his hands.

“You know it is all for you, right, Arthur?” he said. “The Oscars, the awards, they’re wonderful, but it’s not worth it, any of it, without you.” He kissed Arthur softly on the lips.

“Eames,” said Arthur, gently, reaching for his phone.

“You’re realer to me than anything in Hollywood,” Eames said. “You’re the only thing that’s real.”

“Eames,” said Arthur. “So is this.”

He held up the phone. Eames’ face went oddly blank.

“Congratulations,” Arthur said softly, his smile a little helpless; and then Eames was yelling, and tugging Arthur closer, and the sounds of celebration wafted out their eco-friendly windows and echoed over all of Notting Hill.
Chapter 3

Bibliography

Arthur’s bookshelf of three-word titles may be found [here at Goodreads](http://www.goodreads.com).


Chapter 4

Filmography

*[Barbarella]*, Dir. Roger Vadim. 1968.
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*[Boy]*, Dir. Taika Waititi. 2010.
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*[The Umbrellas of Cherbourg]*, Dir. Jacques Demy. 1964.
Chapter 5

Notes & Acknowledgments

First and foremost I have to thank all of you who were reading this on the inception of the kink meme back in September 2011! There are so many of you who are still here and commenting and that means so much to me. This fandom is so incredible and so are all of you. Thank you.

Second: thank you to Erin, aka eleveninches, for beta-ing and brit-picking this entire thing over the years, and for letting me get away with far more cheesy parts than she could probably bear, haha. If you haven’t heard yet, she has a book and it is amazing and you should read it. <3

I have to thank Kate Winslet for letting me turn her into a shameless prop for this entire fic. I’m not sure how that happened, except that Kate Winslet seems awesome and I am sad that she is not my friend. And Edgar Wright and Zoe Saldana, and David Tennant and assorted Harry Potter cast members. Oh, and Leo. Oh, and I guess I should thank Richard Curtis for writing Notting Hill, or something.

I would like to anti-acknowledge the passing of time, which jossed me in the following things during the three and a half years it took me to complete this fic:
* Tom Hardy vacationed in the Maldives before Eames did, making my plan to have them vacation in the Maldives look like a lazy copy >:E
* The Royal Wedding roped in the Goring long after I’d decided to make it Eames’ favorite hotel, making that look like a lazy copy >:E
* David Tennant got married, thus ensuring that Ariadne would in fact never get to date him
* HBC and Tim Burton broke up, for the love of all that is holy!!!

In the interest of fairness, I will say, however, that there was one thing the three-year interval gave me, and that was Manti Te’o. Holy shit, Manti Te’o. If Manti Te’o can pull off faking, in 2012-2013, a national tragedy and a dead girlfriend who never existed while making headline news and being covered in thousands of media outlets around the world, for over a year before anyone suspected it was all a lie, then I absolutely believe Eames could forge a different identity in the earliest days of the Internet and then pull it off for decades without anyone suspecting a thing.

To learn more about the quirky and endearing world and ideas of Buckminster Fuller, there’s no better place to start than the Buckminster Fuller Institute.

The house Eames and Arthur move into looks a bit like this! But with more stainless steel and solar paneling, and, well, books.

Finally, if you experience severe social anxiety, please know you’re not alone and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with you, and no reason to feel shame or humiliation. There are millions of people like you, and lots of resources to help you. The single best place to start is just to talk to your doctor and find out what level of treatment is right for you. Good luck. You’re amazing. <3

Thank you to everyone who reads this story, past/present/future. Each of you are an integral function of the universe. <3

P.S. one last thing! my tumblr is this way!! If you would, please tell me yours so i can stalk you there! :)

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P.S. one last thing! my tum...
“Never forget that you are one of a kind. Never forget that if there weren't any need for you in all your uniqueness to be on this earth, you wouldn't be here in the first place. And never forget, no matter how overwhelming life's challenges and problems seem to be, that one person can make a difference in the world. In fact, it is always because of one person that all the changes that matter in the world come about. So be that one person.”

— Buckminster Fuller
“I live on Earth at present, and I don’t know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing — a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process — an integral function of the universe.”

— Buckminster Fuller

Thank you for reading! ♥

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