In Loving Memory
by a_forgotten_note

Summary

Arthur Kirkland is a successful author living happily with his husband, Alfred Jones. The couple has endured many hardships throughout their relationship, but now that they're settled and comfortable, they assume those hardships are over. That is... until Arthur and his brother are in a car accident. Now Arthur is lost in his own life, trying to remember who he is and why he's with Alfred. The race is on for Arthur to regain his memory, but when he can't even remember why he loved his own husband, how can he be expected to trust him?
Chapter 1

Faint sounds ricocheted off of the edges of his senses. Repetitive, short, and sharp. Metallic aroma in the air. A faint crackle of static electricity. Beeping? A machine that keeps track of something… he could feel his face crinkle in confusion. He couldn’t think of the word. The thud of his pulse, the rush of his blood in his ears… it was all distracting, but he still wondered. What was that machine supposed to do? Furthermore, why couldn’t he think of his own name?

Stiff fabric… starch? He would describe it as “callous” against the sensitive plane of his skin. It scraped against his forehead through his… What? What was that word? The word was a blur in the back of his mind, as if he was trying to read a traffic sign from far away. He knew how to explain the word: it was soft, it covered his head… he remembered a certain person who would run their fingers through it when he was falling asleep. Fur? No, that wasn’t right. But, he was sure he was close.

When he tried to open his eyes, pain was quickly shot through his head. Like a bullet from a… a what? Trying to think of obscure words was making the pain worse, so he simply let that one word slide away as he squinted at the world.

Bright lights burned his eyes as he blinked sleepily, and he stared at the florescent assailment unhappily. There was a routine click of high heels somewhere far away, but it was loud against freshly waxed linoleum. Very close, a phone rang. A woman answered it crisply, calling for a certain doctor to be paged. He blinked slowly; he was in a… medical building. Yes, even though he couldn’t think of the specific name, medical building would have to do.


He blinked again, trying to turn his head to the left to see the source of the voice to no avail. Something about the voice was off… Were the words pronounced incorrectly? Something wrong with the vowels? Closing his eyes, he almost smiled; it wasn’t that the words weren’t wrong, the speaker was simply American.

A hand came up to grasp his shoulder, warm and solid through the thin fabric of his clothes. He would have shrunk away from the American, but again, he couldn’t move. The hand on his shoulder was probably meant to be comforting, but he didn’t know how to feel about it. And what was that term of endearment? “Baby?” Why would the American call him that?

“Arthur? Sweetheart, are you okay?” The American’s hand gripped his shoulder a bit harder, and he made an annoyed sound in response. “Do you need me to call the doctor?”

He opened his mouth – it was dry, like he hadn’t been able to drink… drink what? Liquid substance. It’s clear. Tasteless. Comes from the tap… he squeezed his eyes shut as his head swam. Why couldn’t he remember simple words? Why could he remember his own name? And who was this American that was touching him?

Parting his lips again, he forced a breath of stale air from his lungs, whispering a quiet, “Who is Arthur?”

A pause, and the hand on his shoulder tightened even more. “That… that’s not funny, babe.”
No, of course it wasn’t. It was an honest question. He tried again, “Really, who is Arthur?”

There was a beat of silence as he stared up at the bleak, water damaged ceiling tiles, waiting for the American to speak. At that moment, the room seemed vast and impressive, but only where he couldn’t turn his head to see. It was as if he was missing all of the important things in his life, and his body wouldn’t cooperate to let him move and explore reality.

When the American spoke, it was in hushed, muted tones. “You are… you’re Arthur. This… sweetheart, don’t you know your own name?”

He – or more appropriately, Arthur – blinked up at the dull ceiling. He couldn’t remember a lot of things, apparently. From simple words to the meaning of his being in a hospital, Arthur couldn’t recall several things, including the name of the American sitting next to him.

“I’m Arthur,” he repeated carefully, as if this would jog his memory.

“Yeah. There you go, baby… how do you feel? The surgeon said things may be a little fuzzy, but we can do this. It’s just a little fuzzy.”

Fuzzy. What an interesting way to describe the sensation of memory-loss. Arthur would’ve used something classier, like “obscure” or the less common “murky.” It was strange that he couldn’t remember certain terms, but descriptive words came easily… was he fond of literature? Reading? Writing? Arthur couldn’t remember.

“I can’t remember,” Arthur stated bluntly, hearing the American shift in his chair. He probably sat forward as more weight was pressed into Arthur’s shoulder. “I can’t remember anything. Where am I? Why am I here?”

The American cleared his throat. “You’re in the hospital, Arthur.” Ah, yes. Hospital. That was one of the words Arthur couldn’t remember. “You and Alistair were in an accident… don’t you remember?”

“No.” Arthur said crossly. Didn’t he just say that he couldn’t remember? Was this American stupider than Arthur had initially assumed? Taking a deep breath, Arthur managed to shift on the hospital bed until he was laying comfortably. “I was in an accident…? Who is… who is Alistair?”

While the American sat quietly – Arthur hoped he was thinking about his response – someone new entered the room. The footsteps were sharp and precise, almost confident in their manner as they echoed off of the dreary, white walls.

“Mr. Kirkland,” a man said clearly. Another American? Was he in America, then? And who was Kirkland? Was that supposed to be Arthur? There was the distinct sound of turning pages, and the crackle of plastic. A binder or clipboard being moved… a medical chart, most likely. The new speaker sighed. “I’m Dr. Sampson. It’s good to see you’re awake… you certainly gave your husband a scare.”

“What’s wrong with him?” The first American said quickly, cutting off any chance of Arthur asking the doctor why he was there. With a sharp jolt, the man with his hand on Arthur’s shoulder stepped away, most likely moving towards Dr. Sampson. He sounded frantic, even though he wasn’t the person who couldn’t remember their own name. “He says he doesn’t remember anything. Why doesn’t he remember anything?”
An uneasy noise from the back of the doctor’s throat. “Sir, you need to understand that your husband went through a very difficult neurosurgery, and –”

“I know about the surgery! I know about that!” The American shouted loudly. Arthur felt his heart rate increase; every nerve was set on edge. Hearing the sweet-sounding American raise his voice was frightening, to say the least. Furthermore, the doctor said that Arthur was his husband. How could Arthur not remember his own husband? Kneading the blankets under his hands, Arthur fought to hold still as his supposed husband continued to harass Dr. Sampson. “You guys said he’d be fine when he woke up! This is not fine. He can’t even remember who he is!”

“Sir, please –” Dr. Sampson struggled to console Arthur’s husband, but the raucous American would have no part of it.

He was huffing and puffing like a man who’d sprinted a marathon, and with the heavy sounds of stomping, Arthur assumed that he was pacing like a caged tiger. Was he going to jump at the doctor? Would he punch him for his lack of proper explanation? For just a moment, Arthur felt a memory tingle in the back of his mind… he could almost imagine a blond man leaping forward to punch someone. There was a fire in that man’s eyes, and he didn’t look the least bit remorseful as he turned to look at Arthur with a smile.

Just as soon as the thought flashed through Arthur’s mind, a searing pain drilled through his skull, stabbing between his eyes like someone was pushing a hot knife into his head. Jolting on the bed spasmodically, Arthur lifted his hands to the side of his head and felt his jaw drop as he let out a startled scream. Though he tried to pull at the pain that burrowed just over the back of his eye sockets, a small, plastic mechanism was clamped to his left index finger smacked him in the face stupidly as Arthur sucked in a shuddering breath. The aching, piercing pain quickly dulled to a sad throb as Arthur clawed at the sides of his own face… bandages covered his… his… what was that word?

“A-Arthur?” The American regained his tone of easygoing innocence as he came to Arthur’s side, holding his shoulder again as if that would somehow help him.

“Mr. Kirkland, I need you to tell me what you’re feeling,” Dr. Sampson said urgently, taking a hold of Arthur’s wrists and pulling his hands from his face. “Tell me what hurts. What do you feel?”

Prying his eyes open, Arthur squinted up at a view of a man with wavy, glossy brown hair. His eyes were dark and unfriendly, as if Arthur had somehow wronged him by crying out. So this was Dr. Sampson? Arthur blinked and turned his head away from him to look at the American that held his shoulder and stared down at him desperately. It was the man that he’d caught a glimpse of in his memory, though looking at him now was much less painful.

Impossibly blue eyes caught his own and held him with a force as Arthur took deep, heaving breaths. Those eyes were electric. Almost an impossible, magical kind of blue. Sheltered behind clean, thick-rimmed glasses, those wide, loving eyes watched Arthur carefully. There was something warm Arthur almost remembered about those eyes… something soft and kind. But just when Arthur tried to remember it, the thought was gone, and he was left frustrated and confused.

“What hurts, Mr. Kirkland?” Dr. Sampson asked pointedly, gripping Arthur’s wrists tighter as he did so. Arthur winced at the roughness, but didn’t turn away from the man that was supposed to be his husband.

He was obviously very handsome. With high cheekbones and a strong jawline… Arthur definitely enjoyed looking at him. Golden hair framed his face, and though there was a rather
impressive cowlick parting his hair, Arthur found it almost endearing. This man was surrounded in a cozy, comfortable air and made Arthur feel safe, and as the pain in Arthur’s head faded away, he held the American’s gaze and took deep, slow breaths.

“Arthur?” The American asked him again. Arthur blinked at the movement of his pale, pink lips, but didn’t respond. The doctor had yet to let go of his hands. “Baby, you okay?”

“My head,” Arthur mumbled stupidly. Why did he feel so unintelligent when he looked at this man? Was there something in his head that dictated that he was still in love with his husband, even though he couldn’t remember him? “My head hurts. Did you punch someone?”

The American coughed a laugh, and shook his head. “What? No, I didn’t.”

When the doctor slowly began to let go of Arthur’s hands, he tilted his head to the side to give his husband a closer look. “I thought you did. I was just thinking… you sounded like you were about to hit him,” Arthur gestured lazily to Dr. Sampson, “And I… maybe I just imagined it. But it made my head hurt.”

“You might’ve remembered it,” the doctor said unhelpfully as he pressed a few buttons on a machine that sat next to Arthur’s bed.

Arthur’s husband gave Sampson an unimpressed look while Arthur looked to the doctor with a hopeful expression. The doctor jiggled the IV drip that was draining into Arthur’s right arm slightly, then looked down to Arthur with a bored visage. “Mr. Kirkland, you were in a car accident that caused you a severe head injury.” Arthur noted that one of the monitors next to him started beeping faster than before, but he couldn’t remember what that monitor was called… heartbeat counter? Pulse watcher? Dr. Sampson spoke again before Arthur could find the proper words to describe the machine. “There was some internal bleeding, and we used a minimally invasive surgery to clot the bleeders and help the swelling. At the very least, we expected you to have some trouble with speech or memory, but it’s not uncommon for those with head injuries to experience slight memory loss.”

“‘Slight’ memory loss?” Arthur repeated incredulously, swallowing nervously when his husband leaned over the bed and pointed at the doctor accusingly. “You said things might be a ‘little fuzzy,’ but he can’t even remember who he is! That’s not fuzzy, that’s…it’s,” Arthur’s brow furrowed as his husband waved his hands back and forth uselessly, obviously at a loss for words. “What if he never gets his memory back? What if he’s like this forever? He’ll be out of a job, and I…” he looked down to Arthur sadly, and Arthur bit his lip guiltily, looking away when his husband spoke again. “We won’t be able to go back to the way things were, so… what then? Will we have to get divorced?”

“Mr. Jones, you’re getting a little ahead of yourself,” the doctor said with a sigh. Arthur blinked; his husband’s last name was Jones. But what was his first name? Plucking a small flashlight out of his pocket, the doctor motioned for Arthur to look at him while he waved the light back and forth between his eyes. “Your husband should be fine as long as he’s given adequate care. As for the issue with memory,” the doctor paused and tucked his flashlight back into his pocket. “I can only say that he needs time to recover from the surgery.”

Arthur’s eyes darted back to Jones, searching for any of the malice that had been burning in his voice only a few minutes prior. To his relief, Jones merely looked contemplative as he stared down at the itchy blankets that covered Arthur’s legs.
“So... you’re saying… we have to wait and see?” Jones asked, looking more than a bit perturbed. “We won’t know until... later? Like weeks? Or months?”

Dr. Sampson huffed disagreeably and walked back to the edge of Arthur’s bed, taking up the chart he had left there and tucking it under his arm. “Like I said, Mr. Jones. Your husband has been in an accident, and the brain is a very important part of the body. He needs to rest and recover. Until the swelling in his brain is completely gone and the major concussion is written off, then we can start worrying about memory.” The doctor stepped forward, back into Arthur’s line of sight, and said, “In the meantime, try to take it easy. A nurse will come by in a few minutes to ask if you’re hungry or thirsty. If you need anything,” he sent a pointed look at Jones, then reverted his gaze back to Arthur. “Just hit the panic button, and someone will come running.”


Sampson nodded. “That’s right. I’ll check back in later, just to see how things are.”

When Dr. Sampson finally sauntered out of the room with more pomp and circumstance than a marching band, Jones stepped away from Arthur’s bedside and fell back into a chair. With his newly earned mobility, Arthur turned his head to the left and gave Jones a quick onceover. He wore a smart and sophisticated, button-down shirt that was tucked into freshly pressed trousers. Was he a business man? A company owner or partner of some kind? Following the line of Jones’ long legs, Arthur caught a glimpse of black penny loafers before Jones stood up from his chair and stepped back to the side of Arthur’s bed. Flickering his eyes back up to the American’s face, Arthur wiggled his fingers atop the blankets nervously.

What was he supposed to say? He didn’t even remember his own husband... did that make him shallow? Had they been fighting recently, and the accident was just an excuse for Arthur to forget about the marriage? No, that didn’t seem right. If his memory loss was made up, he wouldn’t have forgotten his own name. Licking his lips, Arthur blinked up at Jones and tried to give him a smile.

The smile was met with the glistening of tears in the American’s eyes. Arthur’s smile immediately drooped; what had he done? He was just trying to make the situation a little brighter. Taking a sharp breath, Arthur felt his heart jolt as he clearly saw Jones in his mind, smiling at him. There was laughter in his head, but it wasn’t sharp or mocking... it was kindhearted. In his memory, Jones straightened his glasses and looked down at his shoes shyly. Such a coy gaze... Arthur felt like he knew it well. He felt like it... but he couldn’t quite remember.

But, as sweet as the memory was, it brought another piercing, searing pain through Arthur’s head. Gritting his teeth, Arthur closed his eyes and turned his head away from Jones. Just as he turned away, Jones bent forward and pressed his face to Arthur’s chest, letting out a low, sad sob. Deciding to hold still and wait-out the pain in his head, Arthur held still as his husband started to cry.

He was very quiet at first, only sniffling and taking small, trembling breaths. But when Arthur finally felt well enough to open his eyes and turned his head to see Jones’ blond hair, the American was openly sobbing against his chest.

His cheeks were burning red and his poor glasses were pressed awkwardly to the side of his face, but Jones didn’t seem to care. He simply scrabbled at the blankets that covered Arthur’s chest and held tight, as if they could save him from his sadness.

Trying to comfort him, Arthur lifted his right hand – at least it wasn’t trapped beneath Jones awkwardly – and pat the man’s golden hair softly.
“I’m sorry,” Arthur whispered, “I’m sorry… I don’t remember you.”

“What?” Jones choked, sitting up a bit to look Arthur in the eye. “What did you say?”

Arthur licked his lips anxiously. “I said I’m sorry. I really… I don’t remember you. You’re clearly upset, so… I’m sorry.”

Shaking his head, Jones wiped his nose on his sleeve and sniffed loudly. Arthur winced at the action, but didn’t comment on it as Jones sat forward and spoke to him in earnest, if not broken, tones. “That’s not it… that’s not why I’m cryin’, honey.”

Arthur’s brow furrowed; Jones obviously used a plethora of endearing terms. Arthur regretted not being able to remember all of them. When he refocused on Jones, he watched as those perfect blue eyes were filled to the brim with tears, immediately spilling over and washing his cheeks in sadness. Before Arthur could ask for the true reason he was crying, Jones brought up a hand to cup Arthur’s cheek and gave him a melancholy smile.

“You’re alive,” he breathed, sounding happy and frightened all at once. Arthur couldn’t adequately describe the emotion on his face, but it was tragically beautiful. Perhaps even hauntingly lovely. Jones sat forward, and for a terrified moment, Arthur feared he was going to kiss him, but Jones merely planted his forehead atop Arthur’s shoulder and continued to cry. “I was s-scared because they said,” he took a stuttering breath, and Arthur awkwardly pat his hair again. “They said you might not w-wake up. But you did.” Jones sat back, gave Arthur a watery smile, and repeated, “But you did!”

Jones pressed his face back into Arthur’s shoulder, and Arthur sat back quietly, letting his supposed husband cry against him. He wished he could remember his first name. He wished he could remember the accident that lead him to being in the hospital. He wanted to remember the man who was in the accident with him… was his name Alistair? Was he still alive, or was Arthur a lucky survivor? He wanted to know where he was and what he did for a living. He wanted to comfort Jones properly, and feel comforted by his presence in return.

Sadly, Arthur wasn’t granted any of his memories back just by wishing for them, and he settled with pressing his cheek to the crown of his husband’s hair and whispering, “I’m alive. At least… at least I’m alive.”

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Arthur had only woken up yesterday, and already he was tired of unwanted company. He had been spoken to by seven doctors that all agreed that his memory loss was a psychological issue and not a medicinal one. He was constantly visited by no less than eighteen nurses that requested he chat with them because his English accent was ‘too adorable for words.’ And lastly, he spoke to at least a dozen policemen that insisted that he must remember something about the accident.

“Anything,” an officer had said, “Anything you can remember would be helpful.”

“As I said,” Arthur replied crossly, grasping at the blankets desperately. He was tempted to press the panic button, but there were several officers lingering just outside the door; if Arthur called for help, they might try to hinder whoever came to his aid. “I don’t remember anything. Really. You can ask my doctors, and they’ll tell you I’ve lost my memory!”

The main officer of the group stepped toward Arthur’s bed, tapping his finger against the plastic tray that served as a table for Arthur. “We just need a little information, Mr. Kirkland –”
“And I have none to give you.” Arthur said clearly. “I’m sorry.”

The officer huffed. “Mr. Kirkland, we just want a little cooperation on your part.” Arthur squinted at the man as his head started to hurt; migraines had been occurring every few hours since Arthur had woken up the day before. Straightening his collar, the officer ducked his chin and looked at Arthur from underneath his angry eyebrows. “Our information says that the man with you in the vehicle was intoxicated,” Arthur nodded, and the officer continued, “We just want to know if you remember any other… psychological trigger that might’ve cause the accident.”

Arthur shook his head and immediately regretted it as his head swam. “I don’t even know who was in the car with me.”

“Isn’t there anything you can remember?” The officer pressed, “Even a small detail –”

Arthur pressed the panic button on the side of his bed as his vision started to blur. “No. No, I can’t remember… I don’t remember anything.”

“Excuse me,” a charming voice called from the hallway, pushing past several officers with a crisp, clean lab coat fluttering in their wake. Arthur immediately recognized the doctor as the pediatric surgeon, Feliciana Vargas. She had met Arthur earlier that morning when she walked into his room by accident. Apparently, it was her third day in the hospital, and couldn’t quite find her way. Stepping in front of the officers, Dr. Vargas stepped over to Arthur and turned off the panic button. “I think you need to leave now.”

The officer raised his hands in surrender as Dr. Vargas flicked her curly brown hair over her shoulder. “Ma’am, we’re performing an official investigation –”

Leaning her weight onto her right foot, Dr. Vargas smiled sweetly at the officers as she tapped the toe of her high heels against the linoleum floors impatiently. “I understand. But this man has gone through severe, painful trauma. He is experiencing amnesia, and I don’t think your harassing him will help him feel any better.”

Leaning his head back into his pillow, Arthur closed his eyes and sighed. The officers grumbled to themselves disagreeably while Dr. Vargas tapped a button on Arthur’s heart monitor. They obviously didn’t seem happy about being dismissed, and Arthur wondered if they would leave without a fight.

“If we could ask you a few questions later, that would be good.” The main officer said solidly, giving Arthur the idea that he really had no say in the matter. Pursing his lips disagreeably, Arthur didn’t open his eyes to see the officer nod at Dr. Vargas. “We’ll be in touch.”

A sigh, sweet as caramel, echoed off of the walls as Dr. Vargas shook her head. Arthur peeked up at her sheepishly, smiling slightly as the doctor gave him a pitying glance.

“Poor passerotto,” she said softly, patting Arthur’s shoulder as she did so. Her light, brown eyes glowed in the late afternoon sunlight, and Arthur knew that she was a very beautiful woman, but he couldn’t find it in himself to truly admire her. Feliciana pressed another button on Arthur’s heart monitor, then went to look at his chart that was clipped to the end of his bed. “Poor Arthur… all beaten up.”

“I wasn’t beaten up,” Arthur argued weakly, twisting his wrist and feeling the IV in his arm pull uncomfortably at his skin. Wincing, Arthur twisted his wrist back into its former position, and sighed again. “They were just hassling me.”
“So you weren’t scared?” Feliciana asked innocently, fluttering her eyelashes as she drummed her manicured fingernails along the edge of Arthur’s charts.

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Of course not.”

Feliciana hummed. “You looked pretty pale for a man who wasn’t scared.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Arthur said as Feliciana opened Arthur’s chart and wrote down a few numbers that were flashing on the several machines around him. Closing his eyes, Arthur flinched at the feeling of a nail piercing his skull. Pressing his fingertips to his bandage-covered temples, Arthur tried to take deep breaths. “But the migraines are back.”

Feliciana hummed. “I’ll make sure that you get something for it. Your best bet might be to sleep through it. Maybe focus on something else?” Arthur gave her an agitated look. How could he focus on anything when his brain felt as if it were swelling until it would ooze out of his skull? Feliciana ducked her head and made an embarrassed expression. “Well, we could talk for a minute, if you like. My next surgery isn’t for another two hours.”

Arthur closed his eyes and pressed harder at his temples, feeling the stitches in the side of his head fester and itch. “Quietly,” he requested, hearing Feliciana walk around to the left side of his bed and pull up a chair. The leg of the chair screeched loudly and grated on Arthur’s nerves, and he repeated, “Quietly.”

“Si, si,” Feliciana said softly. “We’ll get to know each other.” Arthur’s eyebrows knit together in concentration, and Feliciana continued. “You ask a question, then I ask a question… good?”

“Fine,” Arthur breathed. “First question: are you Spanish or Italian?”

She giggled at that. “Italian. My sister and I were raised in Italy by our grandfather.” Arthur gave a semi-interested hum, and Feliciana brushed off the end of her lab coat. “My turn. Who was the man that stayed with you, yesterday?”

Arthur bit his bottom lip. “Apparently, he’s my husband.”

“Does he have a name?” Feliciana asked with a spark of interest. Arthur shrugged awkwardly.

“One question at a time,” Arthur reprimanded, digging his fingernails into the sides of his face until Feliciana’s smaller, softer hands pulled them away and put them atop the blankets. “It’s my turn, now.” Arthur paused. He didn’t want to talk about his husband. He felt guilty for not remembering anything about him. But what could he ask Feliciana to distract her from the sensitive subject of his husband? “All right, I’ve got one. You said you have a sister… what’s her name?”

Fabric rustled as Feliciana tucked a piece of her long, brown hair behind her ear. “Her name is Lovina. She works as a publisher in New York.” Arthur wasn’t even given a second before Feliciana leaned toward him and smirked as she asked, “So, what’s your husband’s name?”

Arthur shifted on the bed uncomfortably. “His name is Alfred Jones,” he paused, and pinched the soft blankets idly. “He says that we’ve been married for three years.”

Feliciana hummed thoughtfully. “And you don’t remember any of it. That’s so…”

“Depressing?” Arthur offered sadly, opening his eyes just a bit just to give Dr. Vargas a beaten look. “Disappointing? Pathetic?”
“I was going to say ‘tragically romantic,’” Feliciana said with a flutter of her eyelashes. “But, any of those could work.”

Arthur groaned; one part because of the migraine, and one part because of his memory. “It is pathetic. I should at least remember the man I’ve agreed to spend the rest of my life with, shouldn’t I?” Feliciana didn’t respond, and Arthur huffed. “I feel terrible. He left to deal with something yesterday, but he said he’ll be back today.”

Feliciana made an interested, high pitched noise that made Arthur’s head ache, and Arthur’s face scrunched up at the sensation. How could such a petite woman make such loud noises? Clapping her hands together delicately, Feliciana leaned forward to whisper into Arthur’s ear.

“Perhaps you will remember something if he comes back to you, no?” Arthur gave a doubtful, shuddery grumble, and Feliciana sat back to wave at another doctor who came into the room. “Now, this nice young man will give you something for the pain. As for your husband,” Arthur glanced up at Dr. Vargas skeptically. Feliciana winked down at him, and Arthur rolled his eyes. “I would be grateful to be married to such a beautiful man.”

Arthur shifted uncomfortably, giving the male doctor an embarrassed smile before he sighed, “I think I’d be more grateful to remember why I married such a beautiful man.”

The male doctor nodded sympathetically as he uncapped a syringe and poked it into a tube that led to Arthur’s IV. Hoping to avoid thinking about the large needle in his arm, Arthur looked back to the door just in time to see Feliciana blow him a kiss. He shook his head in disapproval.

“No fear, piccolo passeratto!” She called in a cheery tone that made Arthur’s head spin and his ears ring. “Just enjoy the company of your beautiful man. Indulge now, think later.”

“That,” Arthur said crossly as Dr. Vargas slipped away down the hall. “Is the worst advice I can ever remember being given.”

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“Okay, so… this is your mom,” Alfred said gently, pointing to a picture of a lovely woman. Arthur sat in bed quietly, looking down at a photo album that Alfred had brought for him. It was Arthur’s third day in the hospital since we’d woken up, and several doctors had agreed that showing Arthur photographs of people he was close to might help stir up a few memories or emotions. But, as Alfred turned page after page, Arthur merely felt lost.

Arthur had looked at several pages of his high school adventures, most of which involved school dances or fundraisers. According to Alfred, he was part of the student council. In every single one of those photos, Alfred had been next to him, smiling, handing out flyers, or holding Arthur close while he made a silly face. They were close each picture, and there was never a sad expression on either or their faces. If Arthur wasn’t with Alfred, he was with other people Alfred said were his old friends. It was very sweet to see how happy he used to be, but Arthur didn’t feel reminiscent or emotional when he flipped through the photo album.

Lifting his hand from the stiff blankets of the hospital bed, Arthur delicately traced the line of his mother’s portrait. She wasn’t exactly young, but she still held herself with the grace of a young lady. She had green eyes that glowed with memories from many years ago, and her peppered brown hair flowed in an unfelt breeze. In short, she was a beautiful woman. Arthur was impressed to know that he was the son of such a lovely woman, but he sadly couldn’t remember
Sliding his fingertip along the side of the picture, Arthur tilted his head to the side and licked his lips. “She’s beautiful,” he regarded softly, having nothing better to say.

“Well,” Alfred smiled, glancing at Arthur’s face. “You look a lot like her.”

Refusing to lift his eyes and look at Alfred, Arthur continued to look at the photo album. Next to the picture of his mother, there was a picture of her with a man Arthur assumed to be his father. He had red hair and a big smile as he held an arm around his mother’s shoulders. He was almost the same height as Arthur’s mother, and he had a mound of freckles on his cheeks that glowed when he smiled. Arthur smiled at the photo; he looked happy.

“And this… is this my father?” He asked quietly, pointing to the reddish man.

Alfred huffed and shook his head, banishing his eyes back to the photo album. “Ah… no. No, that’s your older brother, Seamus. This picture was…” Alfred squinted at the picture and read the caption under the photo. “Yeah, we took this picture at his college graduation four years ago. He went to law school.” Alfred turned the page, and pointed out another picture. “See?” He said with a smile, “There we are, with him.”

True to his word, Alfred and Arthur were standing arm in arm with Seamus, both of them grinning like fools as Seamus’s laughter was frozen mid-picture. Arthur traced the outline of the photograph with a small smile. They all looked so happy. Every picture looked… perfect. Arthur’s smile dampened; his entire life couldn’t have been sunshine and rainbows. It just wasn’t possible. Looking at the other pictures on the page, Arthur pointed out a stern looking man with flaming hair next to Seamus.

“Who’s this?” Alfred leaned over to get a look at the picture, and Arthur kept his finger stationed right under the man’s face. “Is that my father?”

“What? No, no… No, that’s not your dad.” Alfred said quietly. “That’s uh… that’s not him.” Alfred reached across the page and pointed out a petite man with thinning, grey hair standing with Seamus. His eyes sparkled and his cheeks were red with joy; another happy man, it seemed. “That’s your dad. He’s really nice, we always got along. He’s a real cool guy.”

“That’s nice,” Arthur hummed, then pointed at the nameless redhead again. “But who is this?”

Alfred sighed, reaching up a hand to fix his glasses before he ran a hand through his hair. “That’s… that’s your other brother, Alistair.”

“The man who was in the accident with me.” Arthur said quickly in recognition.

Alfred nodded with a slight smile. “Yeah, that’s right.” Arthur waited for more, but Alfred was quiet, looking down at the picture of Alistair with a strange expression.

Raising his eyebrows, Arthur looked down at the photograph and sighed. “What happened to him? Is he worse off than me? Is he really hurt?” Alfred looked up at him for a moment, only to look back down at the pages quickly. Arthur huffed. “What happened? I know that I’ve got a lot of bruises, but if he was driving, he got the worst of the impact. Is he in intensive care? Where is he?”

Arthur knew the most logical answer, but he needed to hear it. He needed to hear it to know it was true. Alfred placed a hand over Arthur’s on the photo album, only daring to look up at Arthur after...
a significant two minutes had passed.

“The doctors… did everything they could to,” he took a shuddering breath, and looked back down at the photo album. “They tried everything they could to help him. But, um…” Alfred swallowed thickly, and Arthur braced himself for the sight of Alfred crying again. “But he… he died on the scene, Arthur. By the time they got to you, Alistair… he was gone.”

As Alfred took off his glasses and started to cough away the catch in his throat, Arthur blinked slowly. So his brother, Alistair, was dead. Arthur knew that he should’ve been sad. And deep down, Arthur was sure that he felt something when it came to Alistair. He just couldn’t tell what it was. He should have been mourning the loss of his brother… but he couldn’t even remember what he was supposed to mourn.

How could he mourn the loss of someone’s life… if he couldn’t remember it?

Before Arthur could ask Alfred, the distraught American left the hospital room, rushing away with the excuse that he needed some air. That left Arthur alone with a book full of faces he couldn’t recall and names he couldn’t remember. Arthur closed it and stared at the bland, beige cover.

The room was quiet, say for the routine beep of Arthur’s heart monitor and the slight buzz of the IV as Arthur was administered his regular pain reliever. For a moment, he almost missed Alfred’s boundless energy and soothing voice that filled the room. It made it seem… bigger, somehow. Less like a trap. However, Alfred was gone, and the room was very, very small.

Picking up the album, Arthur reached over to set it down on the chair where Alfred had been sitting. The pictures merely made Arthur’s head hurt… Alfred could take it home with him when he left. With that, Arthur laid back and closed his eyes, trying to fall asleep while his mind played Alfred’s sugar-sweet accent on an endless loop.

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“Where am I going to stay?” Arthur asked Dr. Sampson on his fourth day in the hospital. The nurses and several other doctors had been whispering to Arthur that he could possibly be discharged the next day; however, Arthur didn’t know where he was going to go. “After I leave the hospital, is there somewhere I’m supposed to go?”

On his left side, Alfred leaned forward in his chair and eagerly said, “You could just come home with me. I mean, we already own the house together, so…” Arthur gave him a befuddled look. He didn’t know he owned a house with Alfred. His husband was quick to continue. “I mean, you could totally stay somewhere else if that makes you uncomfortable, I’m just saying…”

“We could always contact your close relatives,” Dr. Sampson interrupted quickly, writing something down in Arthur’s chart. Arthur sent him a withering look; Alfred may have been a babbler, but Arthur happened to think it was endearing. Sampson didn’t have to interrupt him. But, the doctor went on, “I’m sure your parents would be happy to look out for you.”

Alfred cleared his throat pointedly, looking at Arthur instead of Sampson. Arthur enjoyed the attention, but didn’t smile as Alfred said, “Your parents are living in England. If you want to go, I… well, I guess I could get a ticket for you and pack some stuff up, if you –”

“Don’t you have another brother?” Sampson interrupted again, not caring to look up from Arthur’s medical chart. “And a sister? Surely, they could –”
“Excuse you,” Arthur said crossly, arching an indignant eyebrow at the doctor. “He wasn’t finished.”

Alfred sent a sly look at the doctor as he leaned back in his chair and said, “As I was saying… I could get you a ticket and pack up some clothes if you wanted to stay with your parents, no problem.” Giving Alfred a cautious smile, Arthur nodded once, listening carefully as Alfred continued. “I know Seamus would love to have you, but he’s all the way in Virginia. We’re in Seattle. Again, we could get a plane ticket, but he’s really busy with his firm… I don’t know how well he’d be able to look after you.” Arthur nodded thoughtfully, and Alfred huffed. “Your big sister, Delilah, might let you stay with her, but she’s never liked me, so…”

“So, maybe not Delilah.” Arthur said softly, and Alfred nodded bashfully.

“Mr. Jones, I would like to have a moment to talk to Mr. Kirkland alone, please,” Dr. Sampson said pointedly. Alfred slowly stood up, gently touched Arthur’s shoulder as a supportive gesture, and stepped out of the room, closing the door behind himself. Quickly, Sampson stepped closer to the right side of Arthur’s bed and loomed over him. “Mr. Kirkland, you can’t let him influence your decisions like that. He might be manipulating you.” Arthur let out a skeptical noise, but Dr. Sampson pushed the subject. “Think about it; if your sister dislikes him, it must be for a reason.”

Arthur closed his eyes; he was tired of this nonsense. He was tired of not knowing how to feel. He was tired of being told what to feel. He didn’t want to be confused, and he didn’t want to sit and fret over his lost memories. More than anything, he knew that sitting in a hospital room for days on end was driving him mad.

He knew that Alfred was his best choice if he wanted to feel safe. Alfred had been with him ever since he woke up, telling him anything he wanted to know and getting him whatever he needed to feel comfortable. If he went to his siblings now, he might just become more confused. If he went to his parents, he would be faced with the difficult situation of being the other son that didn’t die. Would they blame him? Would they wish for Alistair instead of a broken Arthur? The worst case scenarios were too unfavorable; Arthur knew he wanted to go with Alfred.

“I trust him,” Arthur said quietly. “He’s been here for me, getting me whatever I need, trying to help me… how can someone like that be bad?” Dr. Sampson snorted, but Arthur didn’t give way. “I’ll be going home with Alfred. I already live with him, so… the familiar environment will do me good.” Arthur nodded to himself as Dr. Sampson gathered his chart and grumbled angrily to himself. “Yes,” Arthur murmured, “It’ll do me good.”

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On his final day in the hospital, Arthur learned that sitting in a hospital room doing nothing but counting the ceiling tiles was boring him to tears. He wasn’t allowed to read – his concussion was still a threat – and the television in his hospital room was broken. The only thing he was allowed to do was talk to Dr. Vargas when she had time to stop by and listen to music through headphones. The only real excitement he earned every day was when Alfred would come to visit him, bringing a fresh change of clothes and a pack of chocolate pudding.

“It’s your favorite!” Alfred had always assured him, pushing the pudding cup at Arthur until he finally accepted it. “Everyone says that hospital food is junk, so I figured you might want this for desert.”

It was sweet, and Arthur knew he was trying to help Arthur remember his favorite things, but Arthur couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. He was always smiling when he came into
the room, and he was always willing to give Arthur whatever he wanted. But… was Arthur really the same Arthur that Alfred loved? Was he someone new now that his memory was gone? Arthur could never find the answer on his own, and opted to smile and thank Alfred for everything he’d done.

Now, on the dull eve of Arthur’s fifth day in the hospital, he was anxiously waiting for Alfred to come walking through the doors. He had signed discharge papers just under an hour ago, and as he sat atop his bed, looking out at the sunset through his hospital room window, he was nervous about leaving the mundane safety of the hospital. Of course it was boring with nothing to do, but… what if he didn’t like going back home with Alfred? The American had promised to do everything he could to make Arthur comfortable, but what if that wasn’t enough? What if Alfred put too much hope on Arthur shoulders, and in the end, he didn’t regain his memory? Arthur didn’t want to crush Alfred’s heart, nor did he want to feel the harsh pain of sentimental flashbacks.

Twiddling his thumbs and worrying his bottom lip, Arthur took slow, even breaths. He was in a difficult position. If he never regained all of his memories, he'd have to start his entire life over. Did that mean he’d leave Alfred all alone? Would Alfred ever speak to him again? Arthur had grown a soft, thin bond with the American over the past week, and didn’t want to lose what small companionship they had cultivated. But, as the doctors had told Arthur, he couldn’t force himself to remember. It was much more complicated than that.

Knocking gained Arthur’s attention, and he turned to see Alfred leaning in the doorway of his hospital room.

“Hey, Arthur,” he said in a friendly voice. Arthur could see the hope glittering in his eyes. Desperate and pure, eager for Arthur to remember who he was. Arthur felt his stomach churn uncomfortably; he hadn’t remembered anything new for the past three days. He knew it was chipping away at Alfred’s optimism, but there was nothing he could do about it. Alfred stepped into the room and put down an empty suitcase. “How’re you feelin’ today? Ready to go home?”

Arthur shrugged. “Those are two different questions,” he murmured, watching quietly as Alfred wandered around the room and picked up the small trinkets and belongings he’d brought for Arthur to keep himself busy. “I’m tired of being here… but I’m not sure if going back to your home will help me feel better.”

Alfred picked up one of the sweaters Arthur had set aside to give him a sad look. “It’s your house, too. Even if you don’t remember it… it’s still your house.”

Lowering his gaze from Alfred’s endless blue eyes, Arthur looked around at the hospital room. He’d organized everything Alfred had brought him into neat piles, hoping to make the transition from hospital to home as easy as possible. Without being told, Alfred went down the line, picking things up and putting them into the empty suitcase quietly.

There was a photo album that Arthur had refused to touch for two days; Alfred had left it in hopes that it might help Arthur remember his friends and family. It only served to give Arthur a painful migraine. Next, there was a small, fluffy stuffed bear that Alfred had supposedly won for Arthur three years ago. Though he wouldn’t admit it, Arthur had slept with the bear every night, pressing his nose into the soft fur and inhaling a scent that he could almost remember. Aside from that, there were a few framed photos of a wedding that Arthur couldn’t recall, and several knitted sweaters that Alfred assured were the comfiest that Arthur owned.

Looking down at the sweater he was wearing, Arthur plucked at the edge of the soft, green fabric. There was a stripe of diamonds around the front of it, and Arthur was sure that the sweater was an eyesore, but something in his head told him that it was too soft to take off. He had
worn-out grey trousers covering his legs, and stiff socks supplied by the hospital; they had rubber grips on the bottom so Arthur wouldn’t somehow slip and fall. Over those socks were a pair of old moccasins that Alfred said used to be his favorite, no matter how worn they were. Arthur pursed his lips with a frown; Alfred was wearing his normal dress shirt and slacks. In comparison, Arthur looked exceedingly frumpy.

Combing his fingers through his own mussed hair self-consciously, Arthur made sure to be careful of the thick bandages that still covered his head. Beneath those bandages lay stitches that marked a sharp line that started nearly at the middle of Arthur’s forehead and ended just above his left ear. Dr. Sampson said that the stitches would dissolve in time and the scar would be covered by Arthur’s hair line, but that gave Arthur little comfort as the area around the injury tended to twinge and ache when he brushed his fingers across it.

“Okay,” Alfred announced as he pulled the zipper of the suitcase closed, hiding all of the sweaters and comfortable sweatpants he’d brought for Arthur. “Ready to go?”

Quickly taking his hands away from his hair – hopefully it didn’t look as messy as before – Arthur slid off of the hospital bed and nodded slowly. Alfred’s smile never wavered as he walked over to the door of Arthur’s hospital room and unfolded a wheelchair that was propped against the wall. Motioning for Arthur to sit, Alfred continued to force a smile as he gently put the suitcase in Arthur’s lap and clicked the room light off as he pushed Arthur out into the hall.

Several nurses waved and smiled at Arthur and waved to him as he was rolled down the hallways and toward the lift that would take them down to the lobby. Arthur smiled at the nurses, but didn’t wave back, opting to hold onto the suitcase atop his lap. Alfred chuckled lowly in his throat, and Arthur felt something familiar rattle in his mind at the sound.

“Looks like you made a lot of friends in here, huh?” He asked personably as he pressed the button next to the lift.

Arthur shrugged loosely, closing his eyes as his head swam uncomfortably. “Oh, I really don’t know.” The lift doors dinged and slid open, revealing an elderly man with a single rose in his hand. Alfred stood to the side and let the man through before he pushed Arthur into the lift and hit another button. Arthur drummed his fingernails against the armrest on his wheelchair. “I’d probably be happier if I could remember the friends I already have.”

Alfred didn’t respond to that, letting Arthur sit in an awkward silence as the lift took them down to the first floor of the hospital. There was no dull music playing to distract himself with, and the dingy metal walls were scuffed and tired from years of use. Arthur looked at the different buttons next to the door to fill his time until the lift came to a shuddering halt and the doors dinged as they opened.

Arthur never remembered being in this part of the hospital before – though maybe he’d been carted through the halls after the accident. Alfred slowly pushed him forward and into the lobby, taking his time and constantly asking Arthur if he was feeling all right. Arthur would always answer with a shaky smile and nod, not trusting his voice.

The pressure was on, and he had to try to remember his own life before Alfred’s heart crumbled away. He didn’t want that to happen. There were several pulsing messages in his brain that screamed that Alfred was very important to him, but Arthur couldn’t remember why he was so important. There must’ve been more than just a sweet romance and sticky, love-drunk memories. There was so much more to Alfred… Arthur just couldn’t remember what it was.

When Arthur heard nice shoes clicking on the floors loudly, he instinctively looked over his
shoulder to see a woman rushing towards them.

“Wait!” Dr. Vargas called to them, her voice echoing down the halls in sweet repetitions of her soothing voice. “Wait, per favore!”

Stopping in the middle of the cozy lobby, Alfred smiled brightly at Dr. Vargas as she immediately knelt in front of Arthur and put her hands atop his in his lap. Arthur could see the glimmer of her eyes. A trusting, honey-colored glow that threatened to melt Arthur if he didn’t look away. There was something melancholy in her smile, but Arthur didn’t think about it too much as she pat his hands softly.

“You’ll be all right,” she said softly, as if Arthur needed the extra reassurance. Trying to agree with her, Arthur nodded slowly, wincing as pain trickled down the side of his head. Feliciana pat his hand again, and sighed softly. “I will always be here, if you need me.”

Digging into the pocket of her crisp, clean lab coat, Dr. Vargas retrieved a business card with several different phone numbers on it. Her name was labeled at the top in bold print. Pushing it into Arthur’s left hand, Dr. Vargas smiled and nodded at him once before she stood up straight and told Alfred not to hesitate to call the hospital if Arthur experienced any extreme pain.

Looking down at the business card in his hand, Arthur pursed his lips and sighed. Unless he came back to the hospital for the worsening of his condition – which hopefully would not occur – he’d probably never see Feliciana again. That was, unless Alfred did something to make him fear for his own safety… he could probably call Dr. Vargas. Was that why she gave him the business card? To give him a safe place to go in case things with Alfred didn’t end well?

Arthur wasn’t given a chance to think about it before Alfred and Dr. Vargas shook hands and parted ways. Feliciana disappeared down the winding halls of the hospital, never to be found, while Alfred turned Arthur’s wheelchair to the large, sliding doors and pushed him towards the outside world. After he lifted his eyes to block the light of a blushing sunset, Arthur looked around at the dull parking lot.

There were a few trees that sparsely peppered the grounds, but the majority of them were bare. It was early autumn as Alfred had told him. It would still be a few weeks before the trees would bloom again. Even though the grass around the trees was a dismal, brown color, the air was light and sweet with the smell of fresh rain. Arthur liked that.

Pushing Arthur to the curb of the pick-up lane just outside of the entrance, Alfred dug into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out his keys. Pushing down the little breaks on the side of Arthur’s wheelchair, Alfred waited patiently as Arthur stuffed Dr. Vargas’s business card into the pocket of his trousers and held onto his suitcase tightly.

“I’m gonna pull up the car,” Alfred murmured with a gentle smile, as if Arthur was a skittish animal and needed to be treated with the upmost care. “I’ll be right back.”

Did Alfred think he’d developed abandonment issues after the accident? Arthur didn’t care to ask. He simply sighed and smiled. Humming in agreement, Arthur watched as Alfred sauntered across the driving lanes, looked to and fro quickly, and ran for the larger parking lot.

As Alfred found the car, Arthur watched several people drive past the pick-up lane and zip through the parking lot. Screeching tires made Arthur’s head ache, and he instinctively flinched when he heard the tires squeal against asphalt. It seemed the accident had left him with a few sharp fears that didn’t disperse after he lost his memory.
Next to him, a few older men and women were wheeled out in their wheelchairs by hospital workers. Several of them had blankets draped over their laps, and Arthur immediately began to envy them as the chilled, fall air rushed past them. Arthur shivered and held the suitcase on his lap closer; it seemed one sweater wasn’t enough to keep him completely warm.

As he continued to wait for Alfred, Arthur watched a woman sprint across the parking lot with her purse in tote. Was someone in her family in the hospital? Where they hurt badly? There was a sad story there, but Arthur didn’t want to know how it ended as the woman ran past him and the older people, stumbling only when the doors paused and slid open. She proceeded to scream at the reception desk about what room she was looking for; Arthur turned away to watch the parking lot again.

Before long, a sleek, black car pulled up in front of Arthur. A BMW, or a Mercedes? Arthur hadn’t caught sight of the symbol on the front of the car. Had he ever been good with cars? He couldn’t remember. Alfred emerged from the car with a smile that threatened to break his face in half, closing the car door with a resounding slam as he hopped back to the pavement where Arthur waited.

Taking the suitcase from Arthur’s lap, Alfred quickly stowed it away in the backseat of the car and slammed that door shut. His smile was clear and bright as he waved at the elderly audience next to Arthur, and he held his hands out to Arthur for support. Arthur hesitated, then gripped Alfred’s hand tightly and used them as leverage to stand up on quaking legs.

“We’ve got to leave that here.” Alfred grunted with a nod to the wheelchair as he held Arthur steady. Arthur swayed uneasily, but nodded.

Arthur’s head swam a bit as he stood up straight, and whether or not he liked to admit it, he leaned against Alfred’s sturdy chest as he shakily stepped over the curb and to the side of the car. Alfred, being the gentleman he was, opened the door for Arthur and helped him into the seat. Leaning in the doorway for a minute, Alfred looked back at the wheelchair and mumbled a quick, “Hold on,” before he closed the car door and left to take the wheelchair back to the receptionists of the hospital.

Arthur’s hands shook when he tried to buckle his seatbelt; the last time he was in a car, he’d almost been killed. Going home should have been easy. It should have been a calming, happy thing. Surely he’d been in this car countless times, and he probably knew it very well. He should have felt safe and sound in the car he had most likely spent years riding in and driving. And yet, as Arthur’s hands sat in his lap, trembling and restless, he couldn’t help but feel terrified of the car that he couldn’t remember.

As Alfred opened the driver side door, Arthur winced and leaned away from his husband. When the car door shut, Arthur flinched and shrunk back further. Slowly, Alfred buckled his seatbelt and arched an eyebrow at Arthur’s behavior.

“You okay? Does your head hurt, or something?”

Giving out an unintelligent, nonsensical noise, Arthur sat upright in the car, stuffing his cold fingers between his thighs before he shrugged. “No, I’m… I just don’t really know what I’m feeling.”

Leaving his hand on the gear shift for a moment, Alfred gave Arthur a long, hard look. “Do… do you wanna go back inside, or…?”

“I think I’m just tired,” Arthur breathed, pointedly looking out the window as Alfred put
the car into drive. “I’ll probably feel better if I get some sleep.”

Alfred turned out of the parking lot. “Did you not take any naps today?”

Staring out at the highway he’d only seen through the window of his hospital room, Arthur sighed softly. “Not today.”

Alfred didn’t comment any further as he pulled out onto the highway and accelerated fast enough to make Arthur’s heart pound anxiously. Skyscrapers loomed just past the hospital, and Arthur could see the Space Needle in the distance. Had he ever been to the top? He could ask Alfred later. Instead, Arthur watched the thin, white clouds disappear on an infinite horizon that was hidden behind the large office buildings beyond the highway. If he focused on the scenery of tall, strange buildings, the highway itself wasn’t so terrifying. That was, until another car zipped past them and Arthur shrunk down in his seat again.

Closing his eyes, Arthur covered his ears to avoid hearing the revving engines that roared past them; something still scared him. Something in his brain still screamed that the road was frightening, even if his memory was gone.

Before Arthur could ask Alfred to get off the highway so he could breathe, Alfred clicked a button on the stereo, and the car was filled with music. Loud, obnoxious music that made Arthur’s aching head spin. Alfred didn’t notice his distress, and continued to watch the road as the bass buzzed in the seats and the guitar drowned out the sound of Arthur’s breathing.

Shapes and colors blurred in Arthur’s eyes, and he blinked hard to regain his focus as Alfred turned onto an exit ramp. The car still shook with the sound of heavy metal, and Arthur looked at the console for the volume control desperately. His hands were shaking and his heart rate had never slowed; at this rate, he would die of cardiac arrest before a car accident.

Turning the volume down low, Arthur took shaking breaths as the car came to a slow stop. Arthur glanced up; a stop sign. After Alfred had turned off of the highway, he’d lead them down onto the much less crowded streets of Seattle. They were somewhere uptown, surrounded by tall, gorgeous houses that pressed close to one another. Alfred finally turned to look at him.

“Sorry,” Arthur finally muttered, looking down at his lap. “I have a headache.”

“No problem,” Alfred shrugged. “I just figured the sounds of the highway where scary.” he said quietly as the formerly deafening music continued at a low hum. “I was trying to cover ‘em up. You looked pretty spooked.”

Alfred pulled the car forward slowly along the streets, taking a leisurely pace as Arthur awkwardly looked up at the buildings around them. Alfred was trying to help him. Granted, his methods were unorthodox, but it still meant that he still cared somewhat for Arthur. That was enough to help Arthur’s heartbeat slow to its natural rate.

Glancing at a small park they drove past, Arthur watched a group of children chasing each other while several people walked their dogs. Bare trees lined the park, and Arthur mused that when spring was in bloom, the park would be alive with light and color. To his right, Arthur noted the tall houses they drove past held their own beauty with ornamented banisters and sculpted rooftops.

“What a gorgeous neighborhood,” Arthur breathed against the window, leaning back bashfully when it fogged up. He must’ve been pressing his nose to the glass for a significant amount of time for it to fog. Thankfully, Alfred didn’t notice the childish behavior.
Alfred only glanced around for a moment before he nodded. “Yeah… truth is, we used to live way downtown. We couldn’t afford anything else.” He hit his turning signal and pulled over in front of a light blue house that Arthur absolutely adored. “After your books started to get popular, you said you wanted to get out of that matchbox we called home.”

Sending Alfred a perturbed look, Arthur’s brows knitted together as he echoed, “Books? What books?”

“You’re books,” Alfred repeated slowly, as if Arthur could no longer understand the English language. Alfred put the card into park. “You’re an author. Didn’t I tell you that?”

“No,” Arthur murmured, “No, you didn’t.”

“Oh.” Alfred blinked at the steering wheel blankly. “I bet I just… forgot, I guess. Like, I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact you can’t remember anything.”

“Me, too.” Arthur agreed softly.

Though Alfred must’ve felt like he’d been left in the dark, Arthur was terrified of the world around him. What did he like? What did he hate? He couldn’t recall anything from his favorite foods to his own family. Arthur’s confusion far surpassed Alfred’s, but he didn’t say so as Alfred climbed out of the car and retrieved the suitcase from the back.

Arthur sat and looked up at the house that must’ve belonged to Alfred. Supposedly, it was Arthur’s idea to move to this lovely house. He’d made a good choice. Pale blue colored the outside with light, white accents around the trim. Concrete steps paved the way to a lovely oak door with a bright, brass doorknob. Glittering, golden numbers marked their door as number 221.

Arthur would’ve kept staring, but Alfred trudged up the stairs and unlocked the front door, blocking Arthur’s view. After he’d set down Arthur’s suitcase just inside the house, Alfred bounced back down the stairs and opened Arthur’s car door.

“Ready?” He said with a shining smile that made Arthur nervous. He didn’t want to disappoint Alfred, but he couldn’t just force himself to remember everything. Alfred held a hand out for Arthur to take, and Arthur fumbled with the seatbelt. “Do you need a minute?”

“N-no, I’m fine,” Arthur said, taking just a moment to blink slowly when his head swam and he felt a bit dizzy. The moment passed sooner than it came, and Arthur quickly put his hand in Alfred’s. “Just lost in thought.”

Alfred held Arthur’s hand tightly as he helped him out of the car, smiling all the while, even when Arthur’s fingernails no doubt dug into the back of his hand. When Arthur was on his feet and steady, Alfred reached around him and closed the car door. Now the real challenge began.

In the hospital, Arthur hadn’t been told to get up and walk anywhere. Though he did get up to go to the bathroom, there was a definite difference between going into the house and shuffling across a hospital room. He needed to walk ten feet, climb the stairs, and walk through his home. Arthur’s head ached at the thought, but he refused to surrender to the pain.

Holding Alfred’s hand tightly, Arthur started off with iron determination, stepping forward with purpose and poise. But, after seven solid steps, Arthur began to stumble and drag his feet. When his feet met the ground, his nerves sent strange signals to his brain that read “danger” and “pain,” leaving Arthur with an excruciating, prickling feeling that raced up and down his spine with each step. By the time he reached the steps, Arthur reached for the railing desperately and leaned
against it, catching his breath.

“Arthur,” Alfred said softly, “We can go back.” Arthur nearly vomited; go back? He’d hadn’t even made it to the front door. How did Alfred expect him to make it back to the car? Alfred placed a hand on his back and rubbed it soothingly as Arthur groaned. Alfred sighed, “We can go back to the hospital. Maybe you’re not ready. Maybe you need to spend a little more time there so you can get better.”

Scowling, Arthur lifted his head to glare at the front door. He didn’t want to go back to the hospital. He didn’t want to be trapped there anymore. Gritting his teeth, Arthur lifted his right foot and put it on the bottom step, feeling his bruised muscles scream in protest. A cold sweat broke out across his forehead, and he heard Alfred tell him to take it easy, but Arthur didn’t stop. He didn’t want to stop. This was Arthur’s choice; to be strong and sleep in a comfortable bed that didn’t leave him with terrified nightmares, or be weak and go back to the smirking Dr. Sampson. Arthur wanted to pick the former. He wanted to, but he had to climb the stairs first.

Alfred held his hand all the way, and when Arthur had made it to the third step, Alfred stopped protesting. If Arthur stopped to steel his determination, Alfred whispered encouragement to him.

“Two more steps,” he mumbled as Arthur leaned against the railing. “Just two more steps and we can get you all comfy on the couch. All the pillows and blankets you could want.”

Arthur frowned; the couch? “Not… not on a bed?”

Alfred chuckled low in his throat, and Arthur’s memory stirred at the sound. “The bedroom is up another flight of stairs. I don’t know if you want to do that.”

Arthur shook his head, and a wave of vertigo hit him with a force. Bending over double, Arthur choked on a deep breath, and Alfred’s voice went up several pitches as he asked what was wrong. Arthur knew he could make it, but his body was still covered in bruises from the accident and stiff from too many long days spent in a bed. Distress signals were still sent to his brain as he slowly made it up to the last two steps, but Arthur breathed a sigh of relief when he could see the inside of the house.

Honey-colored hardwood floors greeted him, and beige walls seemed warm and inviting as Arthur teetered and swayed on the top step. Alfred gave an uneasy laugh as he slowly steered Arthur forward into the house, obviously rattled by the stairs experience. Arthur shuffled into the entryway, looking to the doorway on his right to see a kitchen. Hardwood cabinets and marble countertops caught his eye, but he wasn’t hungry. He could explore that later. Looking at the doorway to his left, he saw a cozy living room with a flat screen television and a large, plush sofa waiting for him. Arthur almost cried with relief. It was only a few steps away.

Alfred helped him to the sofa, and when Arthur fell into a sitting place on the sofa, Alfred grabbed a pillow from the accompanying armchair and put it over the armrest. There, he laid Arthur back against the cushions, reassuring Arthur that he could sleep as long as he wanted. Arthur let his eyes flutter shut as Alfred peeled off his old moccasins. The stiff hospital socks were removed after that, and his legs were gently lifted onto the sofa. Before Arthur could ask for a blanket, Alfred had disappeared from the room.

Arthur didn’t open his eyes; he was tired. His head hurt. His body ached for relief. Sleep would do him good. Just as sleep reached to up take Arthur down into her splendor, the sound of footsteps thudding down stairs filled the room. Arthur cracked his eyes open just enough to see Alfred holding a thick, down quilt over him. When Arthur’s eyes closed, the blanket was draped over him, cocooning Arthur in a veil of warmth.

Breathing deep, Arthur nodded once and whispered, “Yes,” everything felt heavy, and he knew he was quickly falling asleep. Taking one more breath, Arthur breathed, “Welcome home,” before sleep finally overcame him and erased his pain.
Frail, grey light stained the back of Arthur’s eyelids, and as he struggled to sleep, shadows slunk through the grey light to bring down murky, troublesome tones. When he pulled together the strength he needed to open his eyes, he looked up at the stars. Arthur blinked in confusion. Stars? He squinted up at the subtly glowing lights, and noted that they were in fact stickers. They were glowing in the darkened, cool room.

To his left, an open window let in the sound of a car slowly driving past the house. Arthur let out a long breath. The bed beneath him felt stiff; he wished he was in his own bed.

“Hey,” a soft voice called to Arthur from only a few inches away. Arthur blinked at the smell of fruit juice that accompanied the warm breath against the right side of his cheek. “Are you asleep?”

Arthur blinked up at the stars. “No.” Next to him, the bed dipped and shifted under the weight of another person, but Arthur didn’t look away from the ceiling. “Are you?”

“No,” the voice murmured, soft and jittery.

“Do… do your parents always yell like that?” Arthur asked quietly, finally turning to look into two bright, blue eyes. Next to him, Alfred shook his head slowly, biting his bottom lip nervously. Arthur blinked slowly; should he tell his parents about Alfred’s father throwing things? Should he tell someone about his mother that slapped him? Would he get in trouble? Looking at Alfred quietly, Arthur took a deep breath and asked, “Aren’t you scared of them?”

“No,” Alfred hissed with a frown. “I’m ten. I’m not scared of that stuff.”

“But –” Arthur wanted to tell Alfred that he wasn’t understanding the point of the question. Parents were supposed to hug and kiss and cuddle… they weren’t supposed to scream at their children when they forgot to take off their shoes. They weren’t supposed to hit their children when they walked in front of the telly. Arthur wanted to tell Alfred this, but Alfred wouldn’t listen. Huffing, Arthur slid his hand up along the bed to lay by Alfred. “You can hold my hand… If you’re scared.”

“I’m not,” Alfred assured, not looking at Arthur’s hand. “Besides, we’re both ten… and you’re smaller than me. It’s not like you’re braver than me.”

Closing his eyes, Arthur resigned himself to sleep, leaving his hand in front of Alfred. Next to him, Alfred sighed, but didn’t say anymore. The light that stained the back of Arthur’s eyelids started to cloud with shadows once more, and Arthur wished for sweet dreams as he slowly felt himself sink into the mattress. Just before he could feel himself slip away from reality, he felt Alfred take his hand. Arthur smiled.

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Opening his eyes with a startled jolt, Arthur looked up at a high, beige ceiling. He blinked in confusion; where were the stars? Where were the itchy sheets he’d been laying on just moments before he opened his eyes? And why did it feel like someone was slamming a sledgehammer into his forehead?
Sitting up quickly with a sharp breath, Arthur feel his head spin and his eyelids grow dreadfully heavy as he fumbled at the quilt that covered him. He felt himself tilt and lean to the left, and one of his hands slipped off of the sofa that he inhabited before he quickly righted himself. Only a few feet away, Alfred looked up from a paper he’d been reading to look at Arthur.

“Whoa,” he said softly, standing from the plush armchair he occupied and setting his papers and coffee mug aside. “That was fast; I almost spilled my coffee.” He held Arthur steady as the Englishman regained his tilted sense of balance. “You all right? Did ya have a bad dream?”

Arthur frowned; a bad dream? No, it had felt too real to be a dream. Wasn’t it? Taking a deep breath, Arthur felt reality come crashing down on him with a force. The accident. The hospital. Alfred’s house… Alfred. Letting out a deep breath, Arthur shifted his legs to make room for Alfred on the sofa. Strong, helping hands held his shoulders warmly as Arthur’s skewed and confused senses rewired themselves back into order.

Details of the dream lingered in Arthur’s mind, regardless of how hard he tried to cling to the real world. The superhero posters that had littered the walls still danced before Arthur’s eyes along with glowing stars. No matter how hard Arthur squeezed his eyes shut, he could still feel Alfred’s innocent, blue eyes burning into his own. Arthur’s eyes shot open. Alfred had been young in his dream. They both were young. It seemed too random for Arthur to make up on his own, especially if he couldn’t remember anything about his own life…

“It was a memory,” Arthur finally breathed after sitting in Alfred’s grasp for several minutes. Alfred made a befuddled noise in the back of his throat, and Arthur repeated himself. “It was a memory… it wasn’t a dream. It was real. It happened, did it?”

“What happened?” Alfred asked with a nervous laugh, “What’re you talkin’ about?”

Quickly trying to cement the idea that he’d regained memories in his sleep, Arthur explained the dream down to the last detail. From the coldness of the room to the scent of Alfred’s breath. By the time Arthur finished, Alfred had a troubled expression on his face. Arthur noticed when he straightened his glasses and his hands held a slight shake.

Taking a breath, Arthur leaned forward and murmured, “Well?” Alfred didn’t immediately respond, and Arthur grasped his sleeve and tugged on it, trying to regain Alfred’s undivided attention. “Did it really happen, or did I just make it up in a dream?”

Sliding off of the sofa, Alfred scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “Yeah,” he sighed as he put his hands on his hips and walked back to the armchair where he’d formerly been seated. He glanced at the papers he’d been reading before, but didn’t pick them up again as he sat down. “Yeah, I bet it happened… I can’t remember that long ago, though. You said we were ten?”

Arthur shrugged. “That’s what you said in my dream.”

Sniffing speculatively, Alfred squinted up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “That was fifteen years ago, Arthur… I’m not gonna remember that one night perfectly,” he looked back to Arthur with a soft smile. “But it probably happened. My parents were pretty… rough, so I’m sure we talked about it when you stayed over for the night one time.”

Plucking at the quilt that covered his lap, Arthur pursed his lips. “‘Rough?’” He echoed incredulously, looking down at the soft, green fabric of his sweater. If pressed for an adjective to describe the sweater, he’d supply ‘dingy.’ In his seat, Alfred grunted an affirmative noise, and Arthur frowned as he mumbled, “Define ‘rough.’”
The living room was uncomfortably quiet as Alfred glared up at the ceiling. Crystalline bits of discomfort settled in Arthur’s stomach, but they were quickly washed away when Alfred stood up. Clearing his throat, Alfred walked out of the room, heading across the hall as he spoke to Arthur.

“I don’t wanna talk about it right now,” he said lowly, his sad tones echoing hollowly off of the quiet walls of the house. Such sad repetitions… a lonely ballad of a voice. Arthur regretted asking anything at all. He slid his legs off of the sofa as he heard Alfred open the refrigerator. “You hungry? Heck, you’ve gotta be. You haven’t eaten since yesterday… I just didn’t want to wake you up.”

Arthur froze; yesterday? Glancing around the room for a clock, Arthur noted a small, ornately decorated wooden clock sitting on a shelf above the TV. Pushing himself up onto wobbling feet, Arthur slowly shuffled to the clock, noting that it was eight o’clock. The house was too dark for it to be morning… It was nighttime already? Had he slept all day?

“Arthur?” Alfred called again, and Arthur turned away from the lovely clock to see Alfred’s back across the hallway. Broad shoulders were tense beneath his button-up shirt, though Arthur was surprised to see it untucked. He was always so well put together when Arthur saw him… Well, even the most suave men had to untuck their shirts eventually. Alfred spoke again, drawing Arthur’s attention. “I was thinking of just making you some soup… the doc said to take it easy, and soup is pretty easy. Are you up for some chicken noodle? Or maybe some buttered noodles?”

“Oh, um…” Reaching up to itch his forehead, Arthur scowled when the bandages hindered the movement. He resorted to pulling his fingers through his mussed hair that wasn’t covered by thick, stiff bandages. “Any soup sounds fine.”

“Great! I was busy with my stuff, so I haven’t eaten dinner, either.” Alfred snorted at the statement, and finished with, “God, who needs to be taken care of here? You or me?”

Alfred laughed in the kitchen, and Arthur felt his heart clench at the sound. It was so familiar… but he’d never heard Alfred’s voice echo like that before. He’d never seen Alfred’s shoulders pick up that way, and he’d never watched Alfred shaking his head in disapproval of his own joke… hadn’t he? It was all new for now, but Arthur knew there were memories lingering just below the surface of his consciousness. The dream had proved that.

Slowly making his way to the doorway of the living room, Arthur glanced at the bunched up mess that was the quilt he’d been curled up with. If he ever moved from the sofa and onto a proper bed, he’d like to take that with him. It had a warm scent that he liked. It almost reminded him of Alfred, in a way… almost.

Leaning in the doorway, Arthur looked to his left to see a flight of stairs that supposedly led to the bedroom. To his right was the entryway and front door… across the hall was the kitchen. Arthur frowned. Where was the bathroom?

“Alfred?” He asked gently as Alfred poured water into a large pot. Alfred hummed inquisitively, and Arthur drummed his finger along the doorway awkwardly. “Where’s the bathroom?”

Pausing at his place in front of the stove, Alfred clicked on the burner and glanced over his shoulder at Arthur. “Oh,” he whispered, as if the idea of Arthur needing to use the bathroom had never occurred to him. Arthur arched an eyebrow, and Alfred swung into motion, walking across the hall and back into the living room. From there, he pointed out the hall beyond the
armchair he’d been sitting in, mumbling, “Second door on the right,” he looked back at Arthur sheepishly and gave him an embarrassed smile. “Sorry, I just… I keep forgetting you don’t know where everything is.”

“It’s fine,” Arthur said, sidestepping Alfred as he slowly trudged to the bathroom. His head still hurt, but at least walking wasn’t as difficult as the day before. Sleeping must’ve helped.

Quickly using the bathroom, Arthur washed his hands, watching his hands turn bright red under the heat. Unlike the room in his dream, Alfred’s house was exceptionally warm. Arthur could only wonder what it cost to keep the heat so high. Glancing at himself in the mirror over the sink, Arthur frowned at his pale complexion and disagreeable expression.

There were bruises all along the right side of his body where he’d been slammed into the wall of the car during the accident, and if Arthur tilted his head to the left, the bruises were startlingly visible. Dark blue and sickening purples marked unhappy blotches along the side of his neck, and when he pulled down his collar, he could see more of the bruise spreading down across his collarbone. On the right side of his face, the skin over his cheekbone was tinted a sallow yellow by a healing bruise. Arthur brushed his fingers over his cheek, wincing when the skin ached.

Trying to distract himself from the nasty bruises, Arthur pulled his fingers through his hair, straightening the knots in his flaxen locks and smoothing down the wild snarls that had formed when he was sleeping. By the time he’d gotten back to the kitchen, Alfred was slowly stirring a metal spoon around the pot on the stove.

Reaching carefully for one of the chairs stationed in front of a round, hardwood table small big enough for two, Arthur sat quietly and watched Alfred stare down into the pot of soup with an unreadable expression. Troubled lines marked his brow, but Arthur didn’t have the courage to point them out. There was something dark and twisted lying underneath Alfred’s warm, happy visage. A whirlwind of upturned emotion and dark clouds of unhappy memories… Arthur could only wonder how Alfred had changed into such a bright, vibrant young man when his parents had been so wretched to him.

Dinner was served in silence, with only a few nods and gestures to mark polite, unspoken statements. The soup was too hot, and Arthur burned his tongue several times, but he didn’t care. He was desperately hungry. He hadn’t really thought about food until the bowl was set in front of him, and his appetite reared its ugly head, making Arthur scarf down two bowls with the vigor of a poor man aching for sustenance.

Alfred left the table only to come back with the several papers he’d been looking at before, reading them as he slowly ate one spoonful after the other. Chewing absently on the end of his numb, burned tongue, Arthur scraped the end of his spoon along the bottom of his bowl.

“What’s that?” He asked curiously, watching Alfred put down his spoon and push his glasses up on his nose. His blue eyes flickered to Arthur, recognizing that he’d spoken, but not really listening to the question. Licking his lips, Arthur leaned back in his chair and tried again. “What you’re reading… is it for your work?”

“Oh,” Alfred looked at the papers, set them down on the table, and shrugged. “Just research papers.” He scratched his hair awkwardly, and pushed his spoon around his bowl. “I’m reading them so I can determine whether or not I’m eligible for a research grant.”

Arthur sat forward again. “Research grant?”

“Oh course, I’m…” Alfred glanced at Arthur, and gave him a sad smile. “Right… I work
at a university, here in Seattle. I work in the microbiology department, studying small organisms and diseases.”


Alfred laughed loudly, and Arthur winced at the decibel before smiling in return. He really was a bright man. And intelligent, as well… Arthur had been lucky to find Alfred. But, what had happened between them, soft or rough alike, was lost… Arthur needed to retrieve it. Looking down at his empty bowl, Arthur huffed.

Forcing himself to think about things before the accident gave him migraines, and though the hospital had supplied him with pain medication, it would be best to leave that alone until he truly needed it. Sleeping seemed to help, bringing Arthur a memory with barely any pain. Yes, Arthur nodded to himself; sleeping could help him remember.

“I’m tired,” Arthur announced bluntly, tugging Alfred’s attention from his papers.

“Already?” Alfred said anxiously, “You slept all night and day, and you’ve only been up for an hour or so… don’t you wanna move around? Maybe talk a little?”

Arthur squirmed in his chair. Walking around the house seemed like a fine idea, but he didn’t know how far he could go without his head hurting like it had the day before. If they were to go outside, a potential disaster might be waiting for them. Talking seemed like a wonderful thing in theory, but Arthur was finding it increasingly difficult to talk to Alfred. His eyes held too much emotion, like a well of broken hearts that was begging to be mended. Surely, Arthur couldn’t fix his heart… not without his memories.

Seeming to sense Arthur’s discomfort, Alfred stood up from the table and held his hands up in surrender.

“Or you could go to bed!” He said with an almost painfully cheery tone, “Don’t let me tell you what you need… I’m no doctor! You wanna sleep? You sleep! All the experts say that people don’t get enough sleep these days, anyway.”

Arthur blinked. “What experts?”

“Just experts,” Alfred said with a dismissive wave of his hand as he stomped out of the kitchen only to return with the quilt gathered up in his arms. “C’mon, I’ll get the bed set up for you. Do you think you can make it up the stairs?”

Giving an indignant huff, Arthur stood up from his chair and frowned hard enough to make the corners of his mouth hurt. Alfred wasn’t supposed to doubt him. Alfred was supposed to unconditionally believe in him, chanting words of encouragement as Arthur struggled to remember who he was… or perhaps Arthur was putting too much responsibility on his shoulders.

Alfred wanted Arthur to remember him, and Arthur wanted Alfred to have complete faith in him… both wishes were tall orders, but Arthur wanted both of them to follow through. Placing his foot on the bottom step of the stairs, Arthur took a deep breath.

“You could stay down here, if you want.” Alfred said gently, sounding gratingly neutral as he stood behind Arthur with his arms full with the quilt. “There’s no pressure to go upstairs right now… No one is judging you.”

“I never said I felt judged,” Arthur hissed in return, slowly but surely climbing from one step to the next. Alfred snickered to himself for a moment, and Arthur paused to look at Alfred
over his shoulder. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” Alfred smiled, “You just… you sounded like yourself for a second, there.”

Arthur frowned and continued to walk up the stairs. He sounded like himself? Who else was he supposed to sound like? Resigning himself to climbing rest of the stairs in silence, Arthur gripped the handrail and climbed to the sanctuary of a real bed.

When he reached the top step, his slight headache had escalated to a steady pounding that went in tandem with every beat of his heart. It was an almost hypnotic kind of pain, and as Arthur stood at the top of the stairs looking straight into the door of a bedroom, he felt himself tilt back on unsteady feet. Before he could go crashing down the stairs, he was caught against Alfred’s sturdy chest and held there, swaddled in the folds of the quilt.

“Whoa, there… let’s not fall asleep on the stairs, pumpkin,” Alfred said with a tone that oozed affection. Arthur didn’t bother to remind Alfred that he promised not to use terms of endearment until Arthur was comfortable with them.

Humming affirmatively, Arthur righted himself and trudged forward into the bedroom with Alfred slowly trailing behind him. When Arthur had cleared the doorway, Alfred stepped around him and proceeded to untuck the blankets from the right side of the bed, pushing them back to make room for Arthur. After that was finished, he opened a chest of drawers and proceeded to dig through the contents as Arthur continued to walk across the room at a sluggish pace.

“Okay,” Alfred started clearly, “I’ve got your flannel pajamas, and your cotton ones… which ones do you want?”

“What’s the difference?” Arthur sighed as he reached the end of the bed and sat down, massaging the bit of his temples that weren’t covered in bandages or laced with stitches. He wanted to sleep away his headache and never wake up with it again, but the doctors had all agreed that headaches after neurosurgeries were normal.

Alfred stepped over to the bed and set the flannel pajamas next to Arthur. “You say the cotton is comfier, but the flannel will keep you warmer.”

Arthur wasn’t given a choice as Alfred stowed the blue, cotton pajamas back into the drawers, not to be seen again. Taking the flannel pajamas up, Arthur slid them into his lap and closed his eyes, trying to will his headache away. Alfred moved around the room quietly, opening a door on the far wall that Arthur assumed led to the bathroom and closing it merely seconds later.

“Arthur, they said we should take you back if you have a severe headache,” Alfred muttered as he stepped closer to the end of the bed, next to Arthur.

Squinting up at Alfred, Arthur huffed, “I’m fine. I’m just tired… it’s not a severe headache,” before he slowly stood up and trudged to the far side of the room. Opening the door Alfred had just closed, Arthur was happy to see that it was indeed the bathroom.

On his right, a large mirror reflected Arthur’s tired expression, and to his left, a ridiculously large bathtub beckoned Arthur onward. Arthur gave it a longing look; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d bathed on his own. When he was in the hospital, he was given pathetic sponge baths that merely made Arthur uncomfortable. Now, looking at the lovely tub, Arthur had to hold himself back from filling it and submerging himself in hot, cleansing water.

By the time Arthur emerged from the bathroom clothed in his green, plaid pajamas,
Alfred was standing by the front door of the room. He offered Arthur a smile, and Arthur hesitantly returned it as he shuffled to the side of the bed.

“You all good?” Alfred asked, leaning in the doorway with his ever-present smile.

“I’m fine,” Arthur breathed, reaching for the blankets and feeling a spike of pain shoot through his forehead. Feeling his expression crumble, Arthur leaned back and sighed. “Just need to sleep… I just need to get some sleep.”

Alfred sniffed and snuffled his foot back and forth. “That’s not all you need…”

“What was that?” Arthur said, squinting at Alfred as he gripped the blankets tightly. “What did you say?”

Looking up at Arthur, Alfred’s eyes looked hollow as he smiled again. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me, okay? Sleep tight.”

With that, Alfred closed the door without a second thought, leaving Arthur alone in the dark.

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No memories stained Arthur’s dreams as he laid in a bull, bleak plane. Infrequent light cut through the darkness, and as Arthur laid back against the endless surface that marked the end of space and time, he was very aware of a presence next to him. He blinked, and ripples of emotion flowed through his heart and made his nose twitch and his fingers tingle. Despite the person lying next to him, Arthur felt a strange sense of corporeal peace in his dreamscape world.

Finally turning to the companion next to him, Arthur found himself looking into his own green eyes. It was like looking into a mirror… were it not for the smaller body of the person next to him. It was his younger self, laying back against the emptiness with his hands clasped atop his chest, just like Arthur. Arthur blinked, and so did the younger Arthur, watching with a blank, open look. Bland, but curious. Arthur sighed.

“This is a dream,” he said to his younger self quietly. The younger boy nodded.

“You sound sad,” the younger boy noted tersely. Arthur stared at the boy. Had he always been so serious? Was he really like this boy when he was younger, or was it an invention of his mind? The younger boy spoke up again before Arthur could reply. “Why are you sad?”

Arthur hesitated, then turned away from his younger self to stare up at the dull, silverying sky that was quickly darkening with oncoming shadows. “I can’t remember who I am,” he breathed. “I’m in my old home, fast asleep, but…” Arthur turned to look at his younger self again, and gave him a depress smile. “But I can’t seem to feel like I’m at home.”

The younger boy pursed his lips thoughtfully, wiggling the hands that sat atop his chest as he mulled over Arthur’s words. “Is that so bad?” He murmured to the endless space around them, changing the flow of gravity around them and making Arthur’s heart feel heavier in his chest. “You can start over new, this way. You don’t have to worry about all of the scary things anymore.”

Giving his younger self a pitying glance, Arthur wondered what used to be scary. What had he been afraid of? What did he worry about? Was there anything, or was his subconscious mocking him? Taking a breath, Arthur looked up at the impossible sky, seeing it bend and dip as looming shadows moved away to make room for lighter, kinder grays.
“There’s someone who loves me,” Arthur whispered to the smoky sky above him. “He loves me so much… I want to remember why he loves me. I want to remember why I love him.” Pausing to think, Arthur closed his eyes. “And my family, my friends… I don’t want to leave them behind.”

Quiet for only a moment, the younger Arthur sighed, “So you’re going to keep trying? Even if it hurts?”

“I’ve remembered a few things already,” Arthur said hopefully, smiling up at the deepening sky. “I’ve remembered a bit about Alfred… but I want to know more.”

“Then keep trying,” the boy said bluntly, “Then you’ll get your answers.”

Arthur took a breath, ready to respond, only to hear the familiar sound of knuckles rapping against a solid, oak door. Arthur blinked, and the dreamscape was gone. The skies were no longer a smoky, darkening grey, and the vast darkness around him was nowhere to be found. Not even his younger self – a memory? A dream? – disappeared in the fluctuating, rippling landscape.

Blinking once more, Arthur looked up at a dull, beige ceiling. There was a hint of light bathing it, and Arthur assumed it was indeed morning with the grating sounds of traffic echoing on the distant highway. Holding still, Arthur pulled his hands out from under the blankets where they’d been resting atop his stomach, patting the soft quilt that Alfred had laid on the bed for him. It smelled welcoming… like an old scent that Arthur was too in love with to forget.

The knocking on the door repeated, and Arthur blinked at the muffled sound of Alfred’s voice. “Arthur? I know you’re probably sleeping… but my ties are in there. Normally, I’d go without one, but I’ve got a meeting with the chairman of the university board, today.” Arthur hesitated; what did Alfred do again? Work in a lab? Ah, yes. Working at a school with diseases and things. Sighing, Arthur listened as Alfred called through the door again. “Okay, if you’re not going to answer me, I’m just gonna sneak in and steal my lucky tie.”

“I’m awake,” Arthur replied in a tired tone, slowly propping himself up on his elbows and waiting for his dizziness to dissipate. “Come get your tie, Alfred.”

Quickly opening the door, Alfred shoot to the right side of the room where a wardrobe lay unopened. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Alfred sang as he pulled open the doors and dug through a small drawer that was tucked inside. Arthur gave his husband a weary glance. His blue shirt – crisp, clean, and pressed – looked particularly flattering with his navy blue trousers and black dress shoes. Arthur would even dare to say that Alfred looked handsome in his work attire, but he would never say it aloud. How would Alfred react to such a statement?

Turning around with a dark-colored tie in his hand, Alfred looked pleased with himself as he turned up his collar and attempted to tie the knot and complete his ensemble. Arthur watched quietly as he pushed himself in an upright position with his hands comfortably folded in his lap. The tie was, at first glance, very professional; it was a dark color that mirrored the hue of Alfred’s trousers, though when Arthur looked closer, he could easily see a lovely image of the milky way brightening the end of the tie. Arthur smiled. Alfred must’ve enjoyed outer space. But if he liked it so much, why did he study microbiology and not the stars?

Arthur would’ve kept thinking about it, but he was distracted by the way Alfred grumbled to himself and untied the sloppy knot he’d made, trying to retie the tie to no avail. Arching an eyebrow, Arthur reached up a hand to scratch at his itchy bandages, feeling the incision wound on the left side of his head burn and sting painfully. Alfred made a frustrated, garbled noise, and Arthur puffed a breath of laughter.
“Troubles?” He asked sarcastically, feeling a bit of his amusement disappear when Alfred looked up at him sadly.

“You normally tie them for me,” Alfred mumbled, “It’s become our little routine.”

Feeling his expression turn to one of disbelief, Arthur stared at Alfred. “You don’t know how to tie your own tie?”

“I swear I knew how to do it before!” Alfred paused, looked at the floor and muttered, “Once…” Another pause, “I guess that was a while ago.”

Patting the blankets atop his lap, Arthur shrugged at Alfred hopelessly. He couldn’t remember his father’s name, let alone how to tie a tie. Alfred’s normally happy – if not fake – expression wavered, and he huffed. The meeting with the chairman of the university must’ve been important, Arthur mused. Otherwise, Alfred wouldn’t have been so fraught over something as simple as a necktie.

“It’s cool,” Alfred said suddenly, turning back to the wardrobe, turning around again, and stopping mid-step. “N-no, it’s cool. I got this. I can google it!”

Arthur gave Alfred a pitying look. The poor man looked lost in his own home. “Do you have a clip-on tie? Maybe then you could focus on your meeting and not waste your time struggling with knots.”

Alfred threw his hands into the air. “You told me not to get those!” Arthur winced at the sudden rise in tone, and Alfred went on, “You said they were unprofessional, and I shouldn’t get them. So I didn’t! You promised that you would tie my tie whenever I needed you to… that was our thing.”

“I’m sorry,” Arthur blurted mindlessly, not having anything better to say. Wringing his hands, Alfred started to pace. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be… I know this isn’t your fault. It’s not your fault. I’m just too lazy. I should’ve remembered it.” Arthur hummed, and Alfred agitatedly adjusted his glasses several times. “I took off a few days just to be with you in the hospital, and I forgot about my research papers and… this is important. I need to make a good impression.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows. “You’re not going to make a good impression if you’re sweating through your undershirt.”

Halting his pacing progression, Alfred gave Arthur a horrified look. “What? Is it that noticeable?” Not waiting for Arthur to answer, Alfred started to flap his arms like a bird, apparently trying to fan away his perspiration. “I thought I was getting another day to help you settle in, but no! No, I’ve got to meet with him today because, get this, he’s leaving for Christmas vacation tomorrow!”

Wrinkling his nose, Arthur looked down at his lap. “But… isn’t it tomorrow the third of November?”

“Yes!” Alfred said, incredulously staring up at the ceiling in frustration. Before Arthur could react, Alfred stomped over to the bed and sat down with his back to Arthur, huffing and puffing like a man who’d just run a marathon. “Now I’m freaking out about what I’ll tell him, and I’m gonna be late because of this, this…” he indicated to the necktie awkwardly. “This stupid thing!”

Shifting on the bed uneasily, Arthur took a breath and slowly exhaled. “I could try,” he said softly, watching Alfred whipped around to look at him with a gaze filled with hope. “I don’t know if I’ll
remember, but I can certainly try.”

“Oh god, thank you,” Alfred breathed as he shifted on the bed to face Arthur. His cheeks were red and his eyes glittered with excitement, but Arthur couldn’t help but feel as though Alfred had more faith in him than he should. Catching Arthur’s gaze, Alfred held him there with his impossibly blue eyes and smiled. “Thank you.”

Arthur pursed his lips and shrugged. “Don’t thank me yet; I haven’t even tied it.”

Holding still, Alfred lifted his chin a bit when Arthur scooted close to take up the ends of the tie. Taking the larger end, Arthur twisted it under the smaller one, staring down at the tie in his hands with intense concentration. As he made a loop, Arthur felt his chest grow tight, as if something very sad had occurred in the past minute. His heart gave a dull throb, and when he pulled the end of Alfred’s tie through a loop, Arthur’s vision went blurry with wobbly tears.

“Hey,” Alfred said, reaching up his hands to hold Arthur’s shoulders. “Hey, what’s wrong? You didn’t have to tie it if you didn’t—”

“I don’t know,” Arthur breathed, pulling the tie taught and feeling tears roll down his cheeks. Blinking slowly, Arthur looked down at Alfred’s necktie with breathless confusion. It was perfectly tied, neat and smooth as Arthur let his fingers drag down the length of the tie. “I feel like I’m just…” He looked up at Alfred desperately, feeling more tears fall as his throat constricted around his words. “I feel like this is… just…”

Alfred’s eyes were wide as he cupped Arthur’s cheeks, desperately searching for a way to console Arthur. But there was nothing that Alfred could do to console him. Arthur didn’t even understand why the emotion overcame him the way it did. Alfred was going to be late for his meeting as it was, and Arthur knew that the American wouldn’t leave if he continued to cry.

Trying to halt his tears, Arthur quickly wiped at his cheeks, knocking Alfred’s hands that held his face in the process. Taking this as a sign that Arthur didn’t want to be touched, Alfred ripped his hands away and held them to his chest anxiously.

“What did I do?” Alfred asked nervously, trying to catch Arthur’s gaze even though Arthur’s eyes were tightly closed. “Arthur, what did I do?”

“Nothing,” Arthur breathed, trying to calm the perplexing emotions raging in his chest. Struggling to look up at Alfred, Arthur only grew more frustrated when more tears obstructed his ability to clearly see. “You didn’t do a-anything, I’m just… I can’t quite…” Arthur didn’t get to finish as Alfred reached forward and enveloped Arthur in a hug.

Oh. That was, well… that actually felt very nice. Alfred smelled like musky cologne that Arthur couldn’t remember the name of, and his arms were warm and strong. Arthur’s own arms were caught between the two of them as Alfred leaned forward at an awkward angle, but Arthur made quick work of looping them around Alfred’s available waist. There, Arthur let his body conform to the curves of Alfred’s embrace naturally.

His nose was pressed to the side of Alfred’s neck, and as he closed his eyes to breathe deeply, Arthur felt the itch of Alfred’s unshaved face tickle at his cheek. Arthur’s fingers clung to the small of Alfred’s back easily, and when Alfred’s own hands rubbed his back gently, Arthur felt the tension in his chest slowly dissolve into warm, wispy trails of forgotten tenderness.

“You’re okay,” Alfred said softly into Arthur’s shoulder, patting his back twice. Arthur nodded, grasping Alfred’s shirt as he sniffled. Alfred took a deep breath, and Arthur followed suit,
listening carefully as Alfred repeated, “You’re okay.”

For a solid minute, Arthur and Alfred held onto each other. Arthur knew it was far past the normal limit of a hug between strangers, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to say that Alfred was truly a stranger. He was more than a nameless face, now... he was a strong symbol of a long-lived romance. Alfred was the shadow of a mountain that Arthur had climbed once, long ago. He was a faint melody that Arthur hummed to himself, but could never remember the name. And as Arthur clung to his husband, soaking in every bit of his contagious warmth, he couldn’t help but wish once more that he could remember everything about him.

Instead of voicing his wish, Arthur leaned back and whispered, “You’re going to be late,” into Alfred’s ear, immediately feeling stupid for saying it so intimately. Did it bother Alfred? Did it seem too assuming to speak to him in such a manner if he didn’t remember Alfred?

When a hand lifted from his back – Arthur mused that Alfred might’ve been checking his watch – Arthur stayed where he was, conveniently propped against Alfred’s shoulder like a limp, comfortable doll. But, the cozy moment was short-lived as Alfred released him and leapt off of the bed.

“Shit,” he breathed, turning in a circle as if he was searching for something. He stopped spinning just in time to look at Arthur and smile, giving him a hesitant thumbs-up. “You’re good?”

“Yes,” Arthur said quickly, nodding once. “Fine. I’m fine. But, shouldn’t you be going?”

Fixing the collar of his shirt, Alfred nodded, walking to the door as a brisk pace before he turned back to Arthur. “I’ll be home around six,” he looked back to the door, only to stop and look at Arthur again. “There’s leftover soup in the fridge if you want it, and plenty of chocolate pudding in the cupboard for dessert,” Arthur nodded, and Alfred hesitated once more in the doorway. Arthur would have found the hesitation endearing if the man hadn’t looked so frantic. “The phone is downstairs on the table, and I left my number next to it, just in case.”

“Right-o. I’ve got it. Food, dessert, phone numbers...” Arthur nodded to himself, trying to help Alfred be on time.

Alfred lingered in the doorway, slowly sliding his feet backward. “So, if you need anything, and I mean anything, don’t worry about it. I’ll pick up in a heartbeat. If you’re bored and need me to tell you where something is –”

“Yes, I’ll bell you, I promise,” Arthur agreed, waving Alfred away as his head started to hurt.

“Great!” Alfred said, bounding away from the room and down that stairs. Hearing rustling downstairs, Arthur gave one more swipe at his damp cheeks before he started to slide off of the bed slowly. When he heard the front door creak open, Arthur paused to hear Alfred shout, “I love you!”

Arthur froze. Alfred said he loved him. Was Arthur supposed to respond in kind? He didn’t even remember his first kiss with Alfred, let alone falling in love with him. The front door didn’t close. That meant Alfred was waiting for him to say something... or was he? As Arthur continued to fret, the front door creaked again, but didn’t close.

“W-wait,” Alfred called again, sounding more befuddled than Arthur felt. “I... I meant like... I’m sorry! I hope that didn’t make you uncomfortable!”
“It’s fine,” Arthur replied without thought. “Have a good day!”

When the front door finally slammed shut, Arthur closed his eyes and sighed. Why couldn’t he just say that he loved Alfred? Surely, deep down in the core of his being he knew that he loved Alfred. They were married, after all. There was something that Arthur felt for him. With or without his memory, Arthur knew that he still felt something for Alfred, proven by the incident with the necktie.

Slowly sliding off of the bed, Arthur wobbled a bit before he started his short trek to the bathroom. On his way, he wondered why he cried about tying the tie. Had something sorrowful happened the last time he’d done Alfred such a favor? Or was muscle memory triggering a strange flux in his emotions, giving Arthur’s brain the wrong signals as he perfectly tied a tie without thinking? Flicking on the bathroom light, Arthur sighed and figured that it was yet another confusing thing he had to add to the list of forgotten memories.

After he’d finished his morning routine – he dug through the drawers in the bathroom to find a new toothbrush – Arthur looked at himself in the mirror. He looked like a wreck. How Alfred had been able to say “I love you” to such a mess, Arthur would never know. His hair was more mussed than it had been the day before; did he toss in his sleep? No, he woke up in the same position he’d been in when he fell asleep. Turning his head to the left, Arthur saw the dark bruises still staining his neck and shoulder, though the bruise on the right side of his face were now invisible.

Pursing his lips, Arthur stared at his unamused reflection. He hated the way he looked. From his narrow nose to his high cheekbones, down to the last messy blond hair, Arthur disliked it. How could Alfred love him? What part of Arthur’s personality struck a chord within the American that insinuated that Arthur was loveable? Frowning, Arthur watched his thin, pale lips twist into something moody and disagreeable. His eyebrows – had they always been so thick? – drew together in frustration. Alfred hated everything about himself, so how could Alfred love him?

Shaking his head, Arthur turned away from the mirror, leaning on the counter heavily. Matters of love were far from where Arthur’s attention should have been. He should’ve been trying to remember Alfred and his parents, not fretting over what Alfred loved most about him. Arthur needed to know what he loved about Alfred. There was no time to think otherwise.

Although, Arthur was pleasantly distracted by the bathtub. It was gleaming and inviting, practically begging Arthur to fill it up with hot water and soak his troubles away. Biting his bottom lip, Arthur hid a smile. It couldn’t hurt to take a little bath… he could work on remembering more things when he got out of the water. Surely, that would be just fine.

After tinkering with the plug for the drain for a bit, Arthur managed to turn on the water for the tub, wait for it to warm, and successfully watch the tub begin to fill. While the water slowly filled the enormous tub that Arthur was determined to enjoy, he dug around in the small cabinet located next to the door of the bathroom. There were bins with bandages, aspirins, and several different kinds of cologne on one shelf, but Arthur had no use for them. On the second shelf were a plethora of soft, huggable towels that Arthur gladly rifled through, finding an orange one that he quickly recognized as his favorite.

As he held the towel in his hands, Arthur stared at it in confusion; how did he know it was his favorite? Was it just a universal truth that failed to fade when he lost his memory, or had he made up his mind on the spot? Memory or decision, Arthur wouldn’t tell. Setting it atop the counter next to the sink, Arthur looked at the bottles that lined the tub, quickly finding the body wash and moving it closer as the tub continued to fill.
After looking down at the steaming water for a bit, Arthur turned the knob the other way for cold water, not wanting to scald himself. From there, he went back to the bedroom and dug through the chest of drawers that he saw Alfred looking through. Inside, he found even more jumpers than Alfred had brought to the hospital. Arching an eyebrow, Arthur guessed that he often got cold. Taking the least gaudy sweater, Arthur found a plain, white t-shirt and blue jeans to go with it, stowing them on the counter next to his towel as he turned off the water and stared down at the tub with unbridled pride.

He deserved a bath, Arthur decided as he slipped out of his pajamas. He’d been in a terrible car accident, lost his memory, and cried over tying a necktie… he deserved a little self-indulgence. Though when Arthur slipped out of his pants, he frowned at the bruise that traveled down his entire right side. It stained his leg, torso, and arm… Arthur was impressed that only his brain had internal bleeding after the accident.

But, when Arthur slipped into the hot water and laid back, he imagined that the sore, purple blotches on his legs were instead violet flower petals that were stuck to his skin. That vision was much more pleasant as he reached for the body wash and popped open the cap. His body felt tingly in the water, and he quickly relaxed as he scrubbed at his arms. He wasn’t allowed to submerge his head under the water yet; the doctors said that it would take a few days.

It was a heaven on earth, but he knew he couldn’t spend his entire day in the tub… He had an entire house to play with, after all. Perhaps being alone all day would be fun, Arthur mused as he scrubbed at his legs. Who knew? Something in the house might help him remember a little bit about who he was. As Arthur slid down in the tub low enough to feel his chin touch the warm water, he sighed blissfully. His lost lifetime would have to wait until the end of his bath.

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For the rest of the day, Arthur played detective in his own house. He explored every nook and cranny of his and Alfred’s bedroom, looking through the nightstands and finding a few particular things that made him smile. On the left side of the bed – Arthur knew it was Alfred’s – there were several scientific magazines and a spare pair of glasses. On the right side of the bed, Arthur saw a notepad, a copy of a book called *Forgotten Winds*, and a ring sitting atop it. Arching an eyebrow, Arthur assumed it must’ve been his wedding ring. He’d woken up without it in the hospital; Alfred must’ve brought it home to keep it safe. Not wanting to disturb the ring, Arthur closed the drawer and looked around the room for something else.

He looked through several drawers of his own clothes, finding a few pairs of grey slacks that were most likely the most professional pieces of clothing he owned. He also found a lacy white garter hidden under several pairs of socks, but he tucked that back into its hiding place and didn’t retrieve it again. Instead, he took a pair of brown, wool socks and put them on before he carefully walked down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, the walls were lined with several framed photos that Arthur hadn’t looked at the night before. Obviously, one of the pictures was taken at his and Alfred’s wedding. Arthur stood in a white suit and a smile on his face as Alfred stood in his own gleaming silver tux and a smile that threatened to crack his face in half. Arthur reached up a hand to trace the glass of the picture; they looked so happy. He wished he could remember the wedding.

Further down, there were pictures of Alfred and Arthur in graduation caps and gowns, both holding their diplomas high in the air as their laughter was caught by the camera. Arm in arm and leaning into one another. Arthur wrapped his arms around himself, walking along the hall and looking at each of the pictures slowly.
There was a picture of Arthur and Alfred smiling up at the camera, holding a cake that read “Happy 2nd Anniversary!” in beautiful, looping script. A picture just below that showed Arthur pushing Alfred’s face into the cake. The photo below that one showed Alfred shoving a handful of cake in Arthur’s face. But they were laughing. Always smiling, even in the fourth picture where they kissed, both faces covered in crumbling cake and frosting. Smiling. Arthur held himself a little tighter.

The further Arthur got from the bedroom, the more the photographs seemed to tug at his heart. A frame with two pictures caught Arthur’s eye, and he looked at the first picture that showed Arthur standing at the bow of a ferryboat at night, staring out at the gleaming lights of the city where Alfred was most likely holding the camera. He was bundled up from head to toe in a dark, blue knitted cap and a wool coat, and his cheeks were obviously red from the chilly air, but in the photo, Arthur looked content in the cold. The second had Alfred in the photo, leaning close to Arthur and kissing his cheek while Arthur leaned away and laughed.

Another photo showed Arthur with all of his family, standing in front of a large, two-story home that looked vaguely familiar. Was that his old home? Arthur couldn’t tell. But he went down the line of family members, pointing first at his mother and father who stood arm in arm. Then his older brothers, Alistair, who was frowning at the camera with fierce determination, and Seamus, who wore a goofy smile. Just next to them was his older sister Delilah. She had an arm thrown around Arthur’s shoulders as they both smiled happily at the camera. He wished he could remember her… and why she disliked Alfred. He wanted to know more about Alistair and Seamus. He wanted to remember his parents.

Feeling his heart ache, Arthur tightened his hold on himself and turned away from the photographs, ducking into the kitchen to escape their presence. There, he busied himself with finding the soup that Alfred had left for him and the microwave. He had to rummage through several cabinets to find a bowl and a spoon, but soon he was sitting down at the table, waiting for the microwave to ding. As he drummed his fingers on the oak surface of the table, he looked around at the cozy kitchen.

Had Arthur ever known how to cook? Was he ever good at it? He couldn’t remember recipes or where anything was, but perhaps there was muscle memory like with the necktie. Perhaps if he pulled out a pot or a pan, he would move naturally and cook up a storm. The thought was nice, but Arthur didn’t act on it as microwave beeped and he went to retrieve his breakfast. With any luck, he could figure out how to turn on the telly and delve into some political news. Something in his gut said that American politics would amuse him.

Just before Arthur could whisk his soup away into the living room, he remembered the chocolate pudding that Alfred had promised him. In the hospital, Alfred had brought him the sweet treat every day, though Arthur had never bothered to eat it in front of him. What if he didn’t like it? He didn’t want to hurt Alfred’s feelings. In the end, Arthur had never eaten it, and instead chose to give the pudding cups to the several male and female nurses that would come to check on him.

Going through the cupboards, Arthur searched for the dessert that was apparently his favorite. Maybe it would grant him some sort of memory, like the tie. Though, hopefully, it wouldn’t leave him in tears like he tie had.

When he finally found the pudding, there were at least two dozen packs of the cups tucked into the cupboard. Arthur would’ve laughed, but it was more perturbing than anything. How much of this pudding did he used to eat? Five a day? How often would they go to buy more? Hoping to ignore the details, Arthur took one pudding cup and peeled off the plastic lid, not bothering to eat his soup first. He wanted to know if he liked it. If he didn’t, he would be honest
and tell Alfred. Sure, the accident may have changed things, but he was essentially the same Arthur… wasn’t he?

Taking the spoon that should’ve been for his soup, Arthur scooped up a small amount of the pudding and held it to his lips. There would be no shame if he didn’t like it; people changed. If he didn’t like it, he would find something else to have for dessert. It wasn’t a big deal. Though he coached himself to believe there would be no negative repercussions if he didn’t like the pudding, Arthur still swallowed anxiously before he parted his lips, and quickly put the spoon into his mouth.

The reaction was instantaneous. Arthur breath caught and his eyes filled with tears; he loved it. He absolutely loved chocolate. Before he knew it, he was scraping the bottom of the pudding cup with tears streaming down his face. He hadn’t changed. He was still the same Arthur that everyone knew and loved. The accident hadn’t really changed him. He was still Arthur Kirkland.

Arthur reached for another pudding cup, and that one was gone in the blink of an eye as Arthur continued to cry over the revelation. He could do this. He could still remember who he was and be the same man. If his tastes hadn’t changed, and his memories still lay dormant in his mind, there was a definite chance that he could be himself.

Wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, Arthur tossed the second empty pudding cup onto the counter and reached for another. He would tell Alfred all about this. He would tell him that he could remember things. He would tell Alfred that he loved chocolate pudding, and he’d apologize for not eating the ones Alfred brought for him in the hospital. The third cup was empty, and Arthur reached for another. At this rate, he wouldn’t be surprised if he got sick.

But Arthur… Arthur didn’t mind. He continued to accept the overwhelming sense of excitement and anxiety that welled within him as he put yet another spoonful of chocolate pudding into his mouth. The tears wouldn’t stop for the next hour, and when Alfred called later in the day to check on him, Arthur happily proclaimed that he’d eaten half of the pudding cups that had been stored in the cupboard. Alfred didn’t sound angry, nor did he say that Arthur needed to stop. His reaction made Arthur’s heart swell and his lips turn up into a smile.

Alfred let out a soft, crackling breath into the phone, and started to laugh.

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“You’re gonna make yourself sick.” Alfred commented quietly as Arthur slowly ate yet another pudding cup.

He’d come home over three hours ago, and after Arthur had told him all about the pudding incident, they’d eaten dinner and retired to the living room to watch television. Well, more accurately, Alfred was watching television while Arthur watched Alfred. The American had a strangely ordinary face that Arthur was anxious to crack. There was no real emotion as he changed the channel from an old sitcom to a cooking show.

“I don’t mind if I get sick,” Arthur replied quietly, looking down at the empty cup. The emptiness wasn’t disappointing; he’d brought several more cups from the kitchen to keep him company in the armchair while Alfred sat on the sofa. Setting the empty cup aside, Arthur opened another one. “They make me feel a little better.”

Alfred changed the channel again. “Better? About what?”
Arthur hesitated; how did it make him feel better? It certainly made him feel like less of a failure and more like the person he used to be. It made him feel like he hadn’t completely faded away after the accident… there was still something left of his soul. It was a sweeter thought than losing all of his caring memories forever, and Arthur was happy to let the pudding revelation outshine the possibility of forgetting who he used to be.

Having no better answer, Arthur simply shrugged and popped another spoonful of pudding into his mouth. “I just feel better about things…” Arthur murmured, looking up at the telly to see an American football game rumbling lowly through the surround sound speakers. He lowered his eyes to his pudding cup again. “When I eat them, I feel like I’m the same person I used to be.”

“You are the same person.” Alfred sighed as he scrubbed a hand over his face. Arthur’s nose wrinkled at the agitated tone as Alfred glared at the football game. “You don’t have to eat twenty packages of pudding to prove that you’re the same guy.”

Shifting uneasily in his armchair, Arthur watched as Alfred mashed the buttons on the remote, changing the channel to a Spanish soap opera. “What’s got your nickers in a twist?” Arthur asked quietly, half-afraid to know if Alfred was angry at him for eating almost all of the pudding.

“My nickers are not in a twist.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “They aren’t? Because you’re certainly in a mood.”

Putting the remote down on the table with a loud crack, Alfred sat back against the sofa and watched a blonde weatherman happily declare that it would rain in the morning. Arthur winced at the sudden display of aggression. It was only Arthur’s second day in the house, and already he was having second thoughts about Alfred’s kindness. It only grew worse when Alfred spoke again.

“You know,” he huffed. “I think I liked it better when you were too uncomfortable to talk to me.”

Lowering his pudding cup, Arthur stared at his husband. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He liked it better when Arthur didn’t talk to him? Did that mean after the accident… or before it? Had Alfred made it a habit to bully Arthur into silence when he was in a bad mood? Was there something dark and twisted in their relationship that Arthur didn’t know about?

Arthur’s eyes dropped to his lap; things had been going so well. He was remembering things. He was moving forward. Why was Alfred acting so strange? He had always been so kind… was it all an act? A farce that was put up just so Arthur would trust him?

As Arthur’s mind started to roll down into a negative spiral, Alfred made a gargling, angry sound and fell sideways on the sofa. Arthur sat still and watched as Alfred’s face was pressed into the soft cushions.

“I didn’t mean that,” Alfred said into the plush cushions. “I didn’t… god, I’m so stupid.”

“Yes.” Arthur agreed, stirring the spoon in his pudding cup slowly. “Yes, you are.” Alfred laughed at that, and a bit of the tension in Arthur’s chest was relieved. “Now… what put you in this foul mood of yours?”

Alfred sighed, and Arthur gave him a pitying glance. The poor man looked beaten. Why hadn’t he noticed before? He’d been so excited about his own revelation, he hadn’t even asked about Alfred’s day. Arthur blinked. Alfred had been so worked up about the meeting with the chairman. It probably hadn’t gone well. It must’ve depressed Alfred a fair amount, then, when he came home, Arthur didn’t even bother to ask him what happened. Arthur frowned at his own
behavior. It was a shoddy way for a housemate to act, let alone a husband.

“The meeting sucked,” Alfred said bluntly, muffled by the suede sofa. “He sat there in my office, and I talked and talked… I’m doing some good stuff, too.” Alfred sat up abruptly, throwing his hands into the air. “And then he just… he just…!”

Arthur winced. “What did he do?”

Alfred took off his glasses, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose as he whispered, “He asked me… ‘What department is this for, again?’”

Taking in a hissing breath, Arthur gave Alfred a sorry expression. “That’s pretty bad…”

“On top of that, I didn’t get the grant I was hoping for!” Alfred announced, flopping back against the arm of the sofa. “And then I said that I liked you better when you were quiet… I’m such an ass when I’m mad. If I ever do that again, slap me.”

Immediately remembering that Alfred’s mother had hit him as a child, Arthur’s sad expression turned to stone. “No.” Arthur deadpanned. “I will never hit you.”

Sitting up, Alfred put on his glasses slowly and offered Arthur a slight smile. “I was… just kidding, Arthur. We… our relationship doesn’t ever involve any violence. Even when we fight, it’s just words… things don’t get physical until we decide to make up.”

Arthur blinked in confusion. “What do you mean?” As soon as the words left his mouth, Arthur understood the statement, and he felt his cheeks burn as he looked down at his pudding cup. Alfred chuckled nervously, and Arthur jabbed his spoon into his pudding cup embarrassedly. “Never mind,” Arthur murmured to the chocolate desert. “I understand.”

Pushing his hand through his hair, Alfred leaned back against the sofa with a dazed expression. “Well, I probably should’ve even brought it up. That’s way awkward.” Arthur hummed in agreement, and Alfred laughed to himself again. “God, you don’t even remember me, and I’m already talking to you about –”

“I know what you’re talking about,” Arthur said quickly, watching Alfred adjust his glasses and laugh again. Setting his pudding cup aside, Arthur stared down at his lap with burning cheeks. “I’m sorry your meeting didn’t go well.”

“Aw, I shouldn’t have expected any better,” Alfred smiled sadly. “The chairman doesn’t know his ass from his elbow, let alone what microbiology includes. Anyway, I shouldn’t have said I liked you more when you were quiet. That wasn’t right.”

Arthur shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Alfred said as he sat forward. “You were just worried about me, and that’s really sweet… then I had to go and be an ass. I’m sorry.”

Again, Arthur shrugged, glancing up to see Alfred looking at him with a broken expression reflected in his eyes. “Really, it’s fine.”

“Well,” Alfred sighed as he kicked off his shoes and laid back along the sofa. “At least one good thing came out of today. You still like the pudding!”

Arthur glanced at the pudding, then back to Alfred, watching as he reached for the remote and changed the channel again. Arthur smiled.
“Yes,” he murmured, watching the way the lenses of Alfred’s glasses lit up with the reflection of the telly. Alfred’s tie still hung loose around his neck, and his hair was perfectly mussed… a lovely man, even in disarrayed repose. A man that was trying hard to support his own work and his husband’s mental health. A man that was tired and scared that he was losing the love of his life, but still trying to keep Arthur happy. A beautiful man. Arthur’s smile at Alfred grew a little softer as he said, “I love it.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
See you next chapter.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arthur was a good boy. He went to class on time and did his homework… he was a straight-laced rule follower. But, he was also wrapped around the finger of Alfred Jones. They’d been friends for almost nine years, and Arthur knew that if Alfred moved, so did he. Naturally, this is what led to Arthur shivering in front of a fence in the middle of the night.

The air was crisp enough to make Arthur’s throat burn as he stood in front of a chain-link fence. Winter of their senior year of high school was in full swing, and Alfred had been keen on sneaking out on a particularly chilly December night. They’d been friends for years, and Arthur knew that Alfred was an adventurous boy, but sneaking out of their houses at midnight was a stretch, even for Alfred. Currently, Alfred was busy climbing the fence, and as he sat at the top with a flashlight clamped between his teeth and a heavy backpack thrown over his shoulder, Arthur started to have second thoughts.

“This is crazy,” Arthur hissed as Alfred dropped down onto the other side of the fence, making a quiet “oomf!” as his feet hit the grass. Alfred turned to look at him, taking the flashlight from his mouth to shine the light in Arthur’s face. Arthur held up a hand to block the glare, squinting at Alfred’s cheeky grin. “Alfred, we’re going to get in trouble… let’s go back home!”

“No way,” Alfred whispered, stepping close to the fence and lowering the beam of the flashlight so Arthur could look into Alfred’s crystalline blue eyes. “We’ll only get in trouble if someone catches us.” He narrowed his eyes as his smile became devious. “You’re not wussing out on me, are you?”

Arthur stomped his foot agitatedly. “No! I’m just not sure why we’re on school grounds at one o’clock in the morning.”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out, bro!” Alfred grinned as he stepped back from the fence and waved for Arthur to come over the fence. “So hurry up! You don’t wanna get caught, right?” Shifting his weight between his feet nervously, Arthur glanced behind him at the vacant parking lot of the school that was dimly lit with streetlamps. On the other side of the fence, Alfred stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and sighed, “Or… you could go home. Your choice.”

Shaking his head, Arthur took hold of the fence and started to climb. “I must be out of my mind,” Arthur chanted as he looped his arm over the top of the fence. It rattled ominously, and Arthur looked down to see Alfred waiting for him with a smile on his face. That perfect smile… the smile that Arthur saw every day. He couldn’t’ walk away from it.

“I’m out of my mind,” he repeated as he pushed himself over the fence and down onto the blocked off fields behind the high school. Alfred snickered at the statement, and casually walked around abandoned corner of the school building. It’d been shut down years ago due to a chemical accident from the biology labs and never repaired… now, it was private property of the city. But Alfred roamed around like he owned the place. Arthur narrowed his eyes. “How many times have you come here?”

Alfred shrugged as he walked towards a ladder that was conveniently propped against the back wall of the building, waiting for them. Arthur blinked in recognition. That ladder belonged in
Alfred’s garage. When had it gone missing? Arthur hadn’t even noticed. He doubted that Alfred’s parents noticed either.

“Lost count,” Alfred said, shifting the base of the ladder a few inches to the right before he started to climb. Arthur followed, listening as Alfred continued to speak to still air around them. “This is my secret hiding place… like a secret base. Or a tree fort.”

Arthur snorted. “This is not a tree fort,” Alfred easily lifted himself onto the roof of the old science building, and held out a helping hand for Arthur. Pursing his lips, Arthur took the hand and let Alfred hoist him up onto the roof. “And I thought my house was your hiding place.”

Alfred walked around the gravel-covered roof and sighed. “Yeah, most of the time. But… you know how my dad gets when he drinks?” Arthur nodded, and Alfred huffed. “Sometimes… I don’t wanna go to your house because I know I’ll make a mess… you know?”

“No,” Arthur breathed, watching his tormented friend shake a hand through his hair. “I don’t get it.” Alfred didn’t reply, and Arthur stepped closer, taking hold of Alfred’s arm and turning the larger boy to face him. “Talk to me.”

Taking a deep breath, Alfred’s eyes glittered as he smiled. “In a minute,” he promised, walking toward the edge of the roof and dropping his backpack onto the ground. It rattled and made the distinct sound of glass scraping against glass… Arthur’s eyes went wide.

“What did you do?” Arthur said, his voice leaving no room for nonsense as Alfred unzipped his bag and dug inside for a moment. “Alfred, what in god’s name did you do?”

“I brought the party!” Alfred proclaimed as he produced several bottles of beer from the bag. Arthur nearly had a heart attack as Alfred set the bottles aside and proceeded to pull out several different new ones. Hard lemonade, wine coolers, and finally, a large bottle of gin. Alfred took a beer in each hand and sat down on the gravel, lifting the bottles high into the air. “Let’s get crazy!”

“L-let’s not,” Arthur said carefully as Alfred set aside one bottle to struggle with the cap of the first one. Arthur set to work putting away the bottles that Alfred produced from the bag, wrinkling his nose at the half-empty bottle of gin. He held the bottle up for Alfred to examine. “Did you drink all of this?”

Alfred glanced up from his beer bottle to frown at the gin. “Huh? Oh. No, this is all from my dad’s stash... He probably passed out halfway through that one.”

Arthur’s heart stopped. “Your father.”

“Yeah,” Alfred nodded, finally twisting the cap off of the beer. He whooped victoriously, but Arthur’s mind was still stuck on Alfred’s father. His violent father. His drunkard father. Arthur’s stomach twisted uneasily.

“This is from his stash?” Arthur asked as he put away the gin and watched Alfred give the beer a testing sniff. Alfred nodded, and Arthur scooted closer to Alfred, giving him a disapproving look. “Isn’t he going to notice all of this is missing?”

“No.” Alfred said tersely, holding the bottle in one hand loosely as he stared up at the dark sky. “Like I said, he was out cold when I took this stuff… He’ll probably just guess that he drank it all and fell asleep.”

When Alfred lifted the bottle to his lips, Arthur grabbed the end of it and pulled it away from Alfred’s face. “We’re underage, Alfred,” he said softly, watching Alfred stare at him
emotionlessly. “We’re nineteen… drinking at this age is illegal in America.”

Arthur half expected Alfred to laugh and drink anyway. Part of Arthur anticipated Alfred slapping him on the back and smiling as he took a sip. Arthur waited for him to either be angry or humored, but that moment never came. Alfred simply stared at Arthur, looking for something in his face that Arthur didn’t know existed. Was there a universe in his eyes that Alfred was searching for? Where there messages on his cheeks that Alfred simply had to read? Silent whispers on his lips that Alfred, without fail, needed to hear?

Without speaking, Alfred set the bottle aside and laid back against the roof. Arthur laid back, too. Shifting closer to Alfred in search of heat as they looked up at the starry sky, Arthur huffed, seeing his breath fog his view of the stars. Arthur almost smiled at the sight; it was almost impossible to see the stars so close to the city, especially with how cloudy it’d been for the past few weeks. But that night, lying next to Alfred with an impossible grin on his face, Arthur could see the heavens shining brighter than ever.

“Do you ever wonder about who you’ll be when you grow up?” Alfred asked breathlessly, dragging his hand through the gravel absentmindedly as he spoke.

Arthur sighed. “We are grown up. Technically speaking, we’re adults.” He paused, then added, “Adults that cannot drink alcohol, yet.”

Alfred shook his head, turning to look at the profile of Arthur’s face. “No, I mean… do you think we all just end up like our parents?”

Arthur turned to face Alfred, taking in the troubled glint in his eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re like your parents,” Alfred said anyway, as if Arthur’s response didn’t mean anything. “You’re smart like your mom, and you’re sarcastic like your dad… you’ve even got his laugh.” Closing his eyes, Arthur bit back a smile as Alfred continued. “You’re gonna be someone great when you go out into the world… But what about me?”

Arthur opened his eyes. “You’ll be great, too. I know it.”

“My dad’s a deadbeat drunk and I’m pretty sure my mom is stealing from her boss,” Alfred grumbled as he stared at Arthur. “There’s nowhere I can go with that.” Pausing just a moment, he turned to look up at the stars quietly, sighing softly. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll end up just like my dad.”

“Alfred, that’s not true, and you know it.” Arthur said, not looking away from his view of Alfred’s cheek, red from the cold. Reaching a hand between them, Arthur cautiously gripped Alfred’s hand and pat it twice. Alfred turned to look at him, but he didn’t seem bothered. Arthur quietly said, “You’re the smartest person I’ve ever known. You aced the biology and chemistry exams, and your math scores are off the charts,” blinking slowly, Arthur took a deep breath before he finally whispered, “You’re nothing like your father.”

“Yes, I am,” Alfred fought, closing his eyes and taking ahold of Arthur’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “I have a stupid temper, and I… I decked that one guy from the football team the other day!”

Arthur shook his head. “No, no… Alfred, you’re not your father. You may have a temper, but you’re so good at controlling it. And that football moron provoked you.” Alfred snorted, and Arthur scooted closer, using his free hand to shake Alfred’s shoulder. “It’s true! Your father is mindlessly violent… you… you were defending yourself! He threw the first punch… you can’t call it mindless if you were trying to defend yourself.”
“I’m just like my dad,” Alfred repeated to himself.

Arthur held his hand tighter. “No –”

“Look at me!” Alfred shouted as he suddenly sat upright. He let go of Arthur’s hand to indicate to himself angrily. Arthur sat up slowly, giving Alfred a sad look as he continued to rage. “I took all of this stuff without thinking! I just saw it… and took it. It’s probably just my dad’s genes telling me that I’m going to be an alcoholic, just like him!” Arthur shook his head, but Alfred continued. “And now I’m here with you, trespassing and breaking the goddamned law!” Alfred fell back dramatically, and Arthur winced when his skull cracked against the gravel. Alfred only groaned, “I’m just like my dad.”

Considering what he could say to make Alfred feel better, Arthur leaned over Alfred and gently pat Alfred’s chest. “There, now… that’s not true.” Alfred opened his mouth to argue, but Arthur cut him off. “Stop fighting me. You know I’m right… I’m always right.” Leaving his hand atop Alfred’s chest, Arthur paused only to notice how intimate the action was. But Alfred never pushed him away. Leaning forward a little more, Arthur explained further. “You’re brilliant, clever, and handsome…” Alfred cracked a smile, and Arthur readily returned the expression. “That’s nothing like your dad. And, as for breaking the law, I’m here with you.”

Alfred smiled wider, holding Arthur’s hand to his chest. “So we’re partners in crime.”

“Sure,” Arthur giggled, leaning forward with the movement and hearing Alfred chuckle lowly with him. “Partners in crime.”

As the two boys laughed at the idea, the air around them grew light with heady and fluttery emotions. By the time Arthur caught his breath and looked down at Alfred, he felt his breath hitch at the sight of Alfred’s hooded eyes and parted lips. Arthur swallowed anxiously. Alfred had never looked at him like that before. They’d never been so close… Arthur’s heart started to pound.

It was no lie that he’d thought about being with Alfred before. There were plenty of nights during which Arthur hadn’t been able to sleep without encountering the thought of Alfred lying next to him. But Alfred had never shown any interest in anyone, boy or girl, so Arthur would never had a chance, no matter how much he wanted to love and be loved by Alfred. He’d struggled with the feelings all through high school, and had resigned himself to burying those feelings deep down in his heart where they would never be retrieved. But now, as he loomed over Alfred, he could see stars in his eyes and deep wanting lingering in the shadows of his blue irises.

Before Arthur could sit up, Alfred brought a hand to the back of his neck and pulled him down. Arthur’s eyes closed of their own volition, and he grasped the front of Alfred’s jacket anxiously as their lips met.

It was short. Not even three seconds passed before Arthur pulled away and bit his lip anxiously. What did this mean? Without providing an answer, Alfred parted his lips and arched up to kiss Arthur more thoroughly, catching him and pulling him in for a proper snog.

Arthur let himself get lost in the feeling of kissing his best friend, riding out Alfred’s almost insurmountable enthusiasm. Touches felt harder when Alfred continued to kiss him, lips lingered longer, and breaths were far and few between. When their teeth clicked, Alfred pulled away, groaned a confused noise, and made a face. Arthur laughed at the sight, watching his steamy breath cloud the cool, winter air before he ducked his head and kissed Alfred again, gently this time. As Arthur moved slowly, Alfred followed suit, his hand on Arthur’s neck sliding up to card through Arthur’s blond hair.
Arthur pulled back breathless, euphoric, and in a seemingly permanent state of happiness.

“I love you,” Arthur whispered, his eyes going wide as he looked down at Alfred. He immediately closed his eyes; why had he said that? They’d only kissed a few times. He didn’t know what Alfred felt for him, whether it was just an experimental movement or a genuine act.

While Arthur mentally berated himself, Alfred pulled him back down into another kiss, drowning Arthur in the endorphins that stained his cheeks with warmth. They melted together so easily, Arthur could almost imagine that he was born to kiss Alfred Jones. When Alfred’s right hand tangled in his hair and his left hand slid down Arthur’s side, Arthur felt a shiver run up and down his spine. Everything was perfect.

All of his late-night fantasies were coming true, but none of those desires could match the intense, burning feeling Arthur experienced when Alfred pulled away to whisper, “I love you, too.”

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Arthur’s eyes opened slowly, looking up at the simple, beige ceiling with a ridiculous smile on his face and a fluttering heart in his chest. Softly, he reached up a hand to trace the seam of his lips, trying to remember the feeling that he’d experienced in his memories. Arthur blinked; he couldn’t think things like that. There was a blush that burned across his cheeks and singed his ears, but Arthur ignored it as he pushed back the covers and slowly got out of bed. He may have wanted to stay in the dream, enjoying the newly remembered romance, but he wanted to say goodbye to Alfred before he left for work.

After he used the bathroom, he washed his face and struggled to comb his hair. The bandages were still in the way, but it was only for three more days. Then he would be able to take the cotton away and look at the gruesome incision… Pursing his lips, Arthur frowned at his tired reflection. Maybe he should just keep the bandages on and hide his injury. Arthur shook his head. No, that wouldn’t do. Besides, there were large gauze pads that Arthur could always use to hide the cut. Satisfied with that solution, Arthur brushed his teeth and slipped out of the bathroom.

Dressing himself in a cozy sweater and worn jeans, Arthur slipped quietly down the stairs, hearing the hollow sounds of the morning news echoing through the first floor of the house. Alfred was rattling something in the kitchen, and Arthur paused in the kitchen doorway, watching as Alfred stretched his arms over his head and yawned.

When Arthur finally stepped into the kitchen, Alfred turned to smile at him with his hands still in the air.

“Morning!” He chirped brightly, reaching for the coffee pot and pouring himself a cup. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Morning…” Arthur stepped further into the kitchen, tapping the tabletop quietly as he nodded to no one in particular. “Yes. Fine. Everything was fine.”

Should he tell Alfred that he remembered their first kiss? Would Alfred be embarrassed or offended that Arthur hadn’t remembered more important memories first? Arthur was sure it was the first time he’d ever told Alfred that he loved him, as well. He couldn’t tell Alfred he’d remembered that quite yet… he should at least remember how they met. Or maybe remembering their wedding would be better. What memory could equal the grand equivalent of their relationship? Perhaps he’d have to remember everything between the two of them before he could even begin to tell Alfred about the new dreams he was having.
As Arthur quietly sat down at the table, Alfred leaned back against the counter, watching him as he idly sipped his coffee.

“You all right?” Alfred finally asked after a few long minutes of quiet contemplation. “Your face is a little red… Are you feelin’ sick?”

“Sick?” Arthur asked, his hands flying to his ears that were still hot and red with a remaining blush that didn’t want to disperse. Smiling, Arthur shook his head and shyly met Alfred’s eyes. “No, no… I think I was just cold. I’m all better, now.” He pointed to his sweater, and Alfred raised his eyebrows with a smile.

“Good,” Alfred said as he looked at his wristwatch and knocked back the rest of his coffee. He quickly set his mug in the sink and rushed to the table to take a folder and stuff it into his shoulder bag that already held a laptop. “Okay, I’m gonna be late… You okay with getting yourself some breakfast?” Arthur nodded, and Alfred paused to give him a scrupulous look. “Not pudding.” He ordered, hefting the bag over his shoulder.

“Do I look like I’m in primary school?” Arthur rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to eat pudding for breakfast, Alfred.”

“Great!” Alfred commended, tugging at his loose shirt collar absently as he dug through his bag for his keys.

Arthur, on the other hand, slid away from the table to find where the teabags were hidden. He remembered Alfred making him a cuppa the other day, but where was the tea? While he was busy searching, Alfred paused in the kitchen doorway, jingling his keys anxiously.

“O-one more thing,” Alfred said over the sound of his keys. Arthur turned to look at him, brushing his hair from his eyes. Looking anxious and jittery, Alfred glanced down at his keys, holding them tight and halting their rattle. “We need to talk about some stuff when I get home.”

Arthur’s heart jumped in his chest. Was he in trouble? Had Arthur been talking in his sleep, and Alfred knew he’d been dreaming of their first kiss? Was Alfred angry that he didn’t mention it? Feeling his fingers knot in his sweater, Arthur’s bare toes curled against the hardwood floor nervously.

Seeing his distress, Alfred raised his hands in surrender. “It’s nothing bad! It’s just… we need to talk.”

Arthur didn’t relax in the slightest. “Did I do something wrong?” He asked, watching Alfred’s expression melt down into pleasant pity. “Are you going to send me to live with someone else? Is it because of the migraine I had when you first brought me here? Because if it is, then you should know that it’s normal to have headaches after the concussion I suffered –”

“I know about the headaches and the concussion, Arthur. I was with you when the Dr. Sampson told us about all that.” Alfred smiled, wiggling his keys in his hand as he spoke. “I just…” Alfred paused, sighed, and pushed his hand through his hair. “It’s just your parents, okay? I wanted to talk to you about it when I got home, so you don’t get all worked up over it –”

“I won’t get worked up,” Arthur huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Alfred nodded slowly. “Sure, sure… I just wanted to tell you that they’re coming to see you.”

“What?” Arthur baulked, holding onto the countertop for support. “When?”
“Arthur, I’m going to be late.”

Arthur shrugged. “Then be late! When are my parents coming? Do they know about the amnesia? Do they know about my brother… um…” Arthur shook his head. “Al… what was his name?”

Alfred sighed again. “Alistair. His name was Alistair.”

“Right,” Arthur agreed, walking across the kitchen to stand in front of Alfred. “Do they know about him? And… and my head…” Arthur held a hand over the jagged scar along his brow, feeling pain pulse through his skin at the touch.

“That’s why they’re coming, Arthur.” Alfred said softly, placing a supporting hand on Arthur’s shoulder as he spoke. “They’re coming for the funeral. But before that, they want to see you.”

Arthur’s eyes darted back up to Alfred’s face, seeking answers in those impossibly blue eyes. “When? They know about everything, right? They know I won’t remember them?”

“You’re still their baby, Arthur,” Alfred said quietly, stuffing his hands into his trouser pockets. “They wanna make sure you’re okay.” He huffed, then slowly started to back-peddle out of the doorway. “Now I’m really gonna be late!”

“Go, go…” Arthur said with a flick of his wrist. His parents wanted to see him… even if he couldn’t remember who they were? He couldn’t even remember what his father’s first name was. “Wait!” Arthur said, bolting out into the hall to see Alfred halfway out the door. Alfred groaned dramatically, but Arthur held his ground. “When are they coming?”

Alfred called over his shoulder, “They’re on the plane tonight, so they should be here tomorrow. Now I really have to go. I’ll be home around six!”

With that, Alfred shut the door behind himself, leaving Arthur to fret all on his own. His heart was pounding at the idea of more people expecting him to remember an entire lifetime. And as he stood in the hallway with hands clasped together desperately, his head gained the ache that came whenever Arthur was trying to remember something he couldn’t quite grasp. Retreating into the kitchen, Arthur resorted to finding the tea. Even though it wasn’t enough to wash away his boiling anxiety, surely it might soothe his frayed nerves.

It took three cups of tea to calm Arthur’s racing heart and raging worries. His stomach had been turning itself inside out for sure. There were bits of icy, tingling fear that still laced around his hands and legs, making his fingers drum against the table and his legs bounce anxiously. His parents were coming to see him in less than twenty-four hours. Could he ask Alfred how to behave when he got home? Did he have to change the way he acted? Arthur got a headache just trying to mull over the ideas.

Instead of rotting away at the kitchen table, Arthur ate two pieces of buttered toast and brought a third piece with him into the living room. Perhaps there he could find something he could use to distract himself. Walking past the large window on the left side of the room that was covered by curtains to hide the outside world, Arthur ignored the television in favor of the large bookshelf next to it. It was chalked full of hardcover and paperback books, and Arthur mused that one of them may be able to distract him. Something told him that he liked reading.

The first thing he saw was a history textbook leaning against an anatomy coloring book. Arthur arched an eyebrow at those; they must’ve belonged to Alfred. Next to those books were
several non-fiction books on the journey of an elf through a magical land. Arthur bit into his toast and chewed it slowly as he read the summary on the back of the book, but set it back onto the shelf when he was finished, walking along the bookshelf and seeing several more non-fiction books. In fact, there were only four books in total that were fiction.

When Arthur reached the end of the shelf, his breath caught in his throat. There, printed clearly on the spine of the last five books, was his name. Arthur C. Kirkland. Shoving the rest of his toast into his mouth, Arthur quickly wiped his hands on his trousers and snatched the first book. The cover read Rising Echoes in a simple, looping script. A young woman with a sword adorned the cover in an oil-painted depiction of a forest, surrounded by glowing pixies in the air and trolls at her feet. Arthur slowly blinked down at the book. He’d written this?

Alfred had told him that he was an author. But... of fantasy novels? Magic and mystery... long-sought curses and gifts from strange, impossible gods. Arthur smiled. His books must have been fairly successful. Alfred said that they had lived in a small, downtown apartment because they couldn’t afford anything else. When Arthur books started to sell, they could afford their much better house. If they could buy a lovely home in the upscale part of Seattle, Arthur assumed that he might be a small celebrity when it came to writing.

Setting Rising Echoes aside, Arthur looked at two books that were marked with the series title: Whispering Willows. They were followed by Arthur’s forth book, Hand of Fate. Surprisingly, it was the only book to be paperback, whereas the others were all hardcover. Moving on, Arthur took his latest book off of the shelf, and gave it a long, hard look.

Unlike the other covers that were colorful and filled with magical creatures, this cover was a solid, navy blue. The one-word title, Archived, was written across the top of the book in shimmering, silver paint. Arthur arched an eyebrow, and flipped through the first few, empty pages. When he reached the dedication page, he squinted at the message.

“To document the memories in our lives,
And mark the passage of those we’ve loved.”

For my brother, Alistair.

Pursing his lips, Arthur slid his fingers along the paper, just under the words. It was an emotional message, of course... but what did it mean? To archive something was to put it into storage. Did that mean this book was a storage of Alistair’s memories and thoughts? No, that couldn’t be... That would be too personal to publish. And what did it mean to ‘mark the passage of those we’ve loved?’ Had someone in their family died already? Someone close to Alistair and Arthur? Furthermore, why did he dedicate the book to Alistair, and not his other siblings, Delilah or Seamus?

Biting his bottom lip, Arthur took the book with him as he went to sit down on the couch, slowly leafing through the pages with sparkling interest. He’d always loved mysteries. And perhaps, if he read one of his books, it might stir up a memory or two.

Chapter one opened with a man sitting down in a chair. The words “solitude” and “desperate” struck Arthur as odd in the description of the room. If the man was alone, not speaking, why hadn’t he used the words “silent,” or “lonely,” anywhere in the passage? Tucking his legs underneath himself, Arthur leaned his elbow on the armrest of the sofa while he read. The main character, Simon, had just lost his wife and unborn child. Arthur’s heart ached oddly when he read the statement, and he reread it several times, feeling his stomach churn.
Had Alistair lost his wife and child? Was that why he’d been drinking the night he and Arthur were in the accident? Arthur frowned at the thought. If Arthur knew Alistair was drunk, why had he gotten into the car with him? What has possessed Arthur to allow his brother to drive?

Before Arthur could continue thinking, a sharp pain shot through his head, and the book fell from his hands. He held his face in his hands as he squeezed his eyes shut and curled in on himself. The pain was like a hot needle going through the sides of his head and into his brain, drilling through bone and flesh to wrack Arthur’s brain and plaster grey matter to the inside of his skull.

There, just beyond the edges of the pain that seared the back of Arthur’s eyes, was a memory of Alistair. He was standing outside of a truck, stumbling slightly as he reached for the door. Arthur could see his own hands reaching out to stop him and keep Alistair from driving, but his older brother – so much taller than Arthur had ever imagined – took him by the front of his shirt, and slammed him into the side of the truck. Arthur heard his own skull crack against the doorframe, and he saw Alistair’s lips moving around words, but the sound of his voice was just out of reach. Blurry and warbling… as if Arthur was drowning.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears, and Arthur pried his eyes open quickly, hoping to wipe away the memory. If he stopped remembering things, the burning, aching pain might cease. Even if it was only for a second, Arthur needed it to stop. He needed a moment to breathe… he couldn’t catch his breath. The pain was still coming in waves, blurring his vision as he tried to stand up from the sofa. His legs buckled beneath him, and he tumbled to the ground, crying out when his head hit the floor.

Everything hurt. He felt hot. Were his stitches coming undone? It nearly felt like they were unraveling stitch by stitch, revealing broken skin and torn muscle beneath it. Arthur felt blood trickle down the side of his face. Reaching up a shaking hand, Arthur wiped it across his brow and held it before his eyes, only feeling the gloss of sweat on his forehead. No blood. Arthur sighed in relief. Waiting on the floor as the cracking, disjointed pain continued to course through his body, Arthur tried to take a breath. How could one traumatic memory reduce him to a pile of uncoordinated mush?

Arthur clenched his teeth and fought to push himself up onto his hands and knees; if the pain wasn’t going to stop on its own, then he would force it to stop. When he’d experienced his first recollection in the hospital, Alfred had been there, calming Arthur with the soothing sound of his voice. Surely, if he called Alfred, it would somehow help him… wouldn’t it?

Stumbling his way to the kitchen, Arthur sat himself into a chair slowly, fighting the protest in his muscles. His cell phone sat on the tabletop quietly, waiting for him. He’d never touched it for the past two days that he’d been staying with Alfred. He’d never needed to. Alfred would call the house phone when he checked on Arthur. But now, Arthur took up the cell phone, squinted at his blurry sight of the screen, and tapped the speed dial number on the piece of paper Alfred had left for him.

Closing his eyes and putting his head on the cool tabletop, Arthur tried to take slow, even breaths as he waited for Alfred to answer. One ring… two… three… A bolt of pain shot through Arthur’s skull, and he bit down into his tongue painfully as he fought the urge to whimper. Alfred would know what to do.

On the fourth ring, Alfred finally answered breathlessly, “Arthur, sweetie, this isn’t the best time. I’m in the middle of –”

“Alfred,” Arthur almost cried with relief. The American still had his rich, soothing voice, and it
was doing wonders for Arthur’s nerves. At the moment it was a bit harried, but Arthur couldn’t
care less. It was Alfred’s voice, and that was all that mattered.

“Woah. Hey, what’s wrong?” Alfred asked immediately, his tone switching from dismissive to
frightened in a fraction of a second. Arthur sighed against the wooden table, feeling the throbbing
of his temples slowly start to lessen. Alfred’s voice really was soothing. “H-hey, Arhtur, y-you
gotta tell me what’s wrong. You’re freakin’ me out.”

“I read a book,” Arthur breathed into the receiver, blinking slowly at his much to close view of the
 tabletop. He could feel his eyelashes brush against the wooden surface, but he didn’t lift his head.
The thought of moving made his head spin. He closed his eyes again. “Or, I tried to…”

There was a confused noise in the background of Alfred’s workplace, and Arthur struggled to
listen as Alfred held the phone away from his ear to speak to his colleague. Returning quickly,
Alfred spoke slowly, “So… you read a book, and then decided to call me sounding like you’re
crying.” Alfred sighed into his phone, the sound coming through crackled and exasperated.
“Arthur, you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Arthur hummed. “I’m sorry.” Alfred grumbled something in return, and Arthur listened to the
sound of clinking glasses. Beakers or petri dishes? It would be impossible to tell. Arthur used his
free arm as a cushion for his head on the table, breathing evenly as he whispered, “My head hurts.”

The glass clinking halted. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Arthur’s eyebrows knit together. It hadn’t seemed that severe. Migraines had been fairly routine for
several days after the surgery. “Well, I –”

“Arthur, if you feel that bad, you need to call an ambulance!” Alfred interrupted swiftly. Arthur
heard fabric rustle as Alfred assumedly stood from his seat and moved around his lab.

Raising his voice slightly, Arthur tried to calm Alfred and stop his frantic fussing. “But it’s gone,
now. It happens when I remember something too suddenly… it just hurts. I’m fine, Alfred. It’s not
like I’m–”

Alfred interrupted again, “No, no! They said if the pain is severe, it could mean something’s going
wrong!”

Speaking even louder, Arthur sat up and opened his eyes to glare at the hardwood cabinets.
Thankfully, his vision wasn’t blurry anymore. “Alfred, you’re not listening –”

A door slammed on Alfred’s side of the line. Was he leaving his lab? Arthur frowned as Alfred
said quickly, “Okay, I’m leaving.”

Arthur was nearly shouting, now. “You don’t have to leave, Alfred! I’m feeling –”

“Do you want me to call the hospital for you?” There was a faint echo as Alfred walked down an
empty hallway at a brisk pace. Arthur heard his breathing become a bit haggard as he started to
jog. “Who am I kidding, you probably need me to... stay put, Arthur. Don’t go anywhere. I’m
gonna get you to the hospital and –”

Arthur sighed, giving up on shouting. Instead, he closed his eyes and lowered his voice to a calm,
careful whisper. “Alfred. You’re not listening to me.” Soft, crackling static came through Alfred’s
side of the call as he stopped jogging and held still. He didn’t speak, and Arthur doubted he was
even breathing. Pushing the heel of his hand through his hair, Arthur continued to speak quietly.
“It’s not a severe migraine. It’s just like any other migraine. It happens when I remember
After wait for three excruciatingly long seconds, Arthur heard Alfred give out a long, distressed sigh. “You scared me,” he said lowly. His voice came through as slightly muffled; was he holding a hand to his face? Not speaking into the phone properly? Arthur had to listen closely to hear Alfred grumble, “You said it hurt. And you haven’t called before, so I figured…”

Pursing his lips Arthur leaned forward to lay his head down on the table again. “I’m sorry,” he said listlessly. What else could he say? Alfred had nearly scrambled away from his university to help him, and Arthur was completely fine. He just needed to have some sense of security. Alfred was that security. But how could Arthur say that aloud? Exhaling slowly, Arthur closed his eyes. “I’m sorry to bother you at work.”

Making a pinched expression, Arthur hummed disagreeably. “I wasn’t scared.”

“Yeah, sure,” Alfred agreed sarcastically. Arthur’s expression dampened further. A door creaked as Alfred opened it, and he spoke in even tones when he stepped back into his lab. “If you weren’t concerned, then why did you call?”

Arthur slowly opened his eyes. “I needed a familiar voice,” he replied, careful and slow in his delivery. “You’re the only person I know. The only person I know that I can trust, at the moment,” Alfred was quiet, and Arthur finished with, “I knew that talking to you would make me feel better.”

A pause, and then a long, fond sigh. “Is that how it is?” Alfred asked with a hint of a smile in his voice. Arthur hummed affirmatively, and Alfred chuckled softly. “Well, at least you’re feeling better, right?” Another positive hum, and there was crackling while Alfred adjusted the way the phone sat in his hand. “Okay. Good. I think I can breathe now.”

“How comforting,” Arthur smiled, staring at the shining countertops while Alfred went back to moving glass objects around his workspace.

“Out of curiosity,” the microbiologist mumbled, “What did you remember? I mean, if it hurt that bad, it had to be something… pretty…” Alfred’s words trailed off awkwardly, unsure of what he was trying to say. Arthur sympathized.

“I was reading one of my books… Archived, I believe it was.” Arthur blinked at this view of the cabinets and drummed his fingers against the table. “And I was thinking about Alistair.”

“Oh,” Alfred gasped quietly, “Message received.”

Arthur’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. What did that mean? “What? I haven’t even told you what I remembered.”

“If you weren’t concerned, then why did you call?” Arthur pushed the subject. “I wanted to tell you.”

“But you don’t have to if it’s too personal.”

Sitting up, Arthur narrowed his eyes at the tone of Alfred’s voice. There was a certain
hint of distance in it, as if Alfred had already lost interest in the conversation. Licking his lips, Arthur pressed the phone to his ear and said, “I remembered what happened right before the accident.”

There was the sound of shattering glass across the line, and Arthur winced when Alfred swore and apologized to his coworker. “Hold on a sec’,” Alfred grunted as he set his phone aside to pick up the glass item he’d broken.

Arthur waited patiently with a twisted hint of satisfaction settling in his stomach. At least he’d earned Alfred’s undivided attention. Arthur liked the idea of gaining Alfred’s attention; it made him feel cozy and comfortable. It was like he was the center of the universe when Alfred paid attention to him. When Alfred looked at him just right, Arthur would lose all sense of time and balance, and simply slip into a hazy trance.

Arthur blinked. Where had that come from? Holding a hand to his head, Arthur noted that nothing hurt. The previous ache from his memory of Alistair had completely faded. Now, as he recalled the previous moments that Alfred’s eyes had landed on him with an intimate glint, his head didn’t twinge in the slightest. He felt fine. Arthur frowned; perhaps he was more damaged than he’d previously assumed.

When the phone crackled and buzzed with the sound of Alfred holding it to his ear, Arthur snapped himself from his thoughts and tried to focus on his husband. Recalled memories of Alfred would have to wait until later.

“Okay, sorry about that.” Alfred breathed heavily into the receiver. Arthur squinted and held his phone a few inches from his ear as Alfred settled down into his chair and quieted down a bit. “Now… what happened before the accident? Did you remember the whole night?”

Arthur slowly shook his head, drumming his fingers against the table. “No, just a little bit of it. I remembered that Alistair walked up to a truck… was he driving a truck that night?”

An uncomfortable noise echoed through the phone. “Yeah… yeah, he was.”

Arthur frowned. Why had he let Alistair drive? The man had obviously been inebriated with his stumbling feet and aggressive outreach to Arthur. Pursing his lips, Arthur said, “I tried to stop him, Alfred. I tried to pull him away from the door.” Alfred was quiet, and Arthur murmured, “He grabbed me and slammed me against the side of the truck.”

“Oh, god…” Alfred breathed, the background of his lab nearly silent as he spoke. “Arthur… oh, Arthur, I’m so sorry…”

Arthur went on. “I think I hit my head the hardest. But he was shouting something… I couldn’t quite hear it. What do you think he said?”

A long, shivering sigh. “Well, he was probably just mad that you didn’t want him to drive… he was always kind of stubborn… I’m sorry. Arthur, I’m so, so sorry.”

A long, shivering sigh. “Well, he was probably just mad that you didn’t want him to drive… he was always kind of stubborn… I’m sorry. Arthur, I’m so, so sorry.”

“Why?” Arthur leaned forward against the table, trying to pull an explanation from Alfred’s unwilling lips. The American merely sighed, not revealing any other motive. “Why are you sorry? You weren’t there, you couldn’t have stopped him…” Arthur’s heart stopped. What if Alfred had been there, and he didn’t help? Was that why he was apologizing? Was that the reason he didn’t like to talk about Alistair or ask Arthur about that night? Biting his lower lip for a moment, Arthur traced his fingers along the large bandage that covered his head before he whispered, “Were you there, Alfred? Did you even try to help me?”
Taking a sharp breath, Alfred shifted where he sat. “No! No, I wasn’t there… I was here, in the lab. I was working on a few cultures…” he sighed, and Arthur felt his pulse resume its normal pace. “I would’ve helped you, if I’d known about it! I should’ve been there… I should have been there. But I wasn’t, and now…”

“It’s not your fault, Alfred.” Arthur reassured him before he had a chance to spiral down into a dark, pitiful mentality. “Alfred, please… It’s not your fault.”

Clearing his throat, Alfred made an affirmative noise, as if Arthur’s statement needed to be approved. With one quick breath, Alfred was all business, and Arthur had no room to argue. “All right… I need to get back to work. You’re okay?”


Alfred hummed. “Right. Okay, I’ll see you tonight.” And with that, he hung up, leaving Arthur to sit and blink at the sound of the dial tone.

Hanging up, Arthur set his phone on the table with a frown. Alfred liked to slip out of conversations he didn’t like. Arthur had noticed that much. He had wiggled his way out of talking about his parents, and now that Arthur was remembering the accident, Alfred was acting strangely. He thought it was his fault… but why? Arthur wanted answers. He wanted to know why Alfred felt guilty. He wanted to know why he was so hesitant to talk to Arthur, even though he was still the same person he’d married three years ago.

Crossing his arms atop the table, Arthur put his head down on them and closed his eyes. A light throb still echoed through his skull, and he sighed softly at the feeling. Alfred had certainly done wonders for his migraine, but that wasn’t enough to make him feel better. There was a certain dissonance between them that Arthur didn’t like. Where his own tone was soft, Alfred’s was stubborn and hard to handle, marking a strange line through their relationship.

Arthur shifted his arms slightly. Their relationship? What was that, exactly? How did he feel about Alfred Jones, the man that he was supposed to love? There was a low-lying sense that they were acquaintances, and they were living together in the same house… but, Arthur didn’t know if he could call Alfred a true friend. Could he? He certainly didn’t dislike Alfred, but that didn’t mean he was completely trusting of the man. Alfred had a tendency to keep certain things to himself… from details about Arthur’s life, to his own family, Alfred was a fairly distant living companion. Arthur wondered if he’d always been like that.

Furthermore, Arthur wanted to know if Alfred would honestly answer certain questions if he were to ask them. If he were to ask about their relationship, Alfred would no doubt tell Arthur all of the good things that had happened between them… but what about the bad things? Would Alfred keep those to himself and hope that Arthur never revealed their marital issues? It was a discomforting idea to deal with, and as Arthur sniffled and shifted his arms on the table once more, he tried to imagine a better topic of thought.

That was, until a hand landed on his shoulder.

Jumping in his seat, Arthur sat up quickly to see Alfred standing over him with a bashful smile. Arthur felt a small wave of vertigo hit him, as it had a tendency to when he lifted his head too quick, but it didn’t change the fact that Alfred was standing next to the table. He smelled like fresh rain, and his jacket was nearly drenched, but Arthur couldn’t believe he was here. They were on the phone only moments ago.

“A-Alfred… you’re home so soon?” Arthur gawked, watching Alfred smile and slip off
his jacket. It was hung on the back of another chair before Alfred meandered to the fridge and
opened it to peek inside. Arthur narrowed his eyes at the American. “I told you that you didn’t have
to leave early just to come help me. I’m fine.”

“What?” Alfred asked, turning his back on the fridge to give Arthur a flabbergasted look.
“I didn’t leave early.”

Blinking slowly, Arthur watched as Alfred pulled a canned fizzy drink from a shelf and
cracked it open, closing the fridge. They’d only spoken a moment ago, hadn’t they? Had Arthur
fallen asleep and not even realized it?

“But,” Arthur mumbled numbly. Alfred took a swig of his drink and Arthur’s eyebrows
drew together in confusion. “But… we were just talking. Just a minute ago, you hung up. I just put
my head down for a moment.”

Alfred made an uncomfortable noise as he sat down across from Arthur, tapping the tin
can in his hand rhythmically. “That was almost seven hours ago, Arthur. I think you just fell
asleep. You were out like a light when I came in.”

“Out like a light?” Arthur repeated, not quite believing the words. He’d felt awake. Or,
at the very least, he didn’t feel very well rested for a man that had presumably slept for seven
hours.

“Yeah,” Alfred nodded, taking another drink of his brightly colored beverage before
sitting back in his chair. “I came in, said ‘I’m home,’ but you never answered. I looked in here, and
you were fast asleep.” He tapped the canned drink with a fond smile. “When you’re really out, you
kinda mumble in your sleep. You were doing it when I was putting my bag away.”

Arthur blinked spastically; mumbling? What did he say? Did he say what he was
thinking aloud? If Alfred knew he was questioning their relationship, he was excellent at hiding it.
His gaze was even and calm as he watched Arthur across the table, and his posture was equally
relaxed. His shoulders weren’t in a stiff, anxious line that appeared when he was trying to cover
uncertainty, and his blue eyes glittered with reflections of his smile. Easygoing and open.

“I…” Arthur started, opening his mouth without any real idea of what he wanted to say.
There was no conviction in his words, and he merely blinked tiredly at Alfred. “That must’ve been
very amusing, I’m sure.”

Taking another drink, Alfred smiled against the aluminum rim. “It was more nostalgic
than anything,” he whispered to his drink, “Reminded me of when I’d come home and you’d be
asleep at the computer.”

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asleep at the computer.”

Arthur quirked an eyebrow. “At the computer?”

“When you had a brainstorm, you would sit at your computer and write all day,” Alfred
said with a smile, tapping the side of his drink quietly as he spoke. “I can always remember coming
home to hear you talking in your sleep about whatever thing you were writing at the moment.”

Taking in a deep breath, Arthur nodded to himself. “And I… I wrote often, didn’t I?”

Clearing his throat, Alfred nodded happily, drumming his fingers against the tabletop as
he spoke. “Yeah, yeah… a lot of the time, you wrote stuff that you never showed to Edith.”

That struck a strange chord within Arthur’s mind. Whoever Edith was, she saw Arthur’s
writing… an editor, perhaps? An advisor? Publisher? Arthur leaned forward across the table,
“Edith?” He asked interestingly, following Alfred with his eyes as he stood from the table and wandered about the kitchen. “Who is Edith?”

Opening and closing a few cabinets, Alfred called over his shoulder, “Are you hungry? I don’t think you had lunch, and it’s dinnertime.”

Making a pinched expression, Arthur shook his head at Alfred’s turned back, annoyed by the change of subject. “W-what? I don’t… N-no, I’m not hungry. Who’s Edith?”

“Huh? Oh, she’s your editor and publisher. I’m thinking… Chinese takeout?” Alfred said disinterestedly as he leafed through a few advert papers that were spread across the counter.

“Yes. Takeaway sounds lovely,” Arthur said with a flippant wave of his hand, trying to steer the topic back to Edith. “Now, why wouldn’t I show what I wrote to Edith?”

Alfred waved a pamphlet to and fro in his hand as he spoke, staring at the kitchen cabinets. “Sometimes… you just didn’t want to show her… even if you worked hard on it. I don’t know why.”

Leaning forward, Arthur pressed the subject. “Did I ever say anything about it?” He asked, watching Alfred’s tired expression when he turned around to face Arthur at the table. “Maybe I was trying to work on something with someone else?” Alfred’s expression turned serious, and his eyes became steely with discontentment. Arthur continued, carefully watching Alfred’s tight posture as he spoke. “A different publisher perhaps? Maybe that’s why I wouldn’t –”

“Whoa, whoa… Let’s back up.” Alfred said quickly, raising his hands as a signal for Arthur to shut his mouth. “You would’ve told me if you started another contract with a new company,” his voice was as hard as stone, leaving no room for Arthur to argue. “Besides, you wouldn’t leave Edith.”

Sitting back in his chair, Arthur subconsciously brushed his fingertips over the bandages that covered his forehead. “Why not?”

Alfred took a deep, calming breath as he gave Arthur a tight-lipped smile. “You are full of questions tonight, aren’t you?”

“Better than being quiet,” Arthur countered, scratching absently at his brow and feeling his stitches sting at the attention. He lowered his hand. “I just want to know more about who I was, Alfred.” He paused, seeing distress flicker in Alfred’s irises, and reworked his statement. “I want to know… who I am.” He was fundamentally the same person, but it was taking him longer to recognize that fact than he originally planned.

Sighing again, Alfred held up the Chinese takeaway menu. “If I tell you, will you tell me what you want for dinner?” Arthur nodded in agreement, and Alfred huffed. “To be honest… Edith intimidated you. Reminded you of your sister, Delilah.” Alfred rolled his eyes, and fumbled with the menu in his hands as he muttered, “Maybe that’s why she and I don’t get along.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes at Alfred; now there were two women in their life that didn’t like Alfred. Why did they dislike him, and did he dislike them in return? Did Arthur’s mother like Alfred? Arthur looked down at the table thoughtfully as Alfred dialed the number for the restaurant. In his most recent dream, Arthur had mentioned Alfred coming to stay at his house when he needed a place to stay. If Alfred came to his house often, it must’ve meant that Arthur’s
parents knew and trusted Alfred. If that was the case, Arthur’s mother must have approved of Alfred and Arthur being married.

At least… that was the theory. There was still the issue of Arthur’s sister, and now his editor and publisher. What had Alfred done to gain their mistrust, and worse, why didn’t Arthur take their side? Before Arthur could continue to fret over the question, Alfred hung up the phone and sat down at the table.

“Anyway,” he breathed with an air of dissonance that put Arthur on edge, “Why did you want to talk about Edith so much?”

Arthur shrugged. “Like I said, I want to know who I am. Additionally, I was reading this afternoon, if you recall our conversation on the phone.”

Taking a slow sip of his fizzy drink, Alfred raised his eyebrows. “Well,” he said after he set the drink aside. “Your parents are coming over tomorrow. You should be able to learn more about yourself that way.”

“Oh, yes,” Arthur agreed uneasily, reaching up to absentmindedly scratch his forehead again. The stitches burned, and Arthur placed his hand back on the table with a frown. “I’m sure that’ll be… just…”

Alfred laughed away Arthur’s anxiety, adjusting his glasses and reaching over the table to pat Arthur’s hand. “You’ll be fine, Arthur. It’s not like they’re going to interrogate you. They’re just your parents.”

With that said, Alfred took up his drink and tipped his head back as he downed the remainder of it, not noticing the disbelieving glimmer in Arthur’s eyes. What Alfred said was true… they were his parents, and they surely loved him, but there was no positivity that they wouldn’t put too much stock in Arthur’s memory. As for interrogating, Arthur simply had to cross his fingers and hope that they would be respectful of his troubled memory.

“Right…” He said softly. Lacing his fingers together, Arthur nodded to himself, hoping that somehow, someway, he would be able to rationally speak to his parents. “They’re just my parents.”

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A cup of tea was nestled in Arthur’s cold, trembling hands. The ceramic container was full of distress with only a jittery spoonful of anxiety… all of it seeping warmth through Arthur’s hands and up to his elbows. The warmth didn’t reach his chilled heart that pounded restlessly in his chest, sending erratic signals to his body that signaled he was either in shock or in the process of executing his fight or flight instincts. Arthur knew it was the latter.

He was going to see his parents today.

Since Alfred had gone to work, he had been calling Arthur with semi-hourly updates on when his parents would arrive. The explicit countdown was giving him heart palpitations every time the phone would ring. And as Arthur sat on the sofa with a quickly cooling cuppa clutched between his hands, there were only forty-five short minutes until their expected arrival. But, Alfred said, it might be sooner rather than later. The skies were clear, and the roads were fine… hopefully, Alfred would come home before his parents did.

For hours, Arthur had been shuffling back and forth between the cozy kitchen and the
quaint living room. Alfred would be due home any minute, and he would smile at Arthur with his bland eyes and dissatisfied smile, marking over every bit of Arthur that was different from the one he once loved. There was always that glint in his eyes that hinted that Arthur wasn’t quite right. As if he were a single puzzle piece that was trying to match itself to a different puzzle, and Alfred was routinely inspecting him to see if somehow, he might be able to fit in a different spot.

But Arthur… he knew he was still the same puzzle piece that he’d always been, and no matter how hard he was trying to fit in the place he belonged, Alfred was going to regard him as a foreign piece. The discord between them made Arthur feel out of place in their united puzzle, and his stomach churned every time Alfred would look at him with those electric, observant eyes. Out of place and unrecognized… like Arthur was a stranger. A liar. An imposter. Someone wearing the mask of the man he loved. It made Arthur’s heart ache. Would Alfred ever truly regard him as the real Arthur, or would he always be on his guard?

Furthermore, would his parents still see him as the same man they loved and raised? Would they look at him like some sort of theatrical farce of their son, mistrusting and disregarding everything he did or said? Or, they may be the complete opposite of Alfred, putting too much hope in the fact that Arthur was the same person. His parents may put too much faith in him, weighing all of their hopes on the fact that Arthur might be able to string together a few, unorganized memories that were jumbled together and mismatched on the timeline of his life.

Feeling his heart stutter beneath the weight of his unperfected memory, Arthur brought his mug of tea to his lips and took a slow sip as keys made a solid clunk sound in the lock of the front door. Alfred was home. Just as Arthur had made a point to set his mug of tea on the coffee table, Alfred staggered into the house with a chorus of rustling plastic bags in his wake, heaving a heavy sigh as he went.

“Phew, it’s getting’ cold out there!” He announced brightly as Arthur curled in on himself on sofa. His stomach was twisting itself in knots, and he could feel Alfred’s speculative stare burning into the back of his head from the entryway. But that was the least of their issues; someone was behind Alfred, stomping their feet on the welcome mat just inside the door. Arthur’s heart wrenched at the sound of a man and woman mumbling and grumbling something to Alfred. Their voices were worn with the years, and though Arthur wished the sounds were nostalgic, it only left a cold, uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. Alfred, on the other hand, sounded delighted as he ushered them inside the house. “Come on in, guys! Yeah, just put your shoes there. Sorry about the bags… I needed to go grocery shopping. Super cool that we got here at the same time though, right?”

Kicking off the blanket that covered his legs, Arthur bolted from the sofa and slipped into the bathroom that was just next to the living room. His parents were here. They’d arrive early. At the same time as Alfred, no less. Looking in the mirror, Arthur ignored his perturbed expression and wide, wild eyes. He focused on brushing his fingers through his hair, carefully minding the bandages that were strikingly white against his hair. The bruise along the right side of his face and neck were nearly invisible, and as long as his parents didn’t try to crush him with a tight embrace, the bruises along his torso would be undetected.

Of course, his disappearance didn’t go unnoticed, and Alfred was soon calling for him. “Arthur? Hey, you won’t guess who I ran into!”

“No, not the president… Where are you? I saw you just a second ago,” Arthur felt his heart pound as his parents – so foreign, so strange – chuckled at the light banter. Footsteps approached the bathroom, and Arthur shrunk away from the open door, staring up at Alfred guiltily as he peered through the doorway. “Hey,” he whispered with a soft smile, “Are you playing hide and seek?”

“Sure,” Arthur nodded feeling his head ache at the movement, “Sure. Just pretend I’m not here. I’m invisible. Go back to,” Arthur wave vaguely in the direction of his parents, not daring to say ‘mum and dad’ in favor of awkward silence. “Go back to them.”

Arching an eyebrow, Alfred huffed a lightly humored laugh. “Arthur, they won’t bite. I promise. They really want to see you… they’re worried about you.”

“But,” Arthur mumbled, holding a hand to the side of his head gingerly. Maybe he could pretend to have some kind of issue to escape the pressure that build in his chest at the thought of his parents. “My head…”

“They know about all that,” Alfred said with a smile, holding his hand out for Arthur to take. “Come on… don’t you want to see them?”

No. Arthur didn’t want to see them. He was scared of everything they may say or do. Afraid of what he didn’t yet know, and afraid of what he couldn’t remember. He was trying very hard to remember everything, but he hadn’t been able to sleep last night, and now he was strung out on too many cups of tea. His hands were shaking with the overdose of caffeine, and his heart raced anxiously. He doubted he could even hold steady if he took Alfred’s hand, but when Alfred raised his eyebrows questioningly, Arthur reached forward and gripped his hand tightly, allowing Alfred to tow him out of the bathroom and into the living room.

There, at the head of the room, were two people that Arthur recognized from several photo albums and dozens of pictures. The short, smiling man in the pictures… gray hair and warm, brown eyes that sparkled in every photo, dressed in smart slacks and a warm sweater. His father. The woman with her graying hair pinned up in a smart bun, at least three inches taller than her husband, wearing a lavender blouse that made her green eyes shine when he smiled. His mother. Arthur’s breath caught at the sight, and emotion overwhelmed him.

But… why did it overwhelm him? He didn’t remember who they were, he just recognized them from their photographs. Was his heart on autopilot, pointing out whoever Arthur loved and making him feel the emotions without regard to Arthur’s memory?

Not having time to collect his thoughts, Arthur found himself with his arms full of his mother, wrapped up in her warm embrace as she happily chirped, “Oh, Arthur! My little Arthur… my baby boy… oh, thank god you’re all right.”

Arthur felt pinned, suffocated by the arms wrapped around him. There was still a thick, heavy emotion lingering in his heart, but he couldn’t quite tell if it was melancholy flavored nostalgia or the same fitful anxiety that had been affecting him all morning. Unable to decide what he was feeling, Arthur stood frozen in his mother’s arms, staring at the nondescript wall on the far side of the room.

A cozy, comforting heat spread through his limbs, and Arthur slowly pat his mother’s thin shoulder, awkwardly trying to convey his strange emotions to her. His mother simply held him tighter, as if she could squeeze his memories out of him. His father stood back with a hollow expression in his eyes, clasping his hands together and holding them tight until his knuckles turned white. Arthur could feel the same uneasiness echo in his own bones, rattling down through his
body until his very soul ached with confusing emotions that he didn’t dare to understand.

“George, look at him,” Arthur’s mother ordered her husband, taking a step back from Arthur to hold his cheeks in her small, worn hands. Her skin was wrinkled and soft, smoothed through the years into something beautifully fragile. Arthur could see memories etched into the wrinkles around her eyes as she smiled at him, and there were countless fond recollections caught in the tears that glittered in her eyes. She smiled wider, brushing her thumbs over Arthur’s cheeks as she whispered, “My little boy… oh, thank god you’re safe.”

Patting her back once more in a mindless gesture of comfort, Arthur blinked down at his mother’s iridescent eyes. Shining, roughly cut jade… they were his eyes, taken straight from his mother. Alfred was right when he said that Arthur resembled his mother. There, in her arms, Arthur felt his emotions tip out of control, skewed and pulled in the wrong direction as his eyes welled with tears and his chest ached sadly.

Arthur’s father stepped forward, coming to stand just behind Arthur’s mother and ask, “What’s wrong, Arthur?”

Not getting the chance to answer, Arthur felt Alfred’s bigger, warmer hands clamp down on his shoulders as the American asked, “Does something hurt? Do you need to sit down?”

“Sit,” Arthur nodded, leaning away from his mother and back against Alfred’s sturdy chest. His eyes still felt heavy with tears, but when he blinked, the itching, aching desire to start crying dissipated. He closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes, I think I’d like to sit.”

Waving to the sofa cushions, Alfred indicated for everyone to take a seat. Arthur sat in the on the far right side of the sofa, effectively fenced in as his parents sat on the other two cushions. Alfred sat in his comfortable armchair on Arthur’s immediate right. He wouldn’t have felt so trapped if his parents hadn’t been staring at him, but much to his displeasure, his mother and father never took their eyes off of him.

For several long seconds, Arthur resorted to watching the edge of the coffee table in favor of his parents. The view was much better than the borderline obsessive stare of his parents. When seconds slowly amounted to minutes, Alfred tapped the arms of his chair and huffed. “Anyone want a cup of coffee?” He asked brightly, trying to lighten the thick, strange atmosphere.

“No, no…” Arthur’s mother said with a stern shake of her head. Sitting next to Arthur, she was in the perfect spot to place her hand on his knee and pat it fondly. Arthur tried to shift away from the gesture, but he was already pressed against the arm of the chair. There was no more room. So, he gave her a tight-lipped smile as she continued to pat his knee. “And I know my little Arthur doesn’t drink coffee. Too bitter for him.”

Alfred nodded tiredly, leaning forward to speak to Arthur’s father. “George, you sure you don’t want a cup? I bet you guys had a long flight.”

George shook his head slowly, waving a hand at the statement. “It was fine. Slept through the most of it, didn’t I, Marian?” Arthur’s mother nodded, and George smiled. “See there? Not tired at all. We’re just happy to see our boy.”

Tapping his hands on the arms of his chair again, Alfred nodded slowly, whispering a quiet, “Awesome,” under his breath. Arthur smiled at the tone. Obviously, Alfred felt the awkwardness hanging in the air, just like Arthur. He wanted to get out of the room, just for a
moment. He wanted to run and get away from the warm, cozy sight of Arthur’s happily married parents.

Bracing himself, Arthur closed his eyes and leaned forward as a searing pain split through his head. It burned along his nerves, and set his face aflame as he perfectly recalled Alfred stepping out of the room, once upon a time. He could see Alfred holding a hand to his face, tired, sad… ashamed. Arthur held his head in his hands, his fingernails biting into his scalp as he remembered a strange look in Alfred’s eyes. So desperate… as if he wanted to be a part of Arthur’s family, but not quite. Caught between what he knew and what he wanted.

Taking in a hissing breath, Arthur ignored his parents as they voiced their garbled, warbling concerns. Alfred was kneeling next to him, rubbing a hand across his back supportively as Arthur tried to fend off the feeling of an electric drill boring through his skull.

“W-what’s wrong with him? Is this a flashback?” Marian asked shakily, gripping Arthur’s shoulder hard enough that the physical pain started to outweigh the psychological pain Arthur was experiencing. Arthur merely bent forward further, pressing his bandaged forehead to the top of his thighs as Alfred pat his back softly.

“This… it’s happened before,” Alfred said slowly, quietly… as if he was afraid to raise his voice, like it would break Arthur if he was too loud. Arthur closed his eyes tighter, feeling Alfred continue to pat his back. “It’ll pass after a minute. He’s okay,” Arthur heard the tremble in Alfred’s normally strong voice, and it became more pronounced when he repeated, “He’s okay.”

While Arthur’s face was safely burrowed in his hands, his mother’s fingernails clung to his shoulder, digging into his beige sweater and making his skin crawl. “Is it because of the accident?” She whispered as if Arthur couldn’t hear her in the throes of pain, “He really can’t remember any of it, can he? It must’ve been terrifying.”

Arthur stayed quiet, letting Alfred fumble for words while Arthur was safe from speaking. The pain was easily, if not slowly, subsiding, leaving Arthur to breathe slowly and relax against Alfred’s warm hands on his shoulders. It was comforting to know that Alfred was still with him, holding him even though he couldn’t remember everything about his life.

“He can’t remember,” Alfred finally muttered, patting Arthur’s back soothingly. “He can’t remember the accident.” Alfred finished quietly, gently leaving out the fact that Arthur had remembered his altercation with Alistair before the accident. His parents didn’t need to know about Alistair’s last bout of violence… the poor man was dead, and his parents didn’t need to be beaten down into a worse state of mind. Leaning forward, Alfred pat Arthur’s back again, murmuring softly to him, “You okay? Is there too much going on? Need to lay down?”

Arthur could say yes. He could run away from the people who were supposed to be his parents, and hide under the covers as he fell asleep. He could do it, but he knew it wouldn’t be right. There was a responsibility that rang in his heart, burning through his muscles and causing his lungs to itch in irritation. He had to stay there. To be with them and comfort them… it was the least he could do.

Sitting up slowly, Arthur brushed hair from his eyes and fought to put a smile on his face, looking to Alfred instead of his parents. “I’m fine,” he said quietly, feeling his expression fall just a bit when Alfred narrowed his eyes. There was the look that Arthur knew too well; the look that meant Alfred was trying to decipher him, and discover all of the secrets that Arthur himself didn’t know. Turning away from Alfred, Arthur smiled at Marian and George – his parents – and repeated, “I’m fine now.”
“Oh, darling,” Marian breathed, her trembling hands reaching up to touch his shoulder gently. It was too soft, too hesitant… too foreign to feel comforting to Arthur. Nonetheless, she pat her thin, gentle hand on his shoulder fondly. “You poor, poor thing.”

“How ‘bout a nice cuppa?” George asked Alfred personably, trying to lighten the heavy, fearful mood that had tainted the room. His brown eyes sparkled with an emotion Arthur couldn’t quite see, and Arthur looked down at his lap as George continued, “That might make him feel a little better.”

Rounding everyone into the kitchen, Alfred set a kettle on the stove quietly. There were strange lines marking his back; the stiff line of his shoulders to the long, uncomfortable rigidity of his spine clear through his shirt, all the way down to the locks of his knees as he stood discomforted and uneasy in his own kitchen. Arthur wanted to comfort him. He didn’t know how he would go about such a thing, but he wanted to smooth out those lines. Make them into sweeping curves. Warm shoulders and soft smiles. There was a way to do it, Arthur was sure… but it was too far out of reach. Lost in a sea of memories that he wouldn’t — couldn’t — reach while he was trapped in a desert of dry thoughts.

And so, Arthur sat quietly as his parents started to strike up the boring droll of idle conversation. The weather. Arthur’s older brother, Seamus, and his law firm. He’s gaining new clients. Things are very busy. Arthur’s sister and her husband are trying to have a baby. Arthur’s mother is knitting them baby clothes in her spare time. All of it was very idyllic and sweet, and Arthur wanted to join in wholeheartedly, but he couldn’t help but sit back and watch them converse.

It was all so fragile.

His mother’s smile was a fraction too happy. His father’s smile never, ever reached his eyes, no matter how hard he laughed at Alfred’s jokes across the kitchen. They were so broken. Held together by discourse and a feeble need to control what little they had left… they were torn by the loss of their eldest son. And Arthur wasn’t helping anything by forgetting who he was. Depression settled into a dark corner of Arthur’s heart, and he shifted unhappily where he sat at the table. His parents kept talking. Alfred poured everyone a cup of tea. And Arthur… he wished he could join.

He wished, but magic wasn’t real. He couldn’t bring back Alistair if he tried. No matter how much he wanted it. Things had gone too far, and people were already broken. Even if he could paste them back together, there would still be scars where sadness cut deep. Cracks in their skin where shock struck them. Seams where Arthur could try to stitch them closed.

So Arthur took the cup of tea Alfred handed to him. He smiled at his parents – so broken, so shattered. Trying so hard to hold onto their damaged, hazy son. He took a drink of tea. His chest felt tight, but he laughed when his parents laughed. He didn’t hear the joke, but he smiled with them. For them.

“Is it good, Arthur?” His father asked with a hint of hesitation. Arthur looked at his father blankly, and George motioned to the cup of tea that was nestled between Arthur’s hands. “The tea. Is it helping the nerves?”

“Yes, of course,” Arthur murmured. His cheeks felt hot. His eyes were heavy with tears. But Arthur smiled and nodded. “I feel much better now.” He smiled at his mother and father, nodding again thankfully as he whispered, “Thank you so much.”
Chapter End Notes

If you can find my reference to another fic I wrote, congratulations. Thank you for reading! See you next chapter!
The morning went slowly for Arthur. Alfred tried to distract him from the oncoming funeral; letting him take the first shower, flipping the channels on the telly when Arthur came downstairs until they found something Arthur liked, and quietly making French toast when Arthur mumbled that he was hungry. It was a sweet thing for him to do, but Arthur couldn’t help but still feel the difficult tension in the air.

Arthur was quiet, and Alfred let him be such. He allowed the silence to hang in the air like a living thing, manifesting all of the discomfort in the room and shaping its grotesque form around sadness and anger alike to create a writhing, agonizing feeling that stained the air a disgusting shade of unhappiness. Arthur’s fingers clenched around a lukewarm cup of tea as he watched Alfred go about his morning routine, ignoring the very obvious elephant in the room. He collected unidentified papers that were scattered around the living room, shuffling them into a neat pile and leaving them on the far corner of the small coffee table. He straightened his chair – Arthur noticed he did this every morning, leaving it a few degrees different from the former morning – and went to the bathroom to shave and brush his teeth. Arthur remained on the sofa, wiggling his fingers and feeling the catch of syrup on his fingertips. He absentmindedly licked at the stickiness as the weatherman blindly indicated to rain in the near future. Rain again.

It seemed there was a comforting side to remaining in Seattle. Rain was a familiar thing. Reminded him of his short youth growing up in the English countryside. Cool and foggy mornings, seeing his grandparents in bustling city of London, and absorbing the rain into his skin like it was part of his DNA. Arthur blinked tiredly. How did he remember that? How could he just blandly remember boring bits of his childhood, but not the man he was assumedly in love with?

The questions went unanswered as Alfred called from the bathroom, “I laid some black clothes out on the bed for you,” his voice was muffled. Nearly strangled. He was brushing his teeth, and his discomfort made his tones ring strangely around his toothbrush. Arthur stared down at the tea in his hands as Alfred said, “Just pick whatever looks the most comfortable.”

That would be an impossible task. Nothing would be the ‘most comfortable.’ Not today. He was going to a funeral for a former brother. Someone he knew that he once loved very dearly. A brother that he dedicated a book to… one that he had tried to keep safe and stop him from driving drunk. A brother that died because Arthur couldn’t stop him. Arthur’s stomach churned unhappily, but he slid himself off of the sofa anyway, leaving the cool cup of tea on a coaster before he trudged up the stairs.

True to his word, Alfred had left the dreariest articles of clothing from which Arthur had to choose. A black, button down shirt. Very formal. Almost distant. Arthur mused it would be too cold without a proper jacket. And a warm, woolen jumper that had smoky, gray undertones woven into the fabric. Arthur plucked it from the duvet and scratched his fingernails across the sweater. He could wear the bland, pressed trousers with it. Yes, that would be fine.

Obediently trying to follow Alfred’s example and get ready for his brother’s funeral – too soon, too quick, too young to die – Arthur removed his cotton nightshirt and threw it into the hamper. His head swam a bit, but Arthur ignored it as he pulled on a grey undershirt and reached for the black, woolen jumper. He’s barely gotten the piece of clothing over his head before he let out a sharp cry.
The jumper was caught on his bandages. It pulled at the gauze wrapped around his forehead which, in turn, pulled at the hair and skin which was matted to his stitches. It was like someone was trying to rip fistfuls of hair from his scalp, cutting down into his skin as they did so.

“A-Alfred!” Arthur called shakily, his hands still caught inside the jumper and hanging motionless in the air above him. He must look like a fool. Like a child that got lost in a shirt much too big for them. But when he tried to move, to lower his arms or raise them, it pulled at the bandage. Tears stung at his eyes as he struggled with himself for a moment. Perhaps it was like a Band-Aid. If he could just move fast enough, the pain wouldn’t be too great and everything would be fine. With trembling hands, Arthur pushed his arms through the sleeves and grasped the end of the jumper, fully prepared to pull down on the shirt with all his might.

That was, until he heard footsteps on the stairs. Pounding steps that raced toward Arthur. Through the muffling wool, Arthur could hear Alfred breathing heavily as he ascended to the second floor and tore into the bedroom.

“Arthur,” he breathed, halting his progression as he most likely gave Arthur a strange look. “Did you call me? You sounded pretty scared.”

Arthur felt his cheeks burn shamefully as he plucked at the jumper sadly. His head was still stuck inside the sweater, almost as if he was hiding. He could only imagine how stupid he looked. But Alfred never called him stupid, and he didn’t try to pull down the jumper without Arthur’s say so.

Arthur sighed, “I’m stuck.”

A pause, and then a slight inhale before Alfred repeated, “You’re stuck.”

More hot tears burned at Arthur’s eyes, but they were more angry than painful as he reached up and tried to unlatch the wool from the scratchy, caught bandages. “It’s… it’s stuck on the bandage, here. It’s pulling at the stitches. I… my hands are shaking, Alfred. I can’t get it off…”

There was a low sound, almost like a soft rumble of air as Alfred stepped forward to push Arthur’s hands away. He was laughing. Arthur’s cheeks felt hot at the sound, but he didn’t comment on the reaction as Alfred worked on releasing Arthur from his woolen prison. His hands worked deftly. Carefully. As if Arthur was a delicate, glass ornament that would break if he pulled or pushed too hard. Before long, Alfred gently pulled the jumper down over Arthur’s face, only pausing when Arthur winced so he could stretch the fabric away from Arthur’s sore cheek or neck.

From there, the jumper settled easily on Arthur’s shoulders, leaving Arthur to look up at Alfred through watery eyes. The stitches still stung, and the pain echoed over his forehead unhappily, but at least his face wasn’t buried in itchy, hot wool. The sleeves of the jumper enveloped his knuckles. Too big. But comforting, nonetheless.

Alfred’s voice was barely a whisper as he brushed a bit of hair from Arthur’s forehead. “Better?”

Arthur nodded, feeling the few inches between them shrink as he swung his hands to and fro just a bit. “It’s too big. The sleeves are too long.”

“That’s the way you like it,” Alfred smiled, smoothing a hand through Arthur’s hair a bit more. It was soothing, so Arthur allowed the touch. “That used to be my sweater, ya know.”

“Really?” Arthur glanced down at the jumper with a speculative eye. The shoulders were a bit
stretched out, and the hem dangled below his waist. It was believable. “Why am I wearing it, then?”

Alfred shrugged. “You like my smell. Or something like that.” Arthur felt his cheeks grow a bit warm when Alfred turned away to find a plain, black tie. He spoke to the closet as he turned up his collar and wrapped a tie around his neck. “Besides, you like cozy sweaters in the fall and sweater vests in the summer… you’re a sweater kinda guy.”

Wrinkling his nose at that, Arthur smoothed a hand down the front of his jumper. A ‘sweater kinda guy?’ It would explain the inordinate amount of jumpers in his chest of drawers. Furthermore, the heat was heartening. The warm fabrics always held him fondly, supportively… they were a comforting brand of clothing.

Ducking away from the bedroom to brush his teeth and somehow tame his unruly hair, Arthur glared at himself in the mirror. Did he always look so disagreeable? Perhaps if he could just remove the ridiculous bandages, he wouldn’t look so fragile… or maybe, he wouldn’t look so damaged.

Working through his hair and quickly freshening up, Arthur met Alfred in the kitchen. The American had a cup of coffee clenched tightly between two hands, and he stared out of the kitchen window restlessly, as if he was expecting something horrible to happen on the street in a matter of seconds. Arthur cleared his throat uneasily, gaining his attention.

“So,” he started softly, holding his arms out in a vague show of his appearance. “How do I look? Well enough to go out in public?”

After a long minute of inspection, Alfred took a sip of coffee and smiled. It was distant. Almost as if Arthur was a stranger standing in his kitchen. But he smiled nonetheless.

“You look perfect.”

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Arthur shifted uneasily in his seat. The dusty church pews offered little support, and without cushions on the seats, Arthur suspected that he would be just as comfortable stuffed into his brother’s coffin. Next to him, Alfred let out a long, shuddering exhale that rattled Arthur’s heart. The poor man looked exhausted and it was barely noon.

To the right of Arthur and Alfred, Arthur’s parents sat quiet and sniffling as other friends and colleagues of Alistair trickled into the church. The air was heavy with mourning, but Arthur couldn’t find it in himself to join in with the sad atmosphere. Everything simply made him uncomfortable. Each creak of a pew an aisle away, every murmur of greeting from one woman to another, and even Arthur’s parents leaning in close to whisper to one another… it was all just assault on his senses as he tried to recall any memories of the strangers.

The only constant in the entire church was Alfred. He sat with a stony expression and his hands clasped together in his lap, staring straight ahead with steeled determination. Arthur paused his scan of the church every now and then to give Alfred a sidelong glance, admiring his ability to remain still and not crack beneath all of the memories and emotions he held for Alistair.

From what he’d gathered, Alfred and Alistair had gotten along quite well. In Alfred’s photo albums – meticulously put together by Arthur’s mother as a gift – he and Alistair had been depicted together often. Playing rugby in front of Arthur’s old house, Alfred and Arthur with their arms draped over Alistair’s shoulders when he graduated university, and even a few picture of the
two young men playing pranks on one another. If Arthur hadn’t known better, he would assume
that Alfred was in love with Alistair and not him.

But, the pictures of Alfred gazing lovingly at Arthur far outnumbered the pictures of
Alistair and Alfred roughhousing. It was comforting in some aspects, but also a little
disheartening… the amount of pictures including Alistair sharply declined after he had graduated.
There were a few of his wedding with a lovely woman named Marie, but they were quickly
overshadowed by pictures of Seamus graduating. Then there were pictures of Arthur’s older sister,
Delilah, and then… no more Alistair. It was as if he didn’t exist anymore.

Before he died, he simply faded out of his family. Drifting further and further away until
his existence was nothing but an echo in an old photo.

Arthur could only imagine how painful it must’ve been for everyone that cared for him.
He heartbreaking it must’ve been to witness such a bright young man come to such an abrupt end.
He could imagine it, but he couldn’t feel it. He was missing too much. There was a large gap in his
memory containing Alistair, and no matter how much he looked at Alistair’s friends, he couldn’t
piece anything else together.

Fiddling with the cuff of his sweater sleeve, Arthur leaned to his right to whisper to
Alfred, “Alfred, how long do we need to stay?”

“What?” Alfred broke himself out of his silent trance to give Arthur a questioning look.
“Well, I figured we’d… we’d stay until the end of the service. Why? Is something wrong? Does
your head hurt?”

Arthur shook his head once, feeling his stitches burn and itch. “No, no… nothing like
that. I’m just,” Arthur glanced at the several strangers lining the pews behind them. “I’m just a
little overwhelmed.”

Alfred reached a hand over to pat the top of Arthur’s knee comfortably. “Okay. If it’s
too much, we can leave. You just say the word, and we’ll leave.”

Giving a noncommittal hum, Arthur leaned forward to sneak a glance at his parents. His
mother’s eyes were red with tears and his father held her hand with a steadfast grip as he struggled
to keep quiet as a few, disheartened tears rolled down his cheeks. Both were heartbroken, and both
were quiet. Arthur wished he could comfort them, but to him, they were still strangers. So he sat
back in his seat and sighed as Alfred pat his knee again.

“Arthur!” Arthur jolted in his seat when he heard someone call his name, low and
hissing, through the aisles of the church. High-pitched, a tad abrasive… a woman’s voice? A
friend of his? Turning to look over his shoulder, he saw a lovely blonde woman slipping through
the rows of pews to reach him. “Arthur,” she breathed as she reached his side and sat down next to
him, “Arthur, oh my god… You look horrible!”

Arthur blinked slowly. What a perfectly horrid way to greet someone at a funeral.
Feeling Alfred grip his knee a little tighter, Arthur licked his lips and mumbled, “I’m not sure how
to respond to that.”

The strange woman waved her hand at the statement and reached forward to envelope
Arthur in a hug. Alfred’s hand was slipped from his knee as Arthur shifted to accommodate the
woman’s weight atop his own. Their heads knocked together clumsily, and Arthur flinched and bit
his tongue as his stitches pulled and stung. The girl didn’t notice. She simply pat his back with
enough force to make Arthur’s sore muscles cry.
“Poor baby… the accident must’ve been horrible! I wish I was there for you at the hospital…”

Wincing at the feeling of his stitches giving away, Arthur awkwardly tried to push himself away from the stranger. “It’s quite all right, Miss…?”

The girl sat back abruptly. “Arthur, don’t you dare say you don’t remember me.” Arthur didn’t reply to the threat, and the girl leaned over to hiss at Arthur’s parents, “Mummy, you were right! He doesn’t remember a thing. I thought you were exaggerating.”

Mummy? If they had the same mother, they were brother and sister. Arthur’s brain flickered in recognition; this woman was his older sister, Delilah. The one who didn’t like Alfred. He’d seen her picture before, but her hair had been cut and styled differently from the last photograph he’d seen.

Delilah took her time combing her fingers through Arthur’s hair, not paying attention to the pained expression that came to Arthur’s face when she pat Arthur’s bandages.

“You poor little poppet…” she murmured. “Look at you, all beat up!”

“Aren’t you holding him a little too tight?” Grumbled Alfred with a hint of irritation. Arthur gave a sigh of relief as his sister loosened her grip to give Alfred a hard stare.

“You don’t really have the right to say something like that to me,” she whispered back, trying to keep their conversation private from the other funeral attendees. Arthur felt extremely awkward being caught between them, but didn’t dare to comment on his discomfort as Delilah pointedly said, “You’re the one that whisked Arthur away to the other side of the city two years ago,” she narrowed her eyes. “Farther from Alistair and I.”

Arthur turned his gaze to Alfred, seeing a glimmer of worry flicker in those blue, blue eyes before Alfred blinked it away. Had Alfred been keeping Arthur from his family? Was that why Alfred didn’t help with Alistair? Shaking his head once, Arthur pushed that idea from his head; Alfred and Alistair had gotten along swimmingly from what he’d seen in the photo albums. Certainly, Delilah was just exaggerating to get a rise out of Alfred… wasn’t she?

Before Arthur could work himself into a further state of panic, Alfred huffed and shook his head. “First of all, moving uptown was Arthur’s choice, not mine. Second, I’m not smothering him the way you do.”

“S-smothering?” Delilah squawked indignantly. “I’ve never –”

“Alfred, Delilah!” Arthur’s mother hissed, “This isn’t the time or the place to be arguing. Please… be respectful for Alistair.” She dabbed at her eyes for a moment before giving Arthur a sad look. “I’m sure this is very difficult for Arthur, too.”

Yes, it is. Arthur wanted to say. I miss my brother. I remember everything about him. But he couldn’t say it… he couldn’t remember anything. So he sat quietly as Delilah scooted closer to his side and held his hand tightly. He wished her presence was comforting, but it was merely off-putting.

“Oh, Alistair… that poor man,” Delilah murmured to herself as she pat Arthur’s hand. Next to him, Alfred heaved a hollow sigh. Delilah pat Arthur’s hand again. “God bless his soul. That poor, poor man.”
Trying to stay passive in the situation, Arthur remained quiet and observed the rest of the people that entered the church. Men and women that Arthur had never seen stood in the back of the church, whispering lowly to each other. Every single person tried to be quiet, but whispers echoed like shouts in the rafters, and Arthur heard eerie repetitions of his former brother’s name as the seconds crawled by.

His stomach twisted anxiously, and he instinctively reached for Alfred’s hand in search of comfort. Alfred sat still as Arthur laced their fingers together and held tight, only returning the pressure a few minutes later in a dazed reaction.

Sitting quietly with his hand tightly clenched in Alfred’s, Arthur worried his lip as his mother and sister whispered to each other lowly. He was distracted by another voice. It was soft, and almost delicate… a child’s voice? Calling for someone. Arthur squeezed Alfred’s hand, hoping it would ground him, but the sound didn’t dissipate.

Glancing over his shoulder, Arthur tried to find the source of the voice. A young child… a boy? Why would someone allow such a young child to be running around a funeral calling for someone? The harder Arthur looked around, the louder and more persistent the voice became. Warbling. Fearful. Echoing. Almost impossible to understand.


Arthur opened his mouth to disagree, but the child’s voice echoed again. Louder, now. As if the child was calling from deep inside Arthur’s bones. Crying. Desperately trying to be heard. But Arthur couldn’t understand what it was saying.

He leaned close to Alfred. “Do you hear that?” Alfred pulled a puzzled face, and Arthur flinched when the voice repeated itself, unintelligible and frightened. Arthur grasped Alfred’s coat sleeve with his free hand and tugged fervently, “Don’t you hear that?”

“What?” Alfred hissed, “What am I supposed to be hearing?”

“Alistair!” Arthur closed his eyes tight as the voice rang true for the first time, “Alistair, wait for me!”

There, behind the canvas of Arthur’s eyelids, he could see a wide, open field. The sky looked vast and unreachable. The grasses were tall and swaying. Arthur stood at the bottom of a hill, staring out at this beautiful world. It was warm. It was kind. Surely, this was a safe place.

Far ahead, a young boy stood waving at Arthur, beckoning him forward.

“Come on, you lot!” The boy called, his flaming red hair gleaming in the sun. That hair was wild and untamable. Even with distance, Arthur could tell that leaves were caught in those mussed locks. He couldn’t have been older than twelve. “Arthur, if you want me to carry you, you’ll have to catch me!”

The world spun and light ricocheted off of the grass as Arthur began to run. He had to catch up. To play. To be free. There were no frightening things, here. No funerals to fear. No unattainable memories. Everything safe. Arthur was safe.

“Wait!” Arthur yelled, hearing his own voice come out as young and shrill. He was a child. Hardly out of diapers, it would seem. So small and fragile as he tried to push his way through
the tall grass. Two other children met the red-haired boy at the top of the hill, laughing and pushing each other as Arthur struggled to make his way. The young girl spun in circles as the boys celebrated their victorious climb. “Alistair!” Arthur whined, reaching up for the tall boy that called to him before. “Alistair! I want to come, too! Wait for me!”

Before Arthur had managed to climb halfway up the hill, Alistair and the other children had started their descent on the other side, leaving Arthur to huff and puff at the sight of an empty summit. That was his brother, Alistair? The tallest? The happiest? The one that laughed the loudest? Arthur had always assumed that Alistair had been kind.

Why did Alistair leave him behind?

“Alistair! Alistair, wait! Mummy said to take me with you!” Reasoned the young, frightened Arthur. He didn’t like to be alone. He was used to his siblings always surrounding him. Protecting him. Clawing his way up the hill, Arthur panicked. “A-Alistair! Delilah! Seamus! Come back! Don’t leave me!”

“Hold on, now…” Alistair said as he returned to the top of the hill, grinning down at Arthur with his green eyes glittering. “Whoever said we were gonna leave you?”

Arthur sniffled sadly as he struggled up the hill on small legs, his hands grabbing at grass and using it to pull himself forward. “You said I have to catch you… an’ I’m not fast enough!”

Pursing his lips, Alistair nodded thoughtfully at the statement. “Yeah… but you don’t have to be such a crybaby.” Arthur frowned at that, but blinked when Alistair held out his hand. “Come on. You can catch me.”

Feeling a smile come to his face, Arthur reached out his hand – his hand so small, his fingers still pudgy – and grasped Alistair’s hand. “Got you!” Arthur declared happily.

“Yeah,” Alistair nodded as he pulled Arthur up, into his arms. His grin could brighten the darkest night as he looked out across the fields beyond them. “You got me.”

Wrenching his eyes open, Arthur quickly registered the sound of people talking nervously. Alfred? His mother? Alistair? No… Alistair was dead. He’d never hear that voice again.

Trying to observe his surroundings, Arthur quickly saw the ceiling of the church. Was he lying back on the pew? Or was he on the ground? Alfred loomed over him, fanning him with a bible as Arthur’s mother frantically asked someone to bring cold water.

“Arthur? Arthur, baby… are you okay?” Alfred asked quickly, waving the bible to and fro in a desperate attempt to cool Arthur down. Arthur gave a hazy blink of recognition.

“Wh-what?” He asked, seeing Delilah in his peripheral vision. She was chattering into the receiver of a cell phone, pushing her golden hair from her eyes as she glanced at Arthur every few seconds. The church was on its side. The pews were taller than him. He was on the floor? Arthur blinked slowly. “What happened?”

Alfred sighed. “You passed out, sweetheart. You fell right into my lap.”

Arthur’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. He’d remembered something. Something about Alistair. Perhaps his body was coming to terms with the fact that it hurt to remember things. His body had been prepared for the pain, and simply sent the signal to Arthur’s brain to make him
pass out. To relax every muscle so that nothing would hurt. In a way, it was almost comforting.
Almost.

“I passed out,” Arthur said softly, lifting a hand to his forehead to feel at his bandages. The large, cotton gauze was still covering the scar above his left eye, and Arthur was pleased to note that there was no new bleeding. “I feel dizzy.”

“Yeah,” Alfred nodded, “Delilah’s on the phone with the hospital. We’re gonna take you in.”

Arthur didn’t like the idea of going back. All of the doctors and nurses and nosy policemen… Arthur didn’t want that. He shook his head.

“No. No, I’d rather not.” His head swam as he disagreed, but he tried to will it away. “I don’t need to go back to the hospital.”

Alfred huffed and continued to fan Arthur softly. “Arthur, right now, you’re not really the person to make that call.”

“Yes, I am.” Arthur fought back, “I’m the only one that knows what’s happening in my head.”

“But you’re not a doctor, Arthur. There might be bleeding. There might be swelling. Maybe that’s what’s causing these bad headaches you keep getting.”

Scowling, Arthur grabbed the bible Alfred was fanning him with and put it on the ground. “My headaches occur when I remember something. That’s all.”

“But there might be more to it, darling,” Arthur’s mother chimed softly. “We’re worried about you.”

“We’ve already lost one son,” Arthur’s father said gravely as he stood over Arthur with a dark expression, “We can’t bear to lose you, too.”

“But the service,” Arthur sputtered, fighting to sit up as Alfred kept him down with a firm hand on his shoulder. “I’ve… I’ve interrupted everything.”

Alfred shook his head with a soft smile. “It’s okay.”

“Arthur struggled to sit up as a wave of vertigo hit him. “N-no, it’s not. It’s not okay,” said Arthur as he forced himself into a sitting position. The floor tilted as his vision went a bit hazy, but Arthur grit his teeth and spat, “This is a funeral for my brother. This isn’t supposed to be about me!”

Alfred sighed. “Honey, I know you wanna be respectful. But we can’t ignore these symptoms. You have to go to the hospital.”

“Stop telling me that you know what I’m feeling,” Arthur grumbled in frustration. In front of him, Alfred stiffened. Arthur gave him a sharp look. “You don’t know how this feels.”

While Alfred paused to consider Arthur’s statement, several of the funeral attendees whispered to each other lowly. They pointed at Arthur’s clothes. They wondered about his bandages. But no one came forward with a question or suggestion. None were brae enough to ask if he remembered accident. None were strong enough to hear the answer.
When Alfred replied, it was accompanied by a genuinely sad smile. “I want to understand. I really do. Buy your safety comes first. Other than that,” Alfred spread his hands in a small gesture of helplessness. “You have to tell me. Because you’re right. I don’t know how you feel.”

Casting a wary glance at the people around him, Arthur noted that his parents looked terrified. They were struggling with the unimaginable reality of their eldest son dying, and now their youngest son was denying help. Arthur felt guilt settle unhappily in his stomach. He looked to Alfred for help, but he merely gained a longing, worried stare. Arthur’s chest tightened.

“If you think I should go,” Arthur said slowly, “Then… I suppose… I’ll go to the hospital.”

A sigh of relief echoed through the church as nearly everyone smiled. Delilah held her phone to her chest. Arthur’s parents took each other’s hands and held tight. And Alfred… Alfred gave Arthur a hopelessly grateful smile.

Alfred’s eyes glittered with tears as he whispered, “Thank you.”

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“This is completely unnecessary,” Arthur said as he laid perfectly still in a ct scanner. “I’m fine, really. I’m sure this is ridiculously expensive. You’re wasting your money.”

Alfred’s voice came to Arthur through a crackling speaker. “You let me worry about the money, Arthur.” Arthur swore he heard a chuckle. “That should be the least of your worries right now.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “What should I worry about? Becoming radioactive?”

“I’d worry about your brain hemorrhaging,” Dr. Vargas ordered brightly. “Lay still, please.”

Another eye roll. “That’s highly unlikely, Dr. Vargas.”

Alfred laughed into the speaker. “Who’s the doctor here? You or her?”

“Both!” Dr. Vargas giggled alongside Alfred as Arthur struggled to hold still.

He was getting claustrophobic and the dull banter of his husband and doctor wasn’t nearly as comforting as he wanted it to be. It was a miracle that the doctor’s had allowed Alfred to sit in the monitor room while Arthur’s brain was scanned. It was even more unbelievable that Dr. Vargas just happened to be passing by when she saw Arthur.

“Passereto!” She had chirped as Arthur was plopped into a wheelchair and rolled to the ct room. She held onto Arthur’s shoulder as they walked. “I didn’t think you’d be back. You look so pale! What happened, hmm?” She smiled down at Arthur with her golden-brown gaze. “You tell Felicia, and I will make it better.”

Arthur huffed and clasped his hands together in his lap. “I blacked out.”

“Oh, dear…” Dr. Vargas fretted.

Alfred, who had been walking behind their little procession, chimed in, “At his brother’s funeral. He just keeled over. Right into my lap. He was lucky I caught him, or he would’ve
slammed his head right into the floor.”

“Oh, dear!” Dr. Vargas repeated owlishly. She pat Arthur’s shoulder softly. “Poor Arthur… poor, poor Arthur…” Arthur had made a point to dramatically roll his eyes, but Dr. Vargas wasn’t paying attention. She merely pat Arthur’s shoulder again and again. “What an awful place to have an accident. A funeral? It’s just so sad…”

“Yes. Terribly depressing,” Arthur had agreed. “It’s even more depressing when you have to be carried away from the funeral on a stretcher before the service even begins.”

Alfred jogged to walk on Arthur’s right side to say, “It’s for your own good. We’re just lookin’ out for you, Arthur.”

On Arthur’s left side, Dr. Vargas sighed blissfully, “Isn’t it nice that you have such a handsome husband who cares about you?”

Arthur glanced back at the awkward nurse that was pushing his wheelchair. The poor man looked incredibly confused. Arthur gave him a sympathetic smile before he said, “Oh, yes. I’m so very lucky.”

The rest of the route to the ct room was simply Alfred and Dr. Vargas chatting about how Arthur had been doing over the past few days. His diet, his routine, his energy levels. On and on they went until Arthur was finally wheeled into the room and laid back on the cool, plastic panel that would slide him into the machine. Dr. Vargas and Alfred had proceeded to sit in the screening room.

“We’ll be right here,” Alfred had promised Arthur through the small speaker that linked the screening room to the inside of the machine. “You can talk to us if you get nervous.”

And they had remained there for at least twenty minutes, tossing playful quips and remarks back and forth as Arthur fought to remain still. Their constant chatter was distracting, but the inside of the machine was also a tad loud. It whirred and clunked, and every so often, Arthur was worried he heard a strange, metallic ringing that didn’t sound quite right.

Arthur tried to focus on the voices of his husband and the doctor, only to realize they were gone. Arthur blinked hard, trying to will his ears to work again. The whirring of the machine continued, and the vague clicking of parts still echoed, but the only outside connection he had with others was gone. Arthur began to panic. Where was Alfred? He said that he’d be right there. He was talking just a moment ago. Had Arthur fainted again? Was he even in the same room? Had everyone left, assuming he wouldn’t notice?

“Alfred?” Arthur asked quietly. The machine was too loud. Maybe they couldn’t hear him. Arthur took a strangled breath and repeated, “A-Alfred?”

There was a static click before Alfred’s voice rang, “Yeah? I’m here. What’s wrong?”

Arthur let out a sigh of relief. “I… I thought you left.”

“Dr. Vargas had to leave,” Alfred answered nonchalantly. “She has another patient to worry about. She must’ve hit the button before she left, because I’ve still been talking to you.”

“Were you?” Arthur asked, “I couldn’t hear you.”

A soft, static-filled chuckle rang in the scanner. “No worries, Arthur. I’m still here.”
“Good.” Arthur said solidly. “Good. Don’t leave.”

“I don’t plan to, sweetheart.” A pause, then Alfred sighed, “Dang it. Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that… I meant ‘Arthur.’ Not sweetheart. I know you don’t want me sayin’ that stuff yet.”

Arthur shrugged a bit before he remembered he needed to hold still. He flattened himself back into a comfortable position. “It’s all right. From the sound of it, you use those little terms often.”

Alfred laughed at that. “Yeah, I do. It’s a habit.”

“It’s a nice habit,” Arthur smiled.

With that, they fell into a comfortable silence as the scan continued. Every few moments, Arthur would call for Alfred, hearing a gentle, “I’m still here,” in response. It was much more comforting than listening to Alfred and Dr. Vargas chat listlessly. He had Alfred’s undivided attention. When he spoke, Alfred listened. When he asked a question, Alfred was ready with an answer. It was a soothing constant.

After about twenty minutes, Arthur wiggled his fingers and said, “I remembered Alistair. At the funeral. That’s why I fainted.”

There was a moment of silence before the connection crackled and Alfred murmured, “Yeah?”

Arthur licked his lips and hummed. “I remembered something from when we were children. He was a good brother.”

Alfred was quiet when he said, “Yeah.”


Another pause before Alfred replied. “He was a good guy. A really good guy. He looked out for you. You were his baby brother.”

Arthur ignored the single tear that rolled back into his hair. “And now he’s gone.”

“Well…” Alfred hesitated, his voice coming through as muffled and unsure. “Actually, I think Alistair… he’s been gone for a while.”

Taking a deep breath, Arthur closed his eyes and ordered, “Explain.”

“When he started drinking,” Alfred took a deep breath, and Arthur could almost imagine he was fidgeting with his glasses anxiously. “He changed. He wasn’t the same after that.”

“Why did he start drinking?” Arthur wondered, pinching his fingers together restlessly. “Why didn’t we try to stop him? Or help him?”

“We did try,” Alfred assured quickly. “But he didn’t want to listen. It all started a long time ago… Alistair was married to a really nice girl. Marie. She was a sweetheart. Everybody loved Marie.” He took a deep, crackling breath. “She and Alistair were gonna have a baby. He was really excited about it, too. I remember…” Alfred laughed to himself for a moment, but the amusement was short-lived when he sighed and said, “But… Marie went into labor, and the baby was in distress. The doctors tried to fix things, but…”
Arthur’s eyes snapped open as he remembered the book he’d read only a few days ago. It had been dedicated to Alistair. “She died. She and the baby… it’s just like that book I wrote.”

“Yeah, you wrote that book for Alistair.” Alfred explained. “After it happened, he got really distant. He… well, losing Marie broke his heart. We tried to get him to talk to a therapist, but he only went to one appointment. You decided to write that book for him in hopes that you could give him some closure. In the end, you had the main character confide in his family and get help for his depression.”

Arthur frowned. “It didn’t work.”

“Ha! No, it… it really didn’t. Alistair showed up on our doorstep and threw the book at you. He was really pissed… said that you were telling him how to live his life.”

“I was trying to help!” Arthur said desperately, irritated that he wasn’t allowed to move in the machine. “Wasn’t I? He had to know that I just wanted to help.”

Alfred sighed again. “You were, Arthur. I know you had good intentions. But Alistair wasn’t in his right mind. He was angry at the world. He didn’t want to accept that Marie was gone.”

Arthur could understand the unhappiness. If Arthur loved someone as much as Alistair loved Marie, losing them would be the saddest moment of his life. Arthur thought for a moment… did he love Alfred as much as Alistair loved Marie? Were they just as close before Arthur lost his memory? Arthur gasped in realization; was Alfred depressed because Arthur had forgotten everything? Arthur hadn’t seen him drinking… but Alfred could be just as sad.

“Alfred?” He asked carefully, hoping to sound as comforting as he could.

“Yes, I’m still here.”

“Are you sad that I’m gone?” Arthur worried, hearing another metallic click as the machine worked. Alfred didn’t answer. Arthur tried again, “Are you angry at the world because I can’t remember? Because you’ve lost me?”

“Woah, woah,” Alfred said with a smile in his voice, “Let’s not start something like that. I’m a little sad, yeah. But… you’re still you, Arthur. You’ve got your memories in your brain. They’re just taking a while to come back.” Alfred chuckled a bit before he said, “You’re not gone. I haven’t lost you. You’re alive, and that’s what matters.”

“I’m still me,” Arthur agreed softly, feeling a hesitant smile come to his lips. “I’m still me.”

“That’s right,” Alfred said with a small sigh, “The doctor here says that it’ll be just a little longer.”

Arthur wiggled his thumbs impatiently and hummed in acknowledgement. A little bit longer in the machine didn’t sound too terrible. Alfred had been effectively keeping him company, he’d learned a little more about his former brother, and was given a handful of comfort from his husband. Regardless of the fact the trip to the hospital was most likely unnecessary, it was exponentially better than having to sit through his estranged brother’s funeral. There had been too many unknowns for Arthur to feel anything in the church… and then he remembered their childhood escapades.

Alistair was a loving brother. A dutiful one, Arthur was sure. ‘Caring’ and ‘kind’ were
easy description to use for Alistair… but ‘mischievous’ and ‘sly’ also came to mind when Arthur tried to peruse the concept of Alistair Kirkland. It was easy to see that he and Alfred had gotten along swimmingly; they both held a look of sparkling excitement in their eyes when they stood in the same photograph together. Wondrous, vivacious, contagious energy… Alfred and Alistair shared it.

Arthur pursed his lips; what about his other brother, Seamus? Did he hold that interesting, intoxicating ambition as well? Or was it simply limited to Alfred and Alistair?

“Alfred?” Arthur asked to the speaker that rested above his head.

“I’m still here,” Alfred answered quickly. “What’cha need?”

“Did you get along with Seamus?” Arthur wondered, hearing the machine *click* and *whirr* as he held still. “I saw that you and Alistair were close chaps, but… what about Seamus?”

“Oh, yeah! We were all pretty good pals. Your brothers all made a point to play nice with us,” Alfred laughed a bit, “Most of the time, I’m pretty sure they were just humoring us. You were always my best friend though. You’ve always been my best friend.”

Arthur felt butterflies flutter in his stomach at the statement, but didn’t dare to comment on the new discovery. Instead, he focused on the fact that Alfred only mentioned Arthur’s brothers. Perhaps this was what he meant when he said Delilah didn’t like him.

“And… Delilah?” Arthur asked nonchalantly, hoping to seem as open and carefree as possible. Alfred must not have notice the pensive lilt in his voice, because he merely sighed.

“Your family came to America when you were ten years old. Back in England, you guys lived out in the country; you pretty much kept to yourselves.” Alfred paused to think, and Arthur closed his eyes to remember the grassy hills that he and his siblings had run through. They were alone, playing in the great, open grass of the highland hills. Alfred’s voice brought him back to reality. “Delilah liked it when you guys were together. When you started hanging out with me, she didn’t like it… she said I was breaking up your family bonds or whatever,” Alfred huffed, and Arthur smiled a bit. “After a while, she made it clear that she just didn’t like me hanging out with you. I guess I upset the balance that she liked.”

“I can see that,” Arthur said with a grin. “I only spoke to her for a moment at the funeral, but she seemed to have a very one-track mind.”

Alfred laughed at that. “Well, when it comes to you, she’s pretty damn protective, I’ll give you that.”

Before Arthur could ask any other probing questions about his siblings, the CT scanner gave one final *clunk* and went quiet. Over the speaker, a new voice said, “All right, Mr. Kirkland. Your scan is done. We’ll come and get you out of there now.”

This was comforting news to a man that felt like he was being suffocated. But within a few minutes, Arthur was out of the scanner and in a wheelchair with his hands complacently folded in his lap. Instead of a strange doctor, Alfred was the one to steer Arthur around the halls and to an open room filled with cots and patients.

Arthur had been in intensive care the last time he’d visited… this must’ve just been the emergency room. There were children coughing and women badgering doctors for their poor medical skills. A few men were bickering over who threw the first punch while young doctors
carefully stitched up their torn knuckles. It was lively and loud… a little too loud. Arthur felt a headache begin to spike at his temples as Alfred steered his wheelchair to an empty cot.

“We just have to wait here for a bit,” Alfred said as he held out his hand for Arthur.

Taking the hand, Arthur moved from the wheelchair to the cot. He was sitting next to a young woman with an impressive burn that marked halfway up her arm. She gave him a nonchalant smile. Arthur struggled to return the expression as he tried to ignore the bloodied, blackened flesh of her arm.

Instead, Arthur chose to admire Alfred and all his calmness. His eyes were gentle when he smiled at Arthur and sat in a chair aside the bed. His hands weren’t clenched in his lap like Arthur’s, and when he looked around at the ER, he didn’t look nearly as distraught as Arthur was feeling. A few feet away, a baby cried, and Alfred’s expression took a sad turn, but his tranquil smile was refreshed when someone soothed the infant.

Clearing his throat, Arthur tried to distract himself from the bustling hospital. “So,” he began oddly. What should he say? What was he supposed to do at a time like this? “Have you visited hospitals often?”

Arthur could feel his brain slapping itself for the stupidity of the question, but Alfred merely laughed at the question. He seemed so relaxed. So easygoing in such a restless atmosphere. Arthur wished he could be so calm.

“When I was a kid, I would be in the hospital a couple times a month,” he said with a thoughtful nod. “But once I became a teenager, I think my parents stopped trying to look like they cared.” Alfred shrugged. “I guess they got tired of putting up the act.”

“They… they hurt you, didn’t they?”

Alfred nodded. “Yeah, they did.”

Arthur winced. “Often?”

“Often enough that the every single doctor and nurse knew my name, age, and blood type by heart when I was six,” he still had that smile on his lips, like it was frozen in place as he idly spoke of his abusive parents. “I think… when I turned nine, several doctors showed up at my school to give me a toy truck…” Alfred looked wistful as he muttered, “My parents forgot it was my birthday, that year.”

With a barbed feeling clawing at his heart, Arthur reached across the gap between them to place his hand atop Alfred’s. “That’s awful,” he said softly, seeing Alfred’s smile waver for a moment. “That’s just horrible… I’m so sorry.”

Alfred shrugged. “It seemed normal to me at the time.” He looked up at Arthur with a genuine smile sparkling in his blue, blue eyes. “And then you transferred into my elementary school.”

Something felt tight in Arthur’s chest as he looked at Alfred’s smile. He was so sure that something had changed when Arthur arrive at his school. He was so sure… so impossibly trusting. Arthur found the passionate stare almost naïve… but he smiled back nonetheless.

“Did I help you?” Arthur asked hopefully, “Did I help… at least a little bit?”

“Yeah,” Alfred nodded, taking Arthur’s hand and squeezing it. “Without you, things woulda turned out pretty shabby.”
“Mr. Kirkland?” A new voice called, pulling Alfred and Arthur from their private conversation. The young man stood with a file in his hand and a hand on his hip, giving the papers a disgruntled look as he stepped up to the cot. “I’m Dr. Thompson. You’re Mr. Kirkland, right? Arthur Kirkland?”

Arthur sat up a bit straighter and tugged at the hem of his black jumper anxiously. “That’s right,” he murmured. What if the results weren’t good? What if there was something truly wrong with him, and he would have to go through another surgery? What if he didn’t make it through another surgery?

Before Arthur could fully work himself into hysteria, he felt Alfred take his hand and hold it tight again, grounding Arthur and holding him to reality as the doctor sat down on a small seat and turned over a piece of paper. His coal black hair was given a subtle glow from the florescent lights, and when he flipped over another paper, Arthur was interested to see a braided, twine bracelet tied to his wrist.

Before Arthur could observe further, the cinnamon-skinned doctor looked up and smiled. “Looks like everything is fine with your brain, Mr. Kirkland. The fainting spell probably due to the pressure of a new environment,” Arthur and Alfred shared a sigh of relief as the doctor pulled out a new paper and wrote something down. He glanced up again to ask, “Did you feel nauseous at all before the fainting? A headache? Fever?”

Arthur nodded. “A bit of a migraine,” he said softly, shrugging his shoulders. “Just a tic, I suppose.”

The doctor gave a thoughtful hum as he made a note of this. “Well, these are normal symptoms after the trauma you’ve suffered. The scan showed that nothing is going wrong with the procedure we performed. But if your fainting issue persists, we’d like you to come back in for a few more tests.” Arthur grasped Alfred’s hand desperately as the doctor stood from his chair and smiled at the couple. “In the meantime, take it easy. Try to relax. Steer clear of high-pressure situations.”

“Right,” Arthur agreed softly as Alfred murmured a ‘thank you.’

Just before the doctor turned to leave, he took a step closer to Arthur’s cot and gave him a bashful smile, “Um… just before you go, could I maybe have you sign an autograph for my little sister? She loves your books.”

Without thinking, Arthur numbly took the pen that was held out to him and scrawled his name across the sheet of paper presented to him. He signed it to a little girl named Clementine. He told the doctor it was a lovely name, and the man gave an embarrassed laugh.

“Yeah, well… she absolutely loves the stuff you write,” he said with a proud, brotherly smile. “When I go home to visit, she always wants me to read a chapter to her.”

Arthur tried to comb through what he remembered about his books. They had magic, no doubt… adventure? A story for young children, or for young adults? Arthur couldn’t recall. So he simply gave the doctor a fake smile and nodded happily.

“I’m flattered that she enjoys the stories.”

“Sure, sure,” Dr. Thompson agreed, giving Arthur a gentle pat on the shoulder. “I hope the memory issue gets better. Me and my little sister are rooting for you.”

“Thank you,” Arthur said as he walked away to get Arthur’s discharge papers. Arthur turned to
Alfred with a thin smile and said, “I need all the help I can get.”

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“Is this relaxing enough?” Alfred asked before he stuffed a handful of popcorn into his mouth. He chewed loudly, crunching through the salty, buttery popcorn as Arthur sat next to him with a bemused expression. They had been watching some sort of superhero movie marathon on the telly ever since they’d come home from the hospital.

Arthur had politely requested that they not return to the funeral, and Alfred happily obliged. From there, Alfred had gotten far too much Thai takeaway and lounged on the sofa with Arthur until the sky dimmed to a shadowy husk of the former day.

All in all, it had been the most relaxing experience Arthur had gotten since he’d woken up in the hospital. Alfred sat next to him with a smile, laughing at strange parts of the movies and munching away at his popcorn. Arthur sat snuggled under his favorite quilt – Alfred had brought it downstairs just for him. Slowly, Arthur and Alfred had shifted closer to one another, leading up to Arthur being conveniently propped against Alfred’s shoulder as the television screen flickered and glowed.

Surprisingly, Arthur was immensely comfortable being next to Alfred. Perhaps their exchange at the funeral had bridged some of the distance between them. Or maybe the hospital did it? Arthur couldn’t bring himself to care. All he knew was that he was happy leaning against Alfred and stealing a few piece of popcorn every so often.

“I’m very relaxed,” Arthur answered several minutes later, shifting so he could comfortably nestle into the crook of Alfred’s arm. “Thank you.”

“You sure?” Alfred questioned skeptically, giving Arthur a strange look where he was burrowed against Alfred’s side. “Not too cramped over here?”

“No. Are you uncomfortable?”

Alfred sputtered. “What? Me? No way! We watch movies like this all the time!” He paused, “Well, we used to... before...”

“Before the accident,” Arthur finished. “You can just say ‘the accident,’ Alfred. I’m not going to break down and cry if you mention it.”

“Eh, I’m not sure about that,” murmured Alfred as he plucked a single piece of popcorn from the bowl in his lap and tossed it into his mouth. “It seems like a sticky subject.”

“Someday it won’t be,” Arthur assured him, leaning his head against Alfred’s shoulder and closing his eyes happily. “Until then, thank you.”

Alfred didn’t move under Arthur’s weight, but he didn’t pull him closer either. “Thanks... for what?”

“For taking care of me, even if I can’t remember everything about you.”

There was a pause, and then Arthur felt Alfred’s arm snake around him and pull him close. “You don’t have to thank me for that, sweetheart. I’ll always be here for you.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you!
See you next chapter.
Arthur woke with a mouthful of cotton and a head full of ringing church bells. He winced and closed his eyes tight; his headaches had started early, today. Spitting out whatever fabric had been shoved into his mouth, Arthur was alarmed to note that his bed was moving. Rather, the bed beneath him was not even a bed. It was a man.

A particularly tall, handsome, American man.

Sitting up quickly, Arthur realized that he and Alfred had fallen asleep on the sofa together during their movie marathon. When had that happened? Arthur didn’t remember laying down atop Alfred’s chest, and he didn’t remember Alfred reclining against the side of the sofa. But there they were, with their legs tangled and Arthur’s hand braced against Alfred’s chest as he gave his husband a slow onceover.

The fabric in his mouth… it had been a bit of Alfred’s shirt. Arthur must’ve been drooling on it for a good portion of the night, considering the wet patch on Alfred’s shoulder. His husband didn’t seem to notice or care due to his lack of consciousness.

Fast asleep, Alfred snored softly as his right hand dangled over the edge of the sofa. His glasses sat skewed on his face, and Arthur imagined the nose pieces would leave small red divots in his skin when he took them off. Glancing at the clock over the telly, Arthur noted that it was seven o’clock in the morning. The television screen still flickered with dusty depictions of superheroes from the 1980’s, but Alfred must’ve muted it sometime during the night.

Looking back down at Alfred, Arthur didn’t like the idea of cuddling against him again… there was that embarrassing patch of drool that Arthur had left on his gray t-shirt. Regardless of how comfortable Alfred’s chest was, Arthur was not pressing his face into a puddle of his own drool.

“All right. Nice and easy,” Arthur grumbled to himself as he carefully slid his hand off of Alfred’s chest and twisted his legs away from Alfred’s. Beneath him, Alfred groaned and wriggled into a more comfortable position, catching Arthur and pulling him back down with a quiet, “No, no!” of protest from Arthur. Sadly, Arthur wasn’t given a choice as Alfred’s strong arms were tight around his shoulders, pushing the right side of Arthur’s face into Alfred’s damp shoulder.

It wouldn’t have been so off-putting if Arthur’s stitches hadn’t been pinched and pulled against Alfred. But they festered and stung as Arthur’s was held against his will.

“All Alfred,” Arthur grunted, trying to shake Alfred awake as strong arms held him down. “A-Alfred this is starting to hurt. Come on, now. Wake up.”

“Try the toaster,” Alfred mumbled. Arthur paused his struggling to make a perturbed expression. Toaster? What in heaven’s name was that meant to mean?

Pushing himself up just a bit, Arthur managed to see that Alfred was still asleep. Arthur rolled his eyes. Alfred said that Arthur was the one that spoke in his sleep, but he never said anything about himself. Giving Alfred another rough pat, Arthur tried to free himself of Alfred’s grip.
“Alfred,” he tried again. “Wake up. This is getting ridiculous.”

“Mm… not cheese,” Alfred answered, turning his head to face the sofa cushions.

“I don’t have any cheese,” Arthur growled, wiggling a bit more and pounding his fist against Alfred’s chest. “Alfred! Wake up!”

Without warning, Alfred sat up with his eyes wide open, holding Arthur to his chest as he looked around and sputtered, “What? What did you say? What?”

Crushed against Alfred’s chest, Arthur pursed his lips and said, “Well, I told you to wake up, so I suppose you didn’t miss much.”

Loosening his hold slowly, Alfred took off his glasses and rubbed at his tired eyes. “I… I fell asleep.”

“We both did,” Arthur sighed as he slid off of the sofa and scrubbed a hand through his mussed hair. How did a piece of popcorn become stuck in his hair? Perhaps it got caught on his stiff bandages. Speaking of which… Arthur started shuffling towards the bathroom, muttering to Alfred over his shoulder, “I’m going to take off these bandages.”

Alfred’s yawn echoed around the room as he tiredly said, “Want any help?”

“I’ll be fine,” Arthur answered as he stood in the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. The starched gauze and cotton accentuated the milky pallor of Arthur’s skin and highlighted the bruise that still looked strikingly violet along his creamy skin. Pinching the end of the medical tape, Arthur gently tugged at the thick cotton until it unraveled, relieving his skull of unneeded pressure.

Glad to have the mummy-like wrappings off of his head, Arthur itched at his newly freed hair and scalp, reveling in the fact that the bandages no longer pulled at the gauze over his incision. Heaving a sigh of relief, Arthur set the cotton wrap aside and eyed the pad of gauze that concealed his healing scar.

Even though the gauze was thick, he could easily see a dark line of blood that stained the fabric. Alfred had set the spare gauze out on the counter a few days earlier, ready for Arthur whenever he thought it was best to change his bandages. Biting his lip, Arthur gently removed the medical tape from the gauze and pulled the gauze from his forehead.

“Good lord,” Arthur breathed as he looked at his scar.

The wound stretched from just above his temple and nearly to his ear, purple and angry as Arthur eyed the prickly stitches. The black lines were thick and tight as Arthur eyed the swollen wound that was surrounded by blotches of nauseating greens to sallow yellows. Exactly how hard did Arthur get slammed into the side of Alistair’s truck when the accident occurred?

“Jesus… That looks pretty bad,” said Alfred from the doorway of the bathroom. Arthur jumped where he stood in front of the mirror, giving Alfred an embarrassed look.

Arthur quickly shielded his cut behind a hand, careful not to touch the skin. “It’s… I mean, of course it’s… I’m sorry.”

Alfred chuckled. “Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault… here, let me help.”

With gentle, gentle hands, Alfred peeled clean, bright gauze from the packages on the
counter and carefully placed a long strip over Arthur’s forehead, blocking the injury from the world again. Just like that, the horrifying reality of Arthur's fragility was hidden. The only thing that gave him away were the bruises on his body. Not gruesome enough to warrant coverage. Not in need of protection. They were simply there, marking the line between where Arthur had been saved from death and where he and death had embraced wholeheartedly.

“Arthur?” Alfred asked lowly, giving Arthur an anxious look over the lenses of his glasses. Arthur’s eyelashes fluttered as he blinked a few times to pull himself out of his stupor, and Alfred gave him a tentative smile. “You looked like you drifted off to a different world for a second.”


Alfred chuckled to himself for a minute, taking the soiled bandages, wrapping them up in the empty gauze packages, and throwing them away in the small trashcan on the floor.

“That happens a lot, doesn’t it?” Alfred said nonchalantly as he left the bathroom and Arthur behind.

Arthur followed him quietly, running his fingers along the edge of his new bandages as he murmured, “It’s been happening more often, lately.”

Before they could pass through the living room and into the kitchen, Arthur paused just outside the bathroom doorway to look at the other small, hidden rooms around them. They were tucked in the corner of the living room and Arthur hadn’t bothered to explore, and the doors sat closed and formidable.

“Alfred,” he mumbled, “What are these doors?”

“What?” Alfred turned away from the telly to follow Arthur’s gaze, giving the doors a hard squint. “Oh. The one on the left is your office, the one on the right is a storage closet.” He looked back to the television and gawked at the news channel. “Crap, it’s already half past seven? I’m gonna be late!”

“My office,” Arthur repeated softly as Alfred scrambled out of the living room in search of a quick cup of coffee. Ignoring the clinks and slams from the kitchen, Arthur tiptoed to his office and opened the door.

Arthur assumed himself to be relatively tidy, but the inside of his office was a disaster. Several bookshelves lined the walls, each one chocked full of loosely bound books that were yet to be published, along with folders of all colors and sizes. Manilla folders and binders were strewn about the room haphazardly, covering a dusty, oak desk that housed a closed, blank laptop. Loose papers were everywhere. Stuck into hardcover and softcover books alike. Printed in crisp, black printer ink and covered in angry red pen marks of correction, they were pasted to the walls like some sick writing conspiracy.

Arthur didn’t even have to take one step before he had to stop and sneeze. There was a wall of dust clinging to each unidentifiable stack of paper and folders, and Arthur didn’t want to imagine how many dust bunnies were burrowed under his neglected desk.

Had Alfred never bothered to come in and clean things up, or was Arthur merely a closeted packrat? He winced at the sight of his laptop – sheltered under a cozy layer of silver,
gleaming dust – and his chair with its leather cracking and breaking. In any case, Arthur wanted to buy himself a new chair at the very least.

“Arthur!” Alfred called from the kitchen, making Arthur flinch and guiltily backpedal out of the office. “Are you hungry? Do you need me to make you something before I go?”

Pursing his lips, Arthur narrowed his eyes at the office as he shouted, “No, I can manage something on my own. I’m an amnesiac, not an infant.”

Alfred’s laughter echoed around the kitchen before he said, “That’s the Arthur I know and love!”

Though Arthur rolled his eyes at the statement, he couldn’t help but smile. If he was sounding like himself, it must mean that he was closer to remembering more about himself. Reaching forward, Arthur tapped his fingers along the doorframe of his quiet and still office. A good cleaning was in order now that Arthur was able-bodied and strong enough to stay on his feet. There was only one thing standing in his way…

“Alfred?” Arthur asked as he backed away from the office and headed for the kitchen. “Where’s the cleaning supplies?”

“W-what?” Alfred sputtered into his cup of coffee as Arthur swept into the kitchen, “Cleaning supplies? Like… like what?”

Arthur headed for the kitchen sink and opened the small cabinet underneath, finding only dish soap and sponges in a small, orange bucket. “A broom, a vacuum, floor cleaner… things like that.” Arthur glanced up from the cabinet to give Alfred a speculative look. “Why do you sound nervous?”

Alfred blinked owlishly. “Well… maybe I’ve watched too many drama shows about people who get into near-death accidents. Sometimes they can’t deal with stuff and…” He trailed off uncomfortably as he looked down at the cup in his hands.

Arthur stood up straight. “Alfred, do you think I’m going to kill myself?”

“No! Well, I hope not… I just,” Alfred sighed, “I used to work at Poison Control, Arthur. A lot of people who want to harm themselves drink bleach. And bleach is –”

“A cleaning agent,” Arthur finished softly. Alfred glanced up at him with an ashamed expression. He looked like a kicked puppy that was just trying to cuddle up to Arthur and accidentally bit him. Arthur gave him a small smile. “I don’t want to hurt myself, Alfred. I just want to clean my office. It looks like a wreck.”

Coughing a few times to clear his throat, Alfred nodded and turned around to face the coffee maker, hiding his expression from Arthur. However, he couldn’t hide the fact that he lifted his hand to wipe at his eyes.

“Y-yeah, I know. You’re too smart for that,” chuckled Alfred as he fiddled with the coffee pot. “The cleaning stuff is in the closet by your office. The vacuum is in there, too.”

A few seconds of quiet stretched between them, and Arthur stepped forward to place a hand on Alfred’s back. “Alfred?”

“I’m fine.”
Arthur raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Really?”

Alfred huffed a laugh. “Yeah, I just scared myself. Thinking about losing you…” he paused to take a shuddery breath, “It scares me. I thought I lost you in the hospital. I don’t want to feel like that again.”

“You won’t,” Arthur promised, hesitantly wrapping his arms around Alfred’s waist to give him a soft hug. He could feel Alfred’s every breath, each one swirling poetically through his lungs and into Arthur’s ear that was pressed against Alfred’s back. When Alfred sighed, it was a symphony of sound that made a forgotten memory tingle in Arthur’s mind, so close but far out of reach. “You won’t,” he repeated.

Alfred cleared his throat and grumbled, “I have to go to work.” Though he didn’t move.

Arthur stayed put. “Do you want me to let go?”

After a moment of thought, Alfred pat Arthur’s hand where it rested gently atop his stomach and murmured, “No,” Arthur closed his eyes. “You don’t have to let go.”

Arthur didn’t. Not until Alfred’s phone chirped impatiently and made both of them jump. But even then, Alfred was hesitant to move away. When he did, Arthur could feel the warmth of Alfred’s back pressed to his cheek even when his husband moved away. He could feel the burn of Alfred’s fingers against his after Alfred had gone upstairs to change into clean clothes. He could still hear the smooth rush of air calming his senses as Alfred took his keys from the kitchen table.

And when Alfred leaned close to give Arthur a kiss on the cheek as a ‘goodbye,’ Arthur could feel his cheek tingle. The feeling didn’t go away no matter how many cups of tea Arthur drank. And part of Arthur, though he wasn’t sure why, never wanted it to fade.

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Arthur was tired of feeling cluttered. His mind was a mess of strange, sporadic memories that came at inconvenient times. His emotions were muddled between his interactions with the people around him. Even his office was a mess of unorganized and incomplete thoughts.

So, instead of sorting through his memories or emotions, Arthur set to work cleaning the office.

Piles of paper had been organized into piles labeled ‘Ideas,’ ‘Lines for stories,’ and ‘Unknown,’ left outside the office for Arthur to put back after he was finished working. Books – ones that had yet to be edited or published – were lined in neat stacks by the door, some of them being full manuscripts and sequels to others that had yet to be handed to his publisher. Emailed documents and contracts were placed into a neat folder that sat on the coffee table, giving Arthur the room he needed to properly clean the floor and move onto bigger tasks.

It had been a pleasant distraction until Arthur’s cell phone rang in the other room. Arthur plucked the phone from the table and tiredly answering with a dull, “‘Ello?” as he padded back to office.

“Hey!” Alfred chirped happily. The reception crackled and popped, but Arthur could hear that Alfred was in his lab, unwrapping something. Most likely his lunch. “How’s your morning? Did you find all of your cleaning stuff?”

“Yes,” Arthur sighed, looking down at the mysterious stain that plagued his otherwise clean office floor. He nudged at the stain with his bare toe. “I’ve been working on this all
morning.”

“As long as you’re having fun,” he laughed, and Arthur shook his head with a smile. There was a pause where Alfred presumably took a bite of his sandwich and then continued to speak. “How’s the cleaning going?” Alfred asked through the phone, his voice coming through warbling and crackly through the receiver against Arthur’s ear. “Everything you hoped and dreamed?”

Sliding his foot away from the stain, Arthur repositioned the phone in his right hand and sighed, “It’s a lot more work that I thought it’d be.”

Alfred laughed, and it echoed strangely with their odd reception. “That’s not surprising considering you haven’t really done any deep cleaning in there for a couple years. You always said that everything had its place.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Arthur grunted as he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. He brushed the gauze patch and hissed when it stung, but the feeling quickly faded. Arthur sighed. “I must’ve been half mad when I said that. I can’t imagine finding anything in this mess.”

“You always said you had a system,” Alfred said through a mouthful of food. Arthur could hear him chewing, but he didn’t care to point it out. Instead, he knelt down beside his pile of manuscripts and sifted through them as Alfred ate.

“I have a lot of books here,” Arthur noted softly. “Did I ever intend for them to be published?”

After giving a long hum, Alfred took a drink and said, “Can’t say. I mean, some of that stuff you never even let *me* read, let alone Edith. She’s a harpy, that one.”

Arthur’s lips twitched with the promise of a smile. “You really don’t like Edith, do you?”

“Nope!” Alfred answered immediately, giving a fond chuckle. “She’s pretty mean… and shallow. You deserve a better publisher. But at the time, you’d gone through so many rejections from other publishers, you just wanted to settle with whoever would take you.”

Rejections? For his books? That sounded downright awful. Arthur felt his stomach churn unhappily as he thought of running from publisher to publisher, trying to explain his new book to each one. Had he been waved away without a second glance? Had he left his manuscripts with someone before? How sensitive was he about his writing?

From the look of his dozens of manuscripts, Arthur assumed himself to be very shy when it came to sharing his work… even with his own husband. There were books that ranged from unattainable fantasy to gritty, hurtful reality. He had stories that went from princes and princess in modern ages to a single mother trying to support her two children in a man’s world.

And those were just the stories that Arthur had skimmed through. There so many more. Any number of names and personalities trapped in dusty, string bound papers. Hundreds of pages left unread, and stories long lost to their own creator. Arthur felt his heart ache at the feeling.

“Arthur?” Alfred’s voice asked cautiously through the phone. “You okay?”

“Lost in thought again,” Alfred laughed before he took another bite. “What’re you thinking so hard about?”

“These books,” Arthur said thoughtfully. “There are so many wonderful stories… so why didn’t I want them published?”

The phone line crackled a bit when Alfred’s voice turned soft and serious. “You’ve always been a little self-conscious. Maybe that’s it?”

Arthur shook his head. “I don’t know. I feel like there has to be more to it,” he lifted one book titled *Six Siblings: One Outcast* and gave it a conspicuous look. “If I was self-conscious, I feel like I would have showed you at the very least.” He glanced around at the other books. “There’s just so many.”

Alfred laughed at that. “Yeah, well… you did have a habit of writing things down as soon as they came to you. It’s like you thought you’d lose the ideas if you didn’t get them down on paper fast enough.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. “You make it sound like I wrote frantically.”

“Maybe. I think…” Alfred took a breath, “More often than not, it was like you were writing down all of those ideas because you wanted someone to know that you had the idea. Like… you wanted to give it to the world before you couldn’t leave anything else.”

“Like I was running out of time…” Arthur murmured as he looked around at the stacks of folders and binders around him.

“Yeah, that’s it! Like you were running out of time. Kinda cryptic, but it’s pretty accurate.”

Arthur frowned. “Do you think I knew something bad was going to happen? Is that why I wrote so much? Because I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to remember it someday?”

“Phew, that’s a loaded question.” Alfred paused to collect his thoughts before he sighed, “Your Grandpa, Marcus Kirkland… He had alzheimer’s. Your dad got a test a year ago to see if they had the alzheimer’s gene, and he had, but he’s never shown symptoms. But still… it still bothered you. Alistair started showing signs of it a few years ago, and it really freaked you out.” There was another pause, then Alfred’s voice got a bit quieter when he said, “You kept writing out these ideas… jotting down these stories… just in case. You’d always say that. ‘Just in case.’”

Arthur felt his stomach give an uncomfortable twist. “Why didn’t I get the test? Why didn’t I try to see if I had the alzheimer’s gene?”

Alfred huffed, and the reception crackled unhappily. “For a long time, you were at peace with the idea of forgetting everything as long as you had your stories all written out.”

“And that’s it? I never got the test?” Arthur pressed, “Did I never change my mind?”

“You did,” Alfred sighed. “A few months ago. I told you that I would do anything to help you if you got alzheimer’s, and eventually, you said that you’d get the test.”

Arthur plucked at the hem of his tan jumper anxiously. “And? The results?”

“You don’t have the gene, Arthur,” Alfred laughed a bit. “Sorry, did I make you nervous?”
“Just for a moment,” Arthur admitted softly, brushing his finger along the edge of a paper filled with random character names. “It’s a bit out of the blue… I’ve never been told anything about alzheimer’s in my family.”

“You guys don’t talk about it that often. Since Alistair was the only one to get the gene, your family doesn’t like to talk about it… kinda makes everyone else feel bad.”

Arthur smiled sadly. “It’s almost funny.”

“What?”

“It’s ironic that Alistair was the one with alzheimer’s, but I’m the one who forgot everything.”

Alfred paused, and Arthur listened to the low crackle of their connection before Alfred said, “That’s not funny. It’s really sad.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” Arthur looked at his empty office and frowned. He didn’t want to clean anymore. It was like all of his motivation had drained away after his emotionally taxing conversation, and all that was left was his fatigue. Arthur sighed. “I think… I think I’m tired.”

There was a slight click on the line, but Alfred’s voice rang true when he said, “O-oh, that makes sense. You should take a little nap! Don’t want to push yourself too hard.”

Arthur hummed affirmatively and stood from his place on the floor. The office – and his muddled worries about his memory – could wait for a bit.

“You’re right. I’ll go lay down.”

Alfred sighed dreamily. “I wish I could take a nap, too… it’s a little boring here today.”

Arthur laughed at Alfred’s whining tone. “I was the one in the car accident, Alfred. I deserve a nap.”

“I guess that’s true,” Alfred giggled uneasily. Arthur almost regretted bringing up the accident, but the feeling disappeared as Alfred said, “Sweet dreams, Arthur.”

“Thank you,” Arthur smiled as he slowly climbed the stairs to his bed. “Have a good day.”

Arthur laid back on his bed with a sad expression. The room was still dimly lit with the slight suggestion of a sunset, and it casted Arthur in a grumpy, orange haze. His socks had been abandoned on the first floor, and his bare toes wiggled unhappily against the blankets.

His third book was declared a rousing success by his editor and publisher, but there was still something that simply ached in Arthur’s chest. He wasn’t writing for fun or for pleasure anymore. It was for the masses. Demanded by his editor, Arthur had plowed through a poorly constructed plot and worn-out characters, throwing them onto paper carelessly and creating a cliché storyline that he absolutely despised.

When the front door slowly opened and slammed shut, Arthur didn’t sit up. He stayed back against the soft, down-filled blankets, staring up at a faraway ceiling that held a silver-encrusted light fixture. The house that his first two books bought him was lovely, but after his third
book, Arthur felt like a fraud. Like he didn’t deserve it.

“Hey,” Alfred called up the stairs to him in a friendly voice. “Guess what I bought today?”

Turning his lips down into a scowl, Arthur refused to answer. Alfred always went to a store and bought a hardcover copy of his books. As Alfred quickly stomped up the stairs like an excited puppy, Arthur braced himself; Alfred was going to be sweet and considerate. He was going to ask for Arthur’s autograph. He always did.

The door to the bedroom squeaked as Alfred pushed it open a little, whispering through the crack in the door, “Mr. Kirkland, could I get your autograph?”

Arthur frowned. “No.”

There was a louder creak as the door opened wider. Arthur could almost feel the mood in the room dampen as Alfred stepped inside. “No?” Arthur closed his eyes and turned his head away when Alfred crawled onto the right side of the bed. “Why not?” Arthur didn’t move, and Alfred shuffled across the bed until he was pressed up against Arthur’s side. “Baby, are you mad at me?”

Shaking his head, Arthur rolled over and into Alfred, tucking himself into Alfred’s sturdy chest and burying his face in the crook between Alfred’s neck and his shoulder.

“I’m mad at myself,” Arthur said crossly, glaring at his view of Alfred’s crinkled shirt. “Edith says that the book is fantastic.”

Alfred made a confused noise. “That’s good, isn’t it? If your publisher likes the book, then –”

“It’s garbage, Alfred!” Arthur shouted against Alfred’s neck, squeezing his eyes shut and balling up his fists in the folds of Alfred’s shirt. “The whole thing is garbage! It’s – I can’t… The whole thing is just one big, stupid, run-on sentence. I hate it! The whole thing!”

Another confused noise from the back of Alfred’s throat. “Well… if you hate it so much, why did you send it in to be published?”

Rolling away from Alfred, Arthur sat up and pushed the heel of his hand through his hair. Couldn’t Alfred understand him? They were so close and so in love… couldn’t Alfred tell how upset he was by the book? Arthur closed his eyes and turned his face down to his lap. No, Alfred couldn’t simply tell everything he felt. Alfred was not an omnipotent reader of the story. Alfred was a clueless character that didn’t yet know the plot. Sighing, Arthur dropped his hands into his lap.

“Never wanted to write it,” Arthur breathed. “Edith said that the first two books of the Whispering Willows series went so well, I should write another story just about the relationship between Carrion and Samantha.”

Alfred thought about this for a second. “Carrion and Samantha… weren’t those the random background characters you didn’t like?”

Arthur hummed affirmatively. “Now I have four hundred and twenty-five pages about them… They’re so disagreeable. I hated writing it. But,” Arthur took a breath. “Edith went over the numbers… and the outlook of revenues was astronomical.” Looking at Alfred, Arthur smiled sadly at Alfred’s perplexed expression. “I thought… I thought if I could finish the book, I could get you that new photon microscope you keep babbling about.”
“Electron,” Alfred corrected softly. “It’s an electron microscope. And baby, you don’t have to buy me those things,” he chuckled, wrapping an arm around Arthur’s shoulders and pulling him down until Arthur was laying atop him. “I could get that microscope on my own… you didn’t have to write a book you didn’t like to buy me something.”

Arthur made a pinched expression. “But I wanted to get it for you.”

“You didn’t have to force yourself to write a story you don’t like!” Alfred retorted with a hearty laugh. “How ‘bout this… You just write the stories you want to write. No more writing crappy stuff that you don’t like.” Arthur hesitantly nodded, and Alfred patted his back comfortingly. “And no more letting Edith hold the numbers over your head. Don’t let her pressure you.”

Arthur sighed. “That’s easier said than done,” he breathed. “She said with the revenues, I could get all sorts of things. Like a better house… or whatever you might want.”

Alfred froze and held still for several seconds. “What?” Arthur bit his lower lip, and the arm that Alfred had around his shoulders flexed a bit. “Why would she bring me into that?”

Arthur picked at a loose string on Alfred’s shirt as he spoke. “She said that I lock myself in my study when I write.”

“Yeah,” Alfred grunted. “So?”

“So, she said I should… make it up to you.” Arthur said quietly. “She said that you might feel a little underappreciated, and I… I thought that if I could get you something, I could—”

“Could what? Buy me some happiness? You think I’d just feel so much better if you gave me a fancy new microscope?”

Arthur closed his eyes tight and clung to Alfred’s shoulders. “I just thought…”

“No.” Alfred said solidly. “No. Don’t ever let her tell you anything like that ever again. I love you whether or not you lock yourself in your study. I fell in love with you because of your goddamn personality, not your paycheck. Hell, I fell in love with you before you ever got a paycheck!”

“I’m sorry,” Arthur sighed. “Then this whole thing… the book, the money… It’s all useless, isn’t it?”

Pausing only for a second, Alfred sighed. “No, it’s not. Now you’ve got a slush fund to use however you want, so… I guess that’s good. But still… I don’t feel underappreciated, Arthur. I love you. Lots and lots, okay?” Arthur was quiet, and Alfred patted his back. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” Arthur smiled a little, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. “Okay. I love you, too. Lots and lots.”

Alfred continued to pat his back, tapping his shoulder a little harder than anything else. “Arthur?” He asked, as if he thought Arthur wasn’t listening. Arthur hummed inquisitively, but Alfred kept tapping his shoulder, like he was trying to gain Arthur’s attention. “Arthur? Hey, Arthur… c’m’mon, it’s time to wake up.”

Arthur’s brow furrowed; wake up? He was already awake, wasn’t he? He was… no, he was… Letting his eyes flutter open, Alfred looked up at Alfred with blurry eyes.

“Hey,” Alfred said with a smile. “Rise and shine.”
Arthur frowned. Hadn’t he been lying atop Alfred only a moment ago? Was it all a
dream? Raising his hand to scratch at his hair, Arthur felt the line of fresh gauze against his brow.
Arthur blinked. The hospital. The accident. His amnesia. It was all coming back to him with a force
as the warmth of his dream slowly faded away. But, it must’ve been a memory… wasn’t it?

Next to the bed, Alfred stood up straight and stretched his arms above his head. “You
must’ve slept like a rock. Lucky duck. I had to work all day.”

“All day?” Arthur asked softly. He remembered laying down after cleaning the office…
had he slept all day? “What time is it?”

Glancing down at the clock on the bedside table, Alfred sniffled quietly. “Almost seven
o’clock. Hungry? I brought takeout.”

Arthur sat up slowly and rubbed sleep out of his eyes, feeling Alfred brace his shoulder
with a warm, comforting hand. Memories were coming to him more often, which was
comforting… but they seemed to trip and spin out of order, leaving him with scattered recollections
from very different times. So, with a slightly confused expression, Arthur allowed Alfred to pull
him up from the soft quilt and guide him down the stairs.

The fragrant aroma waiting for Arthur hit him halfway down the stairs, and his mouth
watered expectantly. Spices, meats, and a hint of citrus… it was Arthur’s favorite Indian food.

“What?” Arthur stopped with one foot on the bottom stair and his hand locked with
Alfred’s anxiously. “How did I know that?”

Alfred gave him a flabbergasted expression. “How did you know… what?”

“Indian,” Arthur said urgently. Alfred continued to give him a confused stare. “It’s
Indian food. How did I know that? How do I know it’s my favorite?”

Alfred looked up at the ceiling and made a strange, garbled noise. “I dunno… because it
is? Because Indian food is delicious? Because –”

“Alfred,” Arthur interrupted swiftly, “I can hardly remember anything… so why do I
remember this specific food?”

With a shrug, Alfred ran his empty hand through his hair tiredly. “I… I really don’t
know. Maybe your brain just holds onto that stuff, ya know?”

Feeling his nose wrinkle in distaste at the vague suggestion, Arthur let himself be led
into the kitchen. When he saw the table, Arthur’s jaw dropped and his eyes watered at the strong
assailment of various scents.

The table was heaping with fold-up takeaway boxes and plastic containers. From the
sheer amount of them, Arthur could only assume that Alfred was planning on feeding the entire
neighborhood. There were strong scents of paprika and cumin, though Arthur couldn’t quite tell
from which of the numerous containers the smells were coming.

“Good god,” Arthur breathed, watching the steam from all of the food rise to the ceiling
and create their own indoor cloud. Not having anything better to say, Arthur repeated, “Good god.”

“I may have gone a little overboard,” Alfred said bashfully as he stood next to the
overflowing table. He caught one container before it slid over the edge of the tabletop.
Arthur snorted. “You bought enough food to feed a small army,” he noted, giving the food a vague wave. “How did you manage to lug all of this in here?”

“Oh… funny story,” Alfred laughed to himself. Arthur watched with belated amusement as Alfred’s face started to flush. “I went there once, right? I got the chicken curry you like. Because that’s your favorite. Then I got home and I went, ‘wait… is that right?’ Then I went back and got a different kind, and then another and another…” Alfred indicated to the table. “And I kept going back and hoping that I’d get the right kind.”

Arthur lifted an eyebrow at Alfred’s red face. “You don’t have to know which one is my favorite, Alfred. I’m hungry enough to eat the containers themselves. It’s no trouble.”

“But I should know!” Alfred insisted, nodding to himself as Arthur approached the table and gave one of the containers a testing sniff. “I mean… we’ve been going to this restaurant since we moved to the city! I _should_ know, right?”

Arthur popped open a folded container, eyeing the glistening vegetables inside. “We have?”

“Yeah,” Alfred nodded, pacing the kitchen as Arthur dug in kitchen drawers for a fork. “We got out here, didn’t have any money to spare… but we were starving, so we went to this place.” He gave the containers a pointed look as Arthur absently shoved sautéed vegetables into his mouth. Alfred smiled a bit. “It was good food for a great price. At the time, it was all we could afford… so we went there all the time,” he gave Arthur a sad look, “You said you loved it.”

Swallowing hard, Arthur looked down at the contents of his paper container. “Well,” he mumbled, “I have to admit… it’s very good.”

“Yeah?” Alfred asked, his eyes glittering with hope and his voice ringing with excitement. Arthur tried to subvert his attention to the food as he started sifting through the selections.

“Why don’t we bring a few of these into the living room?”

“We can watch a good movie!” Alfred suggested happily, hopping to the table and picking out his favorite of the foods.

Arthur gave him a considering look. How was there was so much love contained in one human being? He obviously adored Arthur. He loved Arthur so much; he went and probably bought every item on the restaurant’s menu in hope that Arthur would like it. He loved Arthur so long; it had started before they even had their feet underneath themselves. Alfred was brought up in a difficult, unloving environment. So… how could he love _so much_?

Narrowing his eyes, Arthur looked at the different plastic containers that held curry. After a moment of thought, he reached for one and took it with him as Alfred bounded into the living room.

“You like classic movies,” Alfred reminded him as they sat down on the sofa. Alfred clicked the remote a few times, searching for the correct film. “You like that one called _My Fair Lady_. We can watch that one.”

“Thank you,” Arthur whispered to his curry as he peeled away the lid. The steam rolled over his cheeks, and he nearly felt his eyes water, but he simply poked his fork into the meat of the curry and blew on it to cool down.
Soon, the echoing, warbling notes of an old song started floating through the air as the movie began. Arthur’s mouth was left hanging open as he held his fork to his lips. He loved this film. He used to watch it on rainy days with his mother. He and Alfred watched it together countless times. When they first became a couple, the first movie they watched was this one. When they had their first apartment, it was the first movie they watched in their empty room. It was special to him.

“Hey, hey,” Alfred whispered soothingly, setting his food aside to look directly at Arthur. “What’s wrong? Do you not wanna watch it? Does it make you remember something sad?”

Arthur sniffed, finally feeling the tears rolling down his cheeks as shakily took a bite of his curry. It was delicious. It almost tasted like his favorite. Arthur smiled as Audrey Hepburn flickered onscreen.

“No,” Arthur breathed, brushing at the tears on his cheeks before he took another bite. “No, I want to watch it. It’s been a long time since we’ve watched this together.”

“Yeah,” Alfred said softly as he leaned back against the cushions. “Yeah, it has been.”

With that, Alfred took up his food from the table. Arthur couldn’t help but notice the smile on Alfred’s face as the movie played, but he didn’t point it out. He merely looked back at the screen, and ate his dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
See you next chapter.
Warm, gentle sunlight dusted the back of Arthur’s closed eyelids as he bathed in summer light. It seeped down into his skin and made his bones swell with glowing, sparkling light. The house was large and the windows were wide and open. It was the height of summer, and Arthur could remember how dreary summers in England had been. There was always so much rain… but now, there was warmth. Light. Humidity. It clung to his skin and made his feet feel sticky when he walked on the new kitchen’s hardwood floor.

It was a strange environment. Almost alien. But it was beautiful, and Arthur liked it. This place was different than his and Alfred’s old, ratty apartment. The new house was a definite improvement. No more worrying about the windows leaking. No more struggling to make rent. No more worry… that was, until Arthur’s next book was due.

The front door creaked open and closed, and Arthur didn’t move as Alfred shuffled inside with a chorus of crinkling plastic. How much food did he buy? Was there enough room in their small refrigerator? Arthur didn’t bother to ask.

“Hey,” Alfred said as he stepped into the living room. He stood over Arthur quietly for a few seconds, then asked, “Why are you on the floor?”

“It’s warm,” Arthur answered simply. He’d laid down in front of the window to feel the sunlight. Sunny days could be rare in England, and though he’d spent plenty of time in America, Arthur still liked to appreciate the warmth. So he laid on his back with his hands folded atop his stomach, smiling at the glistening rays of sun that made his cheeks tingle. “It’s nice.”

Alfred hummed, and Arthur felt the vibrations in the floor as Alfred laid down next to him. For a while, they were both quiet, soaking in the summer sun without having to say a single word. They had a new home. A new outlook of the city. A big change from their normal, half-starved way of life. And most of it was due to Arthur’s first book being published.

His new editor had pushed advertisement in book stores, and in one week, Arthur nearly sold one thousand copies. The revenue check was unbelievable. His editor forecasted more sales. In three months, she planned to have him run a book signing. Arthur’s hands clenched atop his stomach; things were going so fast. Could he really be a level-headed author?

He reached out to Alfred for support, blindly feeling for his hand. He grasped Alfred’s thigh first, and the American laughed.

“Woah, there… tryin’ to feel me up already?” Alfred giggled, and Arthur opened his eyes to stare at the bland ceiling. He shook his head, but there was a smile on his lips nonetheless. Alfred laughed again when he took Arthur’s hand and laced their fingers together. “Buy me dinner first, sweet cheeks.”

“Very amusing.” Arthur murmured. The living room around them was empty except for themselves. Their old sofa had been falling apart in their old flat, and Alfred insisted he would pay for new furniture. Arthur’s head swam with anxiety. What if buying the new house was a mistake? What if his books ended up being a failure? Arthur closed his eyes again. “We bought this house.”
“You bought this house,” Alfred corrected. “I could never afford this place. But you’ve got great taste, baby.”

Nodding, Arthur tried to soothe his nerves. “I bought it. No going back now.”

Alfred sat up, brushing the back of his fingers over Arthur’s cheek. Arthur opened his eyes to see Alfred’s concerned gaze directed at him over the edge of Alfred’s glasses. It was nearly suggestive, but Arthur didn’t have the heart to smile.

“Ahh,” he said lowly, “Do you wanna go back?”

Arthur gave a halfhearted shrug. “We… we just got here.”

“Yeah, a lot is happening really fast. But,” Alfred pushed hair from his forehead. “If you wanna slow things down and think for a while, that’s fine. You can take your time.”

Arthur turned his head away. “Edith says that I should reward myself for hard work.”

“You have,” Alfred nodded, “But you could dial it down and let your money build up, if you want.”

“Edith says –”

Alfred snorted. “Edith is not the queen of the world, Arthur. This is your money. You get to say how you spend it. Do you want to go back to our old apartment? It’s still up for grabs.” Arthur shook his head, and Alfred said, “Okay. Do you want to try a different apartment? One nicer than our old one? We don’t have to go this fast, Arthur. We don’t have to buy a house yet… if you don’t want to. You have the power here.”

“But I don’t want the power,” Arthur sighed, covering his eyes with his forearm sadly. “I like being in command of my characters in books, but I don’t like commanding the people around me. It’s so… demeaning.”

“Ahh, you’re not commanding me around,” Alfred grinned as he leaned down to give Arthur a kiss on the cheek. Arthur squirmed and giggled when Alfred blew hot air across his ear, and Alfred said, “Unless you wanna boss me around. But that’s only gonna happen in the bedroom, baby.”

Arthur let out a full laugh at that. “Alfred, we don’t even have a bed in this house! Our old bed was a dirty mattress with worn-out sheets. I doubt you want to relive all of the messy sex we’ve had on that thing.”

Alfred made a face. “Good point.”

Cupping Alfred’s face in his hands, Arthur pulled him down for a kiss before he murmured, “Tell me this is a good thing. Tell me that this house isn’t a mistake.”

Alfred’s smile brushed against Arthur’s lips. “This is a good thing. It’s not a mistake.”

“Liar,” Arthur sighed, dropping his hands back onto his stomach. “You’re just saying that because I want to hear it.”

Alfred kissed him again. And again. And again. Until Arthur was sure he’d melt into a puddle of incoherent mush on the new, hardwood floors. It was like they were branding the floor with their mark, leaving their scent in the floorboards so everyone knew that this was their home. It
was where they belonged.

Alfred’s hands inched up the curves of Arthur’s hips, and Arthur gasped when warm hands swept over the plane of his bare stomach. “You made a good choice,” Alfred breathed in his ear. Arthur squeaked and squirmed when Alfred tickled his ribs. “I like this place. The house has good bones.”

Arching his back off of the floor, Arthur felt Alfred grab hold of his hips. The floor dug into Arthur’s shoulders oddly, and he grimaced at the feeling. “The only downside to this place… is the lack of furniture.”

Alfred hummed, then kissed Arthur’s brow. “I think we can manage.”

“Nope,” Arthur grunted, pushing Alfred over until he was laying back on the floor. Arthur sat astride his hips victoriously. “Much better. You make a very nice chair, love.”

“Are you gonna use my chest as a table?” Alfred asked, folding his arms under his head calmly. Arthur shrugged at the suggestion, giving Alfred’s chest a considering pat.

“Maybe. It seems sturdy enough.”

Alfred chuckled. “Thanks, babe. I work out.”

“No, you don’t,” Arthur smiled. “You just like to show off.”

Shrugging, Alfred gave Arthur a wink. With was that stupid grin again. The one that Arthur loved more than life. More than rain, more than sun… it was better than finishing a novel. It was his favorite smile. The smile of his husband, his love, his friend.

And Alfred really was his best friend. The only friend Arthur had truly fallen in love with. The only friend that made Arthur feel warm and cared for. The greatest friend anyone could ever wished for. Alfred was –

“Alfred,” Arthur breathed as his eyes slowly opened. He stared up at his beige ceiling quietly, feeling his fingernails scratch at the quilt underneath him restlessly. Another dream, another memory. It was becoming somewhat routine. Though, at the rate Arthur was going, he would be surprised if he remembered his adolescence before he turned eighty years old.

Pushing away the blankets, Arthur swung his legs over the edge of the bed and yawned. The house was quiet. Too still. Alfred was already at work. Arthur glanced at the clock and assumed Alfred had let him sleep in. That was fine. But, something about the house felt hollow, almost as if Alfred had taken all of the comfort from the home when he’d left. This left Arthur with nothing but a cold, quiet house to occupy himself.

Each step down the echoed off of perfectly still walls, and the only company in Arthur’s quiet morning was the quiet patter of rain on the large windows in the living room. Arthur squinted at the watery windowpane; he liked rain, didn’t he? Yes, he should have. Something in the back of his brain tickled and said that rain was a familiar thing. A comforting thing. Arthur sighed. The rain didn’t comfort him enough. The company of his own parents didn’t comfort him either… and Alfred? Oh, Alfred was…

He was…

Arthur turned away from the window and scoured the kitchen for something to distract himself with. Anything would be better than trying to remember the perfect words to describe his
husband. There were too many unknowns, yet. Arthur couldn’t make a definitive answer until he knew what kind of man Alfred was.

Taking a clean bowl down from a high cabinet shelf, Arthur pondered the abstract concept of ‘Alfred Jones.’ He was a handsome man, obviously enamored with Arthur, optimistic despite his horrible childhood, and… and what? What was the last comment? Arthur knew that descriptions often came best in threes. It was a basic writing technique.

Blinking hard, Arthur felt a headache spike at his temples. Descriptive terms… writing techniques… bits and pieces of fractured writing details fluttered through Arthur’s sleepy thoughts, and with each thought came a drilling, aching throb to his head.

The bowl in Arthur’s hands clattered when it fell onto the countertop, long forgotten by Arthur’s trembling hands. Those hands clamped over the sides of Arthur’s face, somehow trying to hold in his brain as it threatened to ooze out of his ears.

The repetitive sound of fluttering pages and clicking keyboards rang louder than sirens in Arthur’s ears, and he nearly read entire paragraphs behind his closed eyelids. The floor tilted, and Arthur felt himself hit the ground at an odd angle, his elbow hitting the floor before his shoulder. Was the phone ringing? Someone was speaking to him, surely. A woman’s voice? But when Arthur looked up from his place on the floor, no one stood over him, and the phone sat dim and quiet on the table.

The pounding continued in his head, but the muddled sounds slowly began to recede into a high-pitched ringing that made Arthur’s ears hurt. When he closed his eyes and covered his ears, gritting his teeth, he heard a woman speak again: “Careful, poppet. I don’t want you to get hurt.” Hurt? Why? The voice was oddly familiar… his mother? Delilah? They sounded too similar to tell them apart. “The city is big, and these people… they might not want to listen to a story like yours. Be realistic.”

Arthur’s eyes snapped open and he stared wide eyed at his sideways view of the hardwood floor. This woman wanted him to be realistic? His books were mostly fantasy. The papers were laced with imagination and magic. Stories of elves and fairies were his bread and butter. Realistic? Arthur hated reality with a passion. He hated the nonexistence of magic. He hated the childish reputation that fantasy held in the world. Arthur nearly laughed at the painful order… realistic.

Arthur was not realistic. He never would be. Alfred knew that. He understood Arthur’s wild imagination. He encouraged it. He knew that Arthur enjoyed creating new worlds and histories. He knew that Arthur was a sap when it came to forbidden romance. He knew that Arthur was a hopeless dreamer when it came to the stars, to foreign languages, to new cultures… Alfred knew.

This woman… she didn’t have any idea who Arthur was.

And with that, the pain subsided to a light, airy throb that left Arthur gasping on the kitchen floor. Luckily, he hadn’t fainted and slammed his skull into the floor. That was a positive point, at the very least. Pulling himself back up onto trembling legs, Arthur clung to the edge of the countertop to hold himself steady.

Was his memory coming back all at once? Did he remember everything? Squinting at the kitchen around him, Arthur noted that he still couldn’t recall the names extended family members. He couldn’t remember what his own wedding was like. He still couldn’t recall Alfred’s voice when he’d said, “I do,” at the altar.
Frowning at the unhappy realization, Arthur fiddled with the bowl he had dropped onto the counter. It was empty and waiting, but he’d lost his appetite. There was nothing that would fill the empty pit in his stomach that gurgled angrily when Arthur dreamt of his past. It was empty with shame… or perhaps guilt. He *should’ve* remembered these things. He *should’ve* been more careful. But he wasn’t, and now he was paying the price.

Before Arthur had a chance to put the empty bowl back in the cabinet, his cell phone rang on the table, causing him to flinch and spin on his heel nervously. The screen glowed as a cheery, synthesized tune buzzed through the speakers of his phone, and Arthur immediately snatched up the device. Was it Alfred? Was he calling to check in? Arthur wanted to hear his voice. That comforting, soothing constant in this confusing madness… Arthur frowned at the screen. Not Alfred.

It was Edith Grates. Arthur squinted at the name as he puzzled the caller. Who was that? The name was familiar… an old friend? A family member? No, that wasn’t right. Arthur blinked in realization; it was his publisher. His stomach clenched nervously. What did she want? Arthur couldn’t remember anything, let alone anything about his books. He wouldn’t be of any help.

Nonetheless, Arthur tapped the green button on his phone, held the phone to his ear, and hesitantly mumbled, “Hello?”

“Ah, there you are! You are one tough man to get a hold of, Arthur.” A brash, nasally, and horribly shrill voice rang through the speaker on Arthur’s phone, and he winced at the volume. He’d have to ask Alfred how to turn it down later. Without waiting for Arthur to respond, Edith quickly got down to business. “Now, I know you’re a busy little bee over there, but I need you to do me a favor.”

Arthur awkwardly looked around the kitchen for an escape from the conversation. He didn’t remember anything about his stories aside from what he’d read. Was he supposed to have been writing something for Edith? Was a manuscript due and Arthur didn’t know?

“Um,” Arthur fumbled for an answer as his palms started to sweat. “That’s, well… I think –”

Edith heaved a troubled sigh. “Don’t get yourself all worked up, sweetie. I’m just asking for one little thing.”

Blinking in disbelief, Arthur felt his headache pick up intensity. “I don’t think I can help –”

“Now,” Edith cut him off again. Did she do this often? It felt familiar, somehow. “I know you got in a little accident,” *Little?* Arthur’s brother was killed in that ‘little accident.’ Did this woman have no tact? “But we do have an edit due for the end of December.”

Arthur swallowed thickly, easing himself down into a chair for support as he tried to comb through his memories with no avail. “I… I don’t remember anything about an edit.”

Another sigh as Edith adjusted her phone against her ear, causing a chorus of crackling to echo into Arthur’s ear. “Yeah… Alfred called and said you had some memory thing. It’ll wear off soon, honey. Don’t you worry.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes and frowned at Edith’s dismissive tone. “I don’t think you quite understand what is happening to me,” he said lowly. “I am suffering from amnesia.”
“But that’ll go away, sweetie,” Edith reassured him quickly. Papers were shuffled on the other line. “Now, you’re a big hit here in the states, but we want you to go international, don’t we? So we need to work out this edit as soon as possible so we can start printing.”

Alfred was right. This woman was impossible. Arthur huffed, “Edith, wait.”

“Now, I’ll send you a schedule for the workup dates and we’ll get together in my office, honey. Get it all figured out. Then you can go back to relaxing.”

Relaxing? Arthur was struggling to remember who he was. That was hardly a relaxing feat. Arthur scrubbed a hand over his face tiredly as he grumbled, “Edith, I don’t remember where your office is. I don’t ever remember what story I’m supposed to be editing with you.”

Edith laughed at that, and Arthur heard it echo off of the walls in her office. “Sure you don’t, honey! I think we both know that you’ve been taking advantage of your little spill, but you’ve been on a mini vacation for two weeks. Time to get back into business.”

Feeling something hot and angry sizzle in his chest, Arthur growled into the receiver, “That ‘little spill’ caused my brain to slam into the side of my skull hard enough to bleed. My brother died in that car accident. I’m not relaxing. I can’t remember who I am. I can’t remember anything. I hardly even remember you,” Arthur took a breath, then sighed, “But, you are right about one thing. I do need to relax.”

“W-what?” Edith sputtered, “That’s not—”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Arthur snapped as he stood up, “I’m going for a walk. Don’t call me again.”

“Arthur! W-wait!” Edith squeaked as Arthur hit the ‘End Call’ button.

Just like that, Arthur might’ve lost his job at Edith’s publishing company. Arthur would’ve felt bad about this, but Alfred was right. He deserved a better publisher. Now that his books were a big hit, he could afford to find a better publisher. One that actually realized that he was in pain. One that noticed he couldn’t remember anything. One that bothered to check in on him before he’d gone two weeks without any contact with the outside world.

Looking around the kitchen, Arthur realized there were too many tense feelings cramped in the house. It was stifling. Enough to make Arthur feel uncomfortable where he stood with his cell phone heavy in his hand. He needed to breathe. He needed to escape. He needed to relax.

Stuffing his phone into the pocket of his trousers, Arthur walked to the door, slipped his feet into a pair of comfortable looking moccasins, took the money from the tray Alfred left for take away food, and opened the front door. Rain still fell, but Arthur found it more comforting than chilling as he closed the door behind himself. The rain reminded him of London. Of home. Of lazy days spent curled in Alfred’s arms, cozy and secure. Arthur smiled, put his hands in his pocket as he walked down the steps, and turned left.

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Two hours into Arthur’s long walk, his grey jumper was drenched and his moccasins were making discomforting squishing sounds when he took a step. But, if Arthur used his imagination, he could pretend that his moccasins were really the mossy undergrowth of a forest far away. His jumper was heavy with the furs of animals he’d captured and skinned. And the fall of rain was a litter of news from the tree elves that echoed the winter solstice’s approach.
With a soft smile, Arthur realized that he rather enjoyed his newly expanded imagination. He was unrealistic and obsessed with the impossible. It was comforting to know that he’d connected with a key part of himself once more.

People on the street gave Arthur strange looks as he calmly sauntered down the pavement in an endless line, dodging the handles of umbrellas as he went. A few children pointed and smiled at Arthur’s rain-soaked clothes, and several older adults frowned in disapproval. Instead of shrinking into his shyness, Arthur let himself embrace the cold rain. The shower felt so familiar… as if he could remember standing under a cloudy sky like this when he was just a little boy. Had he been holding someone’s hand? He might’ve been… but, was it Alfred? Or was it someone else?

Hoping to escape the shivers that started to plague him, Arthur ducked into a nearby café and glanced out the window. He’d been careful to memorize all of the streets he’d turned on during his little trip. It would be impossible to forget where he was if he knew where he’d been.

Glancing back at the coffee shop, Arthur was pleased to find that it was a warm atmosphere. Several young adults were huddled around a small, circular table, heatedly debating the pros and cons of different works of literature. An older businessman drank his coffee quietly by the window, never looking up from his tablet. A young girl munched on a bagel in the far corner, swinging her legs back and forth under the table as her brown, coiled hair bounced with every turn of her head.

Stomping his feet on the welcome mat softly, Arthur shuffled toward the front counter where a barista waited patiently. His nose was pierced and his blond hair was pulled back into a neat bun, and his smile shone a little brighter when Arthur awkwardly glanced up at the menu.

“Hi,” the young man said. A bit flirtatious? Arthur couldn’t quite tell. “What can I get for you?”

Arthur blinked at the young man. With that blond hair and those warm eyes, he nearly reminded him of Alfred. But there were too many differences… Alfred’s jaw wasn’t so square. His eyes were blue and exciting. His eyes were brighter. Filled with wonder. His smile wasn’t so coy… it was soft. Comforting.

“Hey, can I get you something?” The young man repeated, tapping his hands on the countertop impatiently. Arthur blinked himself out of his stupor and sputtered awkwardly as he looked back at the menu.

“S-sorry… I don’t normally come to places like this.”

“What?” A young girl behind the counter baulked, giving Arthur a flabbergasted expression. “You come here all the time! I’m your favorite! You said so!”

The barista in front of Arthur rolled his eyes. “He never said that, Sara.” He looked back at Arthur and winked. “So… green tea, like always?”

Arthur squirmed under the overly-familiar glint in the man’s eyes, looking for some kind of escape. Luckily, Sara came to his rescue, slapping the male barista’s arm with a dishtowel.

“Shut up, Clark! You always get all flirty with him cuz you think it’ll score you some points,” she gave Arthur a smile. “I’ll make your tea, Mr. K. Don’t you worry.”

With that, Clark and Sara went to work, heating water and steeping while Arthur fumbled
with the hem of his jumper. Clark gave him a total for his order, and Arthur awkwardly handed him the money that Alfred had left him. These two young people knew him… well enough to know his name, it would seem. And apparently, he came to this café often. Perhaps they could tell him something about himself.

When Sara set the cup in front of Arthur, he made sure to catch her attention, “Pardon me, uh… you know me, don’t you? Quite well?”

“Um,” she glanced back at Clark for a moment, then back to Arthur. “Yeah, we know you. You used to come here almost every day. Did you go on vacation or something?”

Arthur smiled sadly. “No, I didn’t. I was in a car accident.”

Sara’s eyes went wide as her hands flew to her face, covering a gasp as she asked, “Is that what that big bandage is for? That’s so awful!”

Tapping the side of his paper cup, Arthur nodded gently. “I’ve been suffering from amnesia. I was surprised to hear that you know me,” he gave her another smile. “It’s a little startling.”

“Oh my gosh… Mr. Kirkland, that’s so scary,” Sara gave his wrist a fond pat. “You’re the only famous person I know, and you were in an accident… that’s so sad.”

Moments later, Arthur was sitting at a small table with Sara. She had announced that she was taking her break, and though Arthur insisted that he was fine, she brought him a spare jacket from the breakroom. Her icy eyes and butterscotch skin glittered when she sat with Arthur by the window, perfectly catching the bits of scattered city lights.

“You’ve got to be crazy, going out in this rain without a coat!” She exclaimed as she sipped her mocha. She shook her head in disapproval. “You men are ridiculous.”

“I didn’t really think when I left the house,” Arthur admitted as he spun his paper cup in slow circles. Sara raised a skeptical eyebrow, and Arthur shrugged, feeling his shoulders sag with the weight of his wet sweater. “I just needed to get outside and move. I’ve been cooped up for two weeks, sitting and hoping my memory will… somehow…” Arthur words trailed off sadly, without any real ambition to finish them.

Sara sighed and shook her head. “If I’d known you were going stir-crazy, I woulda come and taken you for a walk.” She laughed at the idea, then tilted her cup to and fro as she spoke, “You’ve helped me through more than one essay, so I think I can pay you back.”

Arthur smiled into his cup of tea as he took a small sip. It burned the tip of his tongue and scorched on the way down, but it was too familiar to ignore. Something about the taste echoed with memories of long, rainy days. Something in the milk was laced with thoughts of writing frustrations. And something about Sara’s silver, silk hijab reminded him of lighthearted conversations.

Wrinkling his nose at his burned tongue, Arthur set down his cup. “Sara, how long have I known you? If I may ask, that is.”

Sara waved away the question. “Just over two years, now. I met you when I first started working here. I started college that year… and you were in a really bad mood that day.”

Arthur frowned. “That seems like it would be a terrible first impression.”
She laughed at that. “A little bit, yeah! But you came back the next day and apologized for being cranky. It was so weird. A customer has never apologized to me before.” She looked down into the whipped cream on her coffee and smiled. “I thought I recognized you, so I looked you up… and then I figured out that you were the Arthur Kirkland. The writer that I aspired to be!” Sara got a faraway look in her eyes. “When I told you that, you laughed. You said I should aim to be better than you.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Arthur nodded to himself. “You should never compare yourself to other writers, just like an artist can’t compare themselves to different artists.” Arthur took a sip of tea, pleased to note that it was much cooler than before. “We all have our own distinct style.”

“Hey, that’s exactly what you said to me!” Sara laughed as she tapped the tabletop. “You said I can’t compare myself to you, and I have to focus on making my own style. It really changed how I thought about stuff.”

Pursing his lips, Arthur looked down into his tea. Had he remembered saying that, or was the thought drilled into his memory so he was unable to forget it? Had he always had that opinion? Did he just remember out of the blue? Arthur winced as a headache burned behind his eyes, and he massaged his temple with his left hand as he closed his eyes.

“Mr. K? Are you okay?” Sara asked anxiously, her voice sounding garbled beneath the weight of the sounds around them. Too many people were talking, the machines behind the counter were buzzing too loudly, and every time Arthur tried to remember meeting Sara, the sounds increased in volume. Sara cut through the sound, placing a hand on his shoulder and shaking lightly. “Mr. Kirkland? What’s wrong?”

Arthur cracked his eyes open to give Sara a desperate look. “I can’t tell if I remembered it,” he admitted, turning his eyes down to stare sadly at his tea. “I remember some things, and then… then everything is so jumbled, I…” Arthur heard ringing in his ears. A song? No, it wasn’t real enough to be instruments. Was Sara speaking to him again? He looked up to catch her wide eyes, murmuring, “I can’t remember.”

Her lips were shaping words, Arthur was sure. But they sounded so distant, so far away… there were trapped underwater, where they ended up sounding warbled and disjointed. Her eyes, so icy, so sharp and cutting… they were different from Alfred’s. Somehow, someway… they were different. A thousand levels of dissonance sat in the shades of blue and grey in her eyes, and Arthur couldn’t recall any of it.

The spare coat around Arthur’s shoulders felt heavy and awkward, and the music in Arthur’s ears continued to ring louder. He didn’t understand where it was coming from until Sara’s voice cut through the madness, stating: “… your phone? Mr. K, is that your phone?”

Scrabbling with his trembling hands, Arthur fished into his pocket and found his phone buzzing in his palm, blinking excitedly with a call. Though his vision swam, Arthur could tell who was calling. It was grounding, and he held the phone to his ear quickly, listening carefully as Alfred’s voice came through the line.

“Arthur? Arthur, where are you? You’re not at home. Did you go out somewhere? Are you okay?”

He sounded desperate and breathless, as if he’d been running. Had he called the home phone and panicked when Arthur didn’t answer? Had he left work in a rush? Was he tearing up the house in search of Arthur, hoping that he wasn’t dead in a corner somewhere? There was
“I’m fine, Alfred. Just fine.” He rubbed a hand over his tired eyes, trying to wipe away the headache that bogged down his thoughts. “Edith called this morning, and I... I just needed to breathe some fresh air.”

This only seemed to frighten Alfred even more, and he sounded like he was on the verge of a panic attack. “Wh-what? Edith? Why did... where did you go?”

“I just went for a walk,” Arthur said softly, waving Sara away as she continued to fret over him. “I... I just followed the street. I made sure to remember where I went, and now...”

“Arthur, for god’s sake! You were just in a car accident, you’re hurt, you’re tired!” Alfred shouted into the phone. Arthur winced at the tone, but didn’t bother to interrupt. “My god, this house should be enough for you right now! You could’ve gotten lost! You could’ve gotten in another accident! You should have told me.”

“Yes, I should have,” Arthur nodded, placing his empty hand over his eyes and sighing heavily. “I just... I needed...”

“What? What did you need? If you needed anything, I’d get it for you!” Alfred barked shortly, his breath coming through as angry puffs through the receiver. “You scared me half to death! You just disappeared and I had no idea where you went! I thought you’d fallen down somewhere and were bleeding to death!”

“I know,” said Arthur as thunder rumbled outside the café. His tea was getting cold, but his head hurt too much to bother with it. “I’m sorry.” Alfred was quiet for a moment, the only sound coming through the phone being his heavy, frustrated breathing. Arthur closed his eyes tighter and repeated, “I’m sorry.”

“No.” Alfred’s voice was short, but it was much softer than before. “No, it’s... it’s okay. I shoulda...” Alfred took a shuddering breath, “I shoulda figured you wanted to get out and breathe some fresh air.”

“Mr. K? Do you need some help?” Sara asked, her voice masking tones of velvet worry. Arthur opened his eyes and gave her a tired smile, shaking his head.

Alfred was quick to speak up, “Who was that? Are you okay?”

Arthur closed his eyes again. “Her name is Sara and –”

“From the coffee shop that you like?” Alfred asked immediately. Arthur swore he could hear the front door slam shut on the other line. Alfred was probably leaving to come find him. “Okay. That’s good... they know you. I’m gonna come get you. I don’t want you walking home in this rain.”

“I think,” Arthur covered his eyes with his spare hand once more. “That would be good. I’m not feeling very well...”

Arthur heard the car engine rumble as Alfred started the car. “Don’t go anywhere, all right? I’m coming to get you. Stay put, baby. You’ll be fine.”

Arthur hummed into the receiver and felt Sara pat his back comfortingly. Alfred didn’t hang up. He simply held the phone to his ear as he raced down the streets of Seattle. Arthur hoped he didn’t break any traffic laws on his way. He listened to the sound of Alfred’s breathing through
the phone, carefully using his calm breaths to keep himself relaxed. There really was something soothing about Alfred. His voice, his face, his presence… There was something so fundamentally comforting, Arthur couldn’t forget it.

In what seemed like minutes, Alfred was spoke again. “I’m coming in, okay? Are you still there?”

Arthur forced his eyes open again. “Yes. I’m here.” When a hand landed on his shoulder, Arthur jumped and turned to see Alfred standing over him with a small smile. It was a cautious one, one that didn’t quite erase the concern that glimmered in his eyes. Arthur returned the smile with his own tired grin. “Hello, Alfred.”

“You look worn out,” Alfred said softly, pulling Sara’s abandoned chair close and sitting next to Arthur. “And you’re soaked. Didn’t you take an umbrella?”

“I didn’t know where they were,” Arthur admitted, hanging up his phone and pushing it back into his pocket. “Though, to be honest, I didn’t try to look for one.”

Alfred sighed. “You coulda called and asked me.”

Arthur hummed at the advice, massaging his temples as Sara lingered at the edge of the table.

“Is he gonna be okay?” She asked Alfred, giving Arthur a concerned look. Arthur didn’t dare to hold that gaze. It was too much like Alfred. Too fearful, too disappointed… just too much. So he curled his hands around his paper cup and dipped his chin down, hoping to seem as inconspicuous as possible. Alfred placed a hand on his back and gave him a few, soft pats.

“I think he’ll be fine. I’ll take him home.” Alfred gave Arthur another pat. “You ready to go? Or do you wanna sit for a while?”

“No,” said Arthur quickly. He stood from his chair too fast and wobbled a bit, but Alfred easily took his shoulders and held him steady. Arthur leaned into Alfred’s hands. “I’m… I’m tired. I think I… we should go home.”

Alfred thanked Sara for being concerned, gave her a generous tip, and ushered Arthur out the door. The rain still came down heavily on Seattle, but it was no longer welcoming. The comfort and familiarity had been washed down the glistening streets, leaving Arthur with a chill that made his teeth chatter.

Using his own jacket, Alfred sheltered Arthur from the rain as he took him to the car, opening the door and letting Arthur sit comfortably before closing the door. It was warm inside… had Alfred turned on the heat? The sudden changed in temperature made Arthur shiver a little harder, and he pulled the spare jacket that Sara gave him a little closer. Arthur blinked. This jacket didn’t belong to him.

When Alfred got in the car and shook his head to get rid of the rain that clung to him, Arthur reached out a hand and pulled on his coat sleeve. “Alfred,” he said urgently. “Alfred, this isn’t my coat. I need to give it back.”

Alfred gave him a soft smile. “Sara said you can bring it back any time you want,” he smiled. Arthur made a face. He didn’t remember Sara saying that? Had he not been paying attention? Alfred started the car and said, “She said it was a spare jacket they keep in the back. We can wash it and give it back to them some other time.”
“Oh,” Arthur murmured as he sat back in his seat. He struggled to buckle his seatbelt with shaking hands, but Alfred waited patiently until he was ready. When Arthur was comfortable situated, Alfred gave him a smile and pulled out onto the street.

Arthur glanced out the window as they drove, giving his one frequented café a sad look as it shrank in the rain-blurred rearview mirror. He’d give the jacket back another day. His hands shook, his head pounded, and he sniffled sadly. Yes… another day.

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Alfred’s fascinated whistle echoed through the bedroom as Arthur curled under multiple layers of thick blankets. “Your temperature is 102.1, Arthur! Pretty impressive for a guy who just went walkin’ in the rain for a while! You’ve hardly been home for an hour, and you’re sick already.”

“Ah, yes,” Arthur croaked miserably. Everything ached. It hurt to speak. But still, he had a witty retort to give. “It was all a master plan to impress you.”

Alfred laughed as he came out of the bathroom with a wet washcloth in hand, giving Arthur a disapproving look over the rim of his glasses. “Well, Mr. Kirkland, this is a valuable learning opportunity.” He dabbed at the sweat on Arthur’s brow, careful to avoid his bandage. Arthur sighed at the cool feeling the icy cloth brought, but shivered when it registered with his fever-wracked system. Alfred shook his head fondly. “You shouldn’t go out in the rain without an umbrella.”

Arthur wrinkled his nose at the advice. “I just needed to leave.”

“And why’s that?”

Pursing his lips, Arthur contemplated his reasoning as Alfred continued to wipe away the salty traces of sweat on his face. His hands were curled around the blankets, pulling them closer as cold water from the cloth dripped down from his cheeks onto his neck. Alfred didn’t mind his shivering, and dutifully continued to gently wipe the washcloth over Arthur’s forehead and cheeks.

“I felt trapped,” Arthur finally muttered. Alfred gave him a confused look, and Arthur cleared his scratchy throat to try again. “Edith called and started ordering me around… she didn’t understand. She wouldn’t listen. I felt like… like she was suffocating me. Smothering down my amnesia and pretending it wasn’t real.”

Alfred gave a thoughtful nod. “She didn’t really believe me when I told her about the accident. I told her to give you some space for a while, but I guess that didn’t happen.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. “You told her to give me space?”

Another nod. “You’ve been going through a lot, Arthur. And Edith is… well, she’s a lot to handle. I didn’t want you to get overwhelmed or pressured into something. You need a break.”

“I think that’s true,” Arthur sighed as he closed his eyes. Alfred brushed hair from his forehead and swiped the washcloth over his clammy skin. Arthur heaved another unhappy sigh. “I need to take a break.”

“That’s right, sweetheart,” Alfred said softly. Arthur could almost hear the smile in his voice as Alfred pulled another blanket up to cover him. “You take a break. Take it easy.”

Relaxing back against the pillows, Arthur absentely listened as Alfred shuffled about the
room quietly. The damp cloth was left on his forehead, chilling his skin as he tried to ignore the ache in his head. Before long, Alfred tiptoed out of the room, closing the door with a shrill squeak when he stowed away downstairs. The television was turned on just loud enough for Arthur to hear it, and when the meteorologist’s droll tones hummed through the stairway, Arthur finally felt himself drawn in the blankets.

So much had happened in one day; he’d spoken to his editor, might have fired his editor, went out into the city, met a young undergrad for the second time, and caught a terrible cold. It was no wonder his body felt bogged down with limitless fatigue. He was more than surprised to hear what Sara had to say about him. She said he’d helped her write essays for school. Did that mean he was a good person, or had he been trying to make up for his poor behavior? That would make him rather shallow. Sara had said that he had been in a bad mood… Arthur wanted to know why. It could’ve been because of a book, or Edith… or Alfred. Arthur felt his stomach churn as he shifted under the blankets.

His head continued to pound and his skin still burned, but the washcloth was cool and his blankets helped his shivers. Though he tossed and turned, his fever only seemed to increase. Had Alfred given him enough aspirin? It seemed ineffective when Arthur had to throw the blankets off to feel cool again. His washcloth fell to the side of his pillow, already warmed by his feverish skin and virtually worthless in the face of Arthur’s pain.

Bringing up a hand to scratch at his forehead, Arthur realized that his bandage was gone. Had Alfred removed it? Had he fallen asleep and taken it off while dreaming? It didn’t matter. All Arthur could think about was his dry throat. How long had it been since he’d had a drink of water? It felt like an eternity since he drank the tea at Sara’s café.

“Alfred,” he groaned, pushing a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. “Alfred,”

“Shh,” Alfred hummed next to him. Arthur jumped at the closeness of his voice and rolled over to give Alfred a hazy frown. With his eyes still closed, Alfred gently draped his arm over Arthur’s waist and pulled him closer. “I’m here, baby. I’m right here.”

Though Alfred meant to be comforting, his body heat only worsened Arthur’s discomfort. Wriggling a bit, Arthur pushed away Alfred’s arm and laid flat on his back again. It was too hot. It was raining outside. Thunder rumbled far away. Arthur’s skin was sticky with sweat. Too much, too much… Swallowing thickly, Arthur reached over to shake Alfred.

“Alfred,” he said, hearing Alfred mumble something unintelligible in his sleep. “Alfred, get up. Get up… I need water.”

“I’m right here, baby,” Alfred sighed, “I’m a tall drink of water.”

Arthur snorted at the response, but didn’t stop trying. He gave Alfred another shove as he said, “Alfred, our marriage vows say ‘in sickness or in health.’”

“So?” Alfred grunted into his pillow without an ounce of ambition.

Arthur huffed, “So I need you to love me when I’m sick, and get me a god forsaken glass of water.”

After a long, rumbling sigh, Alfred rolled across the bed and slapped his feet on the carpeted floor. “Why is the glass forsaken?” He muttered to himself as he wandered to the door. “What did the glass of water ever do to god?”
Arthur smiled at the question. Alfred was always analytical when he was tired… it was why conversations in the middle of the night were so entertaining. But with the way he felt, Arthur couldn’t handle a full conversation. His muscles ached, his head ached, and everything just burned. Arthur wouldn’t be surprised to learn that he was actually on fire. Well, Arthur reasoned, it was a good thing that Alfred was getting him water. He could put out the fire.

When Alfred returned, lightning flickered through the gossamer curtains over their window, casting an eerie glow over Alfred’s half-naked physique as he trudged across the room. Arthur’s vision was hazy and churning, but he still gave Alfred a warm smile.

“Such a good husband,” Arthur murmured as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. Alfred wordlessly held out the glass of water, and with trembling hands, Arthur struggled to take a sip. When some of the water ran over the rim and down over Arthur’s chin, Alfred took hold of the glass and held it steady for Arthur as he drank. The glass was set aside, and Arthur flopped back onto the mattress. “Good husband. Good Alfred.”

Alfred yawned as he crawled over Arthur and onto his side of the bed. “What? Am I a dog now?”

“Well,” Arthur squinted at the ceiling, “That is a very interesting thought.”

Alfred’s voice was half-muffled by his pillow when he said, “Would you still love me if I were a dog?”

Arthur let his eyes flutter shut. “Probably.”

Alfred let out a laugh as he adjusted the way his head sat on his pillow. “Wow. Perv.”

Rolling onto his side, Arthur groped around the bed until he found Alfred’s butt. He gave it two pats, just for good measure. Then muttered into the warm skin of Alfred’s shoulder, “Good boy.”

“You’re funny when you’re sick,” Alfred laughed as he rolled away and let Arthur claim his pillow. Arthur felt his breath; it was hot on his fiery skin. Steam meets flame. Alfred kissed his forehead. “But I like you when you’re not all goofy.”

“If you were a dog, you’d lick me instead of kiss me,” Arthur mumbled into Alfred’s pillow. Above him, Alfred sat up and dragged his fingers through Arthur’s heavy hair. Arthur smiled at the feeling. It felt a little cooler than just letting his sweaty hair stick to his skin.

Alfred yawned again. “Do you want me to lick your face?”

“That would be disgusting, love,” Arthur groaned. Saliva was hot, anyway. It would make him even warmer. Would he melt, like lava? Perhaps become a pile of mush? “Would you love me if I melted completely?” He asked, his legs kicking at the blankets to keep away the heat. The movement only made him warmer.

The ministrations to Arthur’s hair paused before Alfred laughed, “What?”

“I’m going to melt, Alfred,” Arthur said pointedly as he curled around Alfred’s pillow. He was now lying horizontally on the bed, halfway draped over Alfred’s legs, but it didn’t help. He was still burning up. He spread himself out in the shape of a star, hoping to air out his melting skin. “I’m too hot. I’ll just melt.”

“Like ice cream,” Alfred smiled, ducking his head down to kiss Arthur’s neck. “Yum.
“Alfred, Alfred… I’m really not in the mood,” Arthur groaned as Alfred kissed down his neck.

Alfred blew on the shell of Arthur’s ear. “Just trying to distract you, baby.”

Arthur frowned and pressed his cheek into his pillow. “It’s not working.”

The air was damp with sweat, and thunder cracked like a whip outside their window. Arthur wanted to cool down. He needed to get rid of the sticky heat. When thunder rumbled far away, Arthur glanced at the window. Rain. Rain was cold. It was the perfect remedy to whatever fever was stuck to him. Pushing Alfred away, Arthur got up on unsteady legs, pried open the bedroom window, and stuck his head out into the refreshing rain.

It was heavenly. It was like the first snowfall of winter that left Arthur breathless every year. So cool and sharp against his heated skin, it may as well have been hail. Sharp bits of ice cutting through the hot lacquer of his fever. Arthur closed his eyes and opened his mouth, feeling the icy water bite into his tongue and scratch at the ache in his throat.

“Arthur! Arthur, what are you doing? You’re sick!” Alfred grabbed his shoulders and pulled him away from the window. Arthur stumbled back in his arms, sputtering as he realized how much rain had gotten into his mouth. Alfred was quick to pull the window shut. “Are you crazy? You’re gonna make your fever worse! Here,” Alfred pushed him down onto the mattress. “Stay. Don’t move.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” Arthur rubbed his eyes and wiped rain from his cheeks. Now his hair was damp for a new reason, but the cool effect didn’t last long. Already, the chilled rain seemed to be evaporating on his hot skin. Arthur would surely evaporate with it. He’d turn into a cloud of steam that clung to the ceiling. “Alfred, I feel hot again.”

Silently, Alfred came back into the bedroom – when had he left? – with a washcloth in hand. Without pausing, he started to wipe the cool, damp cloth across Arthur’s skin. Oh, that felt wondrous. It pulled away the heavy, sticky sweat and left Arthur feeling a bit lighter. Alfred didn’t pause for dignity when he peeled Arthur’s shorts away and wiped the cold cloth along his thighs. Arthur nearly caved in on himself. He wasn’t even paying attention to his aching muscles anymore, he was distracted by the pleasant coolness of Alfred’s hands. He must’ve run them under cold water.

Smart man, Alfred. He was a smart, smart man. Arthur picked a good man to love.

Grabbing the back of Arthur’s thigh and pulling his leg up, Alfred kissed the side of his knee. “Is this better?”


Alfred chuckled. “Are you still gonna melt from the heat?”

Arthur shook his head lazily. “I don’t think I have it in me.”

“Good,” Alfred purred as he crawled back up to press a kiss to Arthur’s forehead. “This fever is just messing with you, but you’ll be fine. So, no more crazy ideas about me being a dog or you melting, understand?”

“Right,” Arthur breathed as Alfred passed the rag over his arms. His head swam with the
perfect way to perfectly describe what he felt. “It’s… it feels like… like I’m a burning flame being dunked in cold water. Like I’ve fallen into a frozen lake. Like I’ve… I’ve…”

Alfred hushed him softly, kissing his lips to stop the words from continuing. “Take it easy, baby. I’ve got you. You don’t need to think so hard all the time.”

Arthur’s brow wrinkled. “I can’t stop my brain. I’m always thinking of something. I can’t just –”

“Hey, hey…” Alfred kissed his forehead again. “Take a break, Arthur. You don’t need to think right now. Just sleep for a while… you’ll feel better. You can think when you wake up.”


“Sure you can, sweetie. Just relax. I’m right here.”

Arthur pried open his eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of that impish smile, only to see the beige ceiling above him. The blankets were off of his legs and the washcloth was stuck to his pillow, but Alfred was nowhere to be found. Sitting up dizzily, Arthur glanced down to see that he was still wearing his underwear. It must’ve been a dream… or a memory.

Knowing it was most likely the latter, Arthur pushed himself up onto wobbly legs. He held onto the railing on the stairs, carefully squinting at each step until he made it safely to the bottom. In the living room, the television was still on, though the volume as hardly a whisper. Alfred was slumped in his chair, his face in his hand as he snored softly through the ending credits of a movie he’d slept through. Arthur tried to ignore the way his head throbbed at the scene.

Grasping Alfred’s shoulder softly, Arthur gave him a gentle shake. “Alfred,” he whispered, then winced. His voice was as dry as sand. He gave Alfred another shake. “Alfred?”

Alfred woke with a sharp inhale, sitting up and rubbing his face quickly. “What? I’m up. What’s wrong? You okay?”

Arthur gave a hazy nod. “I… I had a dream.”

“Okay,” Alfred took off his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose and yawned before speaking again. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

After a brief moment of consideration, Arthur shook his head. “No, I don’t… but, I can’t sleep.” Alfred gave him a vaguely confused look, and Arthur wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, careful of the bandage on the left side. “I… I’m too hot. I can’t sleep with this fever.”

Alfred sniffed and stood up slowly. “Did the washcloth fall off? That’s okay, I’ll get it nice and cold again.”

“Alfred,” Arthur said, taking a hold of Alfred’s sleeve. Alfred gave him a smile, waiting and complacent. Arthur blinked. “It’s just like before. I keep feeling hot, and I can’t sleep. I don’t want to stick my head out the window again.”

Alfred raised an eyebrow. “Stick your head out the window?”

Arthur nodded slowly, though it just made his head swim again. “I remembered having a fever and sticking my head out the window to feel the cold rain. You were upset.”

For a moment, Alfred made a face and looked down at the floor. Had it really happened,
or was Arthur making up silly things in his fever addled brain? It could’ve been both. Arthur only knew that the floor seemed to be bubbling. Fever-riddled hallucinations indeed.

“Well,” Alfred sighed as he adjusted his glasses, “I can’t exactly remember it. I might’ve been half-asleep. But hey, let’s get you back to bed.”

“But… it all seemed so clear,” Arthur sputtered as Alfred wrapped an arm around Arthur’s shoulders and steered him toward the stairs. “The heat, rain, the lightning…”

“There’s a storm outside,” Alfred offered, patting Arthur’s shoulders. “That might be what you dreamt about.”

Arthur stopped at the foot of the stairs, giving Alfred a hazy glare. “I know what I saw, Alfred. It was too real. I couldn’t have made those things up. I don’t know enough about you to just… imagine those things,” he leaned into Alfred as he looked at him with pleading eyes, “I know it was real,” he paused, then added, “Wasn’t it? It has to be… I didn’t just… make it up. I couldn’t… could I?”

“Woah, woah,” Alfred laughed as he rubbed Arthur’s shoulders and helped him up the stairs, “Take it easy, Arthur. No one is gonna make you write an essay about the dream any time soon. You can relax.”

Arthur’s head pounded as he and Alfred ascended the stairs. “I can’t. I just want to know if it was real… or if I made it up. I want to think.”

“Sure, sure,” Alfred nodded, leading Arthur into the bedroom. “You just don’t need to think so hard,” he laughed for a moment, “I tell you that all the time.”

Arthur nodded sleepily. “You said that in my dream.”

“Well, maybe it was a memory.” Alfred yawned as he sat Arthur down in bed and gave his shoulder a pat. “Now that it’s settled, why don’t you try to get some sleep?”

“But I just remembered so much,” Arthur watched his vision spin and blur as he swayed on the bed. “I… I can’t sleep now. I should talk about what I remember. I should… I should stay awake.”

“You’ve got a fever, Arthur. You should sleep. Just relax,” Alfred took the washcloth and disappeared into the bathroom, muttering as he left, “I’ll be right back.”

Arthur slowly, if not hesitantly, nodded in agreement. Alfred was right. He was always right when it came to keeping Arthur safe. He was warm, he was compassionate… he was a good man. When he returned with Arthur’s washcloth freshly cooled, Arthur gave him a hazy smile.

“You’re a good man,” Arthur sighed as Alfred dabbed at the sweat on his forehead. Alfred hummed thoughtfully, and Arthur said, “You were like this in my dream, too.”

Alfred gave a tired smile and nodded. “I’ve always been like this, Arthur. I haven’t changed.”

“But I have, haven’t I?” Arthur asked sadly, seeing Alfred’s eyes flicker darkly in the dim light from the bathroom. “I’ve changed.”

“You’re still you, Arthur,” Alfred answered stoically as he wiped the cold cloth across the back of Arthur’s neck. Arthur’s eyelids felt too heavy to keep open, and he let them fall shut as
Alfred said, “Even without your memories, you’re still here. Remembering little by little. And I’m still here, waiting for you.”

“You’re a good man,” Arthur smiled. “You’ll always be here, won’t you? You’ll be right here?”

“Yeah,” said Alfred, a smile on his lips. His hands were cool on Arthur’s cheeks. The washcloth was soft on his skin. Arthur’s eyelashes fluttered when his head hit the pillow. He didn’t remember laying back, but Alfred pulled a blanket over him and murmured, “I’m right here.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
See you next chapter.
Arthur didn’t feel himself wake up, but he did feel someone grab the back of his neck and throw him out of bed like a ragdoll. Arthur’s eyes snapped open when his brain caught up with his nerves, and he choked on air when his back was slammed against the wall. Vertigo hit him like a brick wall as he scrambled to get his bearings. Someone was shouting. No, no… two people. Alfred was one of them, tearing his way out of his and Arthur’s bed to stop whoever was holding Arthur against the wall. But who was holding Arthur’s back? Whose hands were shaking ever so slightly as they screamed at him?

Forcing his blurry eyes to focus, Arthur found himself staring wide-eyed and slack jawed at Alfred’s father.

“You think I didn’t know?” He hollered accusingly at Arthur. His speech was slurred but his eyes were wild. A dangerous combination. Arthur shrunk in on himself, trying to somehow defend himself from a man that was nearly twice his size. “You think I didn’t know, you little faggot?”

“Dad!” Alfred grabbed his father from behind and tried to pull him away from Arthur, grabbing onto blue overalls and tugging as hard as he could. “Dad, get off of him! Get off!”

Arthur tried to grit his teeth and steel himself against the barb words Alfred’s father screamed, but he couldn’t stop his breath from coming out in panicked gasps. Alarms were going off in his brain. His fight or flight senses were kicked into overdrive. Everything told him to run. Hide.

Get away from the drunkard madman as fast as he possibly could.

“You said you were with someone in college. I didn’t think you were with this little bitch!” Alfred’s father bellowed, shrugging off Alfred’s hands as he shook Arthur violently. Arthur made sure to bow his head to avoid a concussion, but his shoulders cracked against the dusty walls of their dorm painfully. Alfred’s father huffed angrily and shook Arthur again. “What do you think you’re doing to my son? Turning him into a little faggot like you?”

“Dad, knock it off! Stop! Leave him alone!” Alfred was fighting a losing battle, trying to put himself between Arthur and his father with no avail.

Arthur’s hands shook as he held them in front of his face in defense. His stomach churned, his eyes burned with tears, and he couldn’t stop hyperventilating. What was this? Alfred said that going to university would mean freedom. Alfred said that when they were together in the dorm, his parents wouldn’t bother them. Alfred said so many things. Was Alfred a liar, or was this simply a cruel twist of fate?
“What were you doing together, huh?” Arthur winced and leaned away as Alfred’s father loomed close, grimacing at his bed attire. “All curled up in that bed… were you fucking my son? My son?”

“Dad, stop! You’ve gotta stop!” Alfred grabbed a plastic clock from his shelf on the wall and threw it unnecessarily hard at his father.

David Jones’ head snapped forward with the force of the hit, slamming his forehead into the stone wall of the dorm directly next to Arthur’s head. With that, he went down like a sack of bricks, leaving Arthur trembling and gasping against the wall. Arthur looked down at the drunk, waiting for the moment when he would reach up and drag Arthur down to the floor. But there he stayed, his thinning hair mussed and stuck to his sweating brow as a bruise started to darken on his forehead.

“Oh god,” Arthur breathed, his shaking getting worse as he looked down at the limp body. “Oh my god…”

“It’s okay,” Alfred assured him, stepping forward and taking Arthur by his shoulders and pulling him away from his father. Alfred’s hands were shaking, too. Was he scared? Arthur didn’t bother to ask. They were both stuck looking at Alfred’s father on the floor, wondering what to do with him. Alfred swallowed and gripped Arthur’s upper arms a bit tighter when he said, “It’s… it’s okay.”

“He just hit his head. He just… fell down,” Arthur said softly, his eyes still watery with frightened tears. Alfred pulled him close, tucking Arthur safely into his arms. Arthur wrapped his arms around Alfred and clung tight. “How did he get in here? How did he find us?”

“He probably just saw us in town,” Alfred’s voice shook when he spoke, and he pat Arthur’s shoulder in an attempt to be comforting. It only worsened Arthur’s anxiety. Alfred took a deep breath, and let it out, raking a shaking hand through his hair. “He’s never wanted anything to do with me before this… this is crazy.”

“It looked like he was going to kill me.” Arthur closed his eyes, feeling a warm tear slide down his cheek. Alfred pat his shoulders again.

“I’m sorry,” Alfred whispered. Arthur had never seen Alfred so scared before. It made the whole situation worse. How could an apology fix the fact that Alfred’s alcoholic father had broken into their dormitory? How could it change the fact that Arthur was scared out of his mind? How would that change anything? Arthur knew there was nothing better Alfred could say, but the apology was bitterly received all the same. Alfred took a shuddering breath. “I’m sorry… Arthur, I’m so sorry.”

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Arthur woke in a cold sweat, his heart still running a marathon in his chest. David Jones. Alfred’s father. He was going to come and kill Arthur. If Alfred hadn’t been there… if Arthur hadn’t braced himself… he would surely be nothing but a large red splatter on the wall of his old dormitory. Arthur’s throat became tight and his chest felt numb.

“Alfred!” He sat up and screamed at the top of his lungs, looking around the eerily dark room for any signs of David Jones. A figure stood over him, their hands reaching out for him – Arthur jolted away from the shadowy outline, fighting to run away. “A-Alfred!”

His legs got tangled in the blankets and he fell out of bed sideways. His ankle was stuck.
He couldn’t breathe. The shadow was still reaching for him. It was Alfred’s father. It had to be. Arthur thrashed wildly and kicked his legs in an attempt to get free, but it only made him tired and dizzy. All around him, sound was muffled and Arthur could only scream Alfred’s name louder with hope that he would be heard.

David Jones reached for him, his large hands tearing through darkness in pursuit of Arthur’s throat. Arthur let out another scream, and the bedroom door burst open, slamming back against the wall with a solid crack.

“Arthur! Arthur, what’s wrong?”

A slight click echoed through the room, and Arthur gasped for air as he saw the empty room around him. Alfred stood in the bedroom doorway, his glasses askew and his hair a mess as he held a baseball bat tightly in one hand. He looked about the room for Arthur’s pursuer, but there was no one to find. The room was empty.

With his newly recovered vision, Arthur untangled himself from the blankets and scrambled up from the floor. Alfred caught him with open arms as Arthur ran to him. He was safe. Alfred was here. Burying his face in Alfred’s shoulder, Arthur let out loud, desperate sobs. Alfred held him. Alfred stroked his hair and listened. No one came after them. David Jones was nowhere to be found.

“He was going to kill me!” Arthur blubbered, his fingers pulling at Alfred’s hair. Alfred rubbed his back, and Arthur sniffed breathlessly. “H-he found me again. He was going to k-kill me!”

“It’s okay,” Alfred murmured, his voice deep and rumbling in his chest. Arthur felt the vibrations in his own chest, and he started to breathe a little easier. “It’s all right. No one’s coming for you.”

Arthur swallowed thickly, his shaking arms still wound around Alfred’s neck. “It seemed so real,” he whispered between sad gasps. Alfred nodded in empathy, and Arthur choked down another sob. “He… he almost had me. He was going to kill me.”

Alfred gave Arthur’s back a soft pat. “Who? Who was coming for you?”

Arthur sniffed sadly. “Your father… David Jones.”

For a long moment, Alfred was quiet and stiff, letting Arthur continue to quietly cry against his shoulder. Arthur felt incredibly stupid… he’d let his mind trick him into thinking he was in danger. He let a nightmare take over reality. But Alfred didn’t laugh at the childishness of the act. He didn’t even smile. He just let his baseball bat fall to the floor with a dull thunk, and enveloped Arthur in a hug.

It was so incredibly warm. Granted, Arthur’s fever had yet to go down, but Alfred’s warmth had a gentler feeling. It was more soothing than a cup of tea. Softer than the nicest pillow. Arthur didn’t want to let go. Alfred could tell.

“I’m sorry.”

“You said that when he came after me,” Arthur remembered softly, mumbling into the fabric of Alfred’s shirt. He sniffed and said, “You threw a clock at his head.”

Alfred let out a low chuckle. “He slammed his face into the wall and knocked himself out. Not exactly the smartest move.” Alfred rubbed Arthur’s back, and Arthur let his eyes flutter
shut when Alfred sighed, “Though, after that, we got a pretty hefty restraining order on him. He never tried to come after us again. He’d never be able to afford the fines.”

Arthur hummed thoughtfully and adjusted the way his face rested on Alfred’s shoulder. His nose was pressed against Alfred’s neck and he could still smell the cologne from the other day. Alfred had rescued him from the coffee shop two days ago, and Arthur had been holed up in bed ever since. He’d missed his easy comradery with Alfred in the mornings. He missed watching films with him. So, although the hug was ill gained, Arthur was happy to receive it.

“Are you okay?” Alfred mumbled into Arthur’s hair. Arthur nodded once. “Wanna go back to sleep?” Arthur nodded again, and Alfred slowly unwrapped himself from Arthur. Arthur remorsefully did the same. Why did he enjoy hugging Alfred so much? It must’ve been second-nature to him. It was natural that he enjoyed a comforting embrace… wasn’t it?

Steering Arthur into bed, Alfred made a point to cool down Arthur’s ignored washcloth and place it back on his forehead. The blankets were set back in their rightful place, and Arthur was thoroughly tucked into bed.

Alfred pat the top quilt. “There. All comfy and cozy,” he gave Arthur a tired smile. Arthur gave a hesitant smile in return, and Alfred’s smile improved tenfold. He clapped his hands together with an air of finality and headed for the door. “If you need me, I’ll be downstairs on the couch. God, it’s already two a.m.?”

Though Arthur was quite fine with the idea of Alfred going back downstairs, there was still something niggling at the back of his brain. There was an uncomfortable energy that was settled in the room, and after Alfred turned off the lights, it only increased in intensity. The blankets felt too heavy. Alfred’s footsteps seemed too far away. Arthur was suffocating beneath the memory of a madman.

Sitting up quickly, Arthur choked out, “A-Alfred, wait!”

Footsteps quickly thudded up the stairs, and Alfred hit the light switch again. They both squinted at the strong light for a moment, and then they openly stared at one another. Arthur bit his bottom lip; he called Alfred back, so… now what? Alfred couldn’t just stand by the door all night just so Arthur felt safe. Alfred needed to sleep, too.

“Everything… still okay?” Alfred asked with a half-smile.

Arthur nodded shakily. “Yes. I just… wanted…” what? What did Arthur want? He wanted Alfred’s comforting company. He wanted his headache and fever to go away. He wanted his memory to come back so he wouldn’t feel so helpless. Biting back those responses, Arthur blurted, “Just wanted you to come check.”

Alfred gave him a strange look. “Come check what?” He looked around the bedroom suspiciously. “Do you want me to see if my dad is hiding in here, somewhere?”

Gnawing on the inside of his cheek stupidly, Arthur nodded. Maybe that would make him feel better. If Alfred – being the capable man he was – checked the room for security, it would be much more comforting than Alfred just sitting awake in his room until dawn.

So, Alfred went around the room and checked in the most obvious – and ridiculous – places that his father could hide. The dresser, the closet, the bathroom. He moved onto the nightstands, pulling out the drawers and giving Arthur a shrug when his father did not magically appear inside them. Arthur rolled his eyes. When he’d done a full sweep of the room, Alfred finally
got down on his hands and knees to check under the bed. Arthur sat quietly through it all, his hands clenched anxiously in his lap until Alfred sat up and smiled.

“All clear! No bad guys here,” Arthur stood up and stretched his arms above his head. “No boogieman, no demons, and no crazy dads.” He gave Arthur a fond smile as he put his hands on his hips. “You’re safe.”

Pinching the blankets in his lap, Arthur nodded quietly and watched Alfred go to the door. His footsteps were so soft; Arthur could almost imagine Alfred was merely a friendly spirit passing through on his way to bed. But before Alfred could get through the doorway, Arthur jolted where he sat and grasped the blankets tight.


Nodding thoughtfully, Alfred shuffled back into the room as he rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. “I think… I should probably stay here with you tonight.” Arthur’s heart jumped up into his throat, and Alfred sighed softly. “I mean, I don’t want you to be alone when you’re scared,” he smiled, “When you wake up and think he’s here, you’ll see me and you’ll know that you’re safe.”

Arthur rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I’m not a child, Alfred. I’m not helpless.”

“But everyone can get scared, Arthur. It’s what makes us human,” Alfred sat down on his side of the bed and gave Arthur another winning smile. “If you don’t want me to stay, I’ll go back downstairs.”

Sidling back under the blankets, Arthur pulled his favorite quilt up to his chin and gave Alfred a cautious look. “You should stay,” he murmured as he blinked slowly. Alfred smiled wider, and Arthur sniffled softly. “If it would make you feel better.”

As Arthur’s eyes closed slowly, he could feel Alfred’s hand combing through his hair gently as his husband quietly said, “It would make me feel a little better.”

Arthur still woke up several times that night, his skin clammy and his heart racing. Alfred was there every time, kneeling next to the bed and slumped over the blankets awkwardly. Arthur would reach for his hand and hold it tight as Alfred pulled himself from sleep to blink at Arthur blurrily.

“Hey,” he breathed as he would adjust his crooked glasses. Arthur held his hand tighter, and Alfred squeezed his hand back. “You okay? Did you have another dream?”

“I can’t remember,” Arthur would whisper as sleep started to drag him down yet again. Alfred would smile and nod slowly.

“I’m right here, baby,” he would yawn, patting Arthur’s hand comfortingly. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

“I know,” Arthur murmured as his eyes finally fluttered shut. “I know.”

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Alfred squinted at the thermometer skeptically as Arthur sat expectantly on the sofa. Arthur had been stuck in the bedroom for three days trying to sweat out his fever, and now that
Arthur felt well enough to stay downstairs, Alfred was having a fit. He’d thrown pillows under Arthur before he could sit down. He’d tried to wrap two blankets around him, even when Arthur swatted at his hands. Each time Arthur would reach for his glass of water, Alfred would snatch it up and hand it to him. Did he think Arthur had magically turned into a frail, porcelain doll? It was endearing, but irritating.

If the fever had gone down, Alfred would have no real reason to fuss. So Arthur raised his eyebrows and waited for Alfred to announce his temperature. It would be a surprise if it was anything other than ordinary.

Holding the small, plastic thermometer up to the light, Alfred pursed his lips and shook his head. “This thing is faulty. Has to be. You still look pale. I vote that you stay in bed for another day.”

Arthur groaned and fell sideways on the sofa. “If I stay in bed one more day, I’ll crumble away to dust! I’m fine, Alfred. I’m done sleeping. I feel perfectly fine!”

“That’s the fever talking,” Alfred grumbled disapprovingly. “This is for your own good.”

Closing his eyes, Arthur brushed his fingertips against the line of thick bandage on his forehead. It still itched and it still stung to touch, but the horrible throbbing that used to accompany it was no longer present. Arthur sighed and opened one eye to glare at Alfred.

“Alfred, if you try to put me back to sleep, I will leave this house without warning.” He paused, then added. “Again.”

Letting out a long laugh, Alfred set the thermometer on the coffee table and sat down on the one cushion that Arthur hadn’t claimed. “You know, it’s Saturday. I have the day off, today. So if you go out, I’ll be right here to see where you go.”

Arthur made a face. “That’s more… creepy than comforting.”

For a second, Alfred sat and stared at the dim television screen, then finally said, “Yeah, it kinda is. I should’ve thought about that before I said it.”

For a moment, they both sat in peaceable silence. The top of Arthur’s head was resting comfortably against the side of Alfred’s thigh, and as the seconds wore on, Alfred’s large, warm hand can down to comb through Arthur’s hair. It was a familiar gesture, almost one that Arthur could remember, but as he sat with his eyes closed his heart wide open, no memories graced his mind. He simply settled with the fact that Alfred had pet his hair like that before. They must have sat on the sofa like this, quiet and comfortable as a morning passed them by long ago.

Before Arthur could ask if they sat together like this often, Alfred stood up and snatched his car keys from the table, leaving Arthur to sit up slowly and blink at his sudden urgency.

“When you went out last time, you said you just wanted to get out, right?” He asked, voice loud and his eyes bright. Arthur nodded once, and Alfred raised his hands in the air excitedly. “Yeah! People go crazy if they’re cooped up inside for too long. So let’s go out and have fun!”

Arching one skeptical eyebrow, Arthur slowly stood up as Alfred took his phone from the table and stuffed it into his pocket. “Wait, wait… where are we going?”

“Outside!” Alfred said excitedly. “Hold on, I’m gonna get you a jacket. Don’t want you
to get sick again!

Pursing his lips, Arthur watched Alfred bound up the stairs enthusiastically. Was he always like this? In the memories he had been able to recall, Alfred always seemed a tidbit excitable. He was warm, kind and happy, even in spite of a dark, unfriendly past. There were so many different ways Arthur could see Alfred, he just didn’t have enough memories to say whether or not Alfred was really childish or merely humoring him.

So, with a slight smile, Arthur allowed Alfred to tuck him into a gray, wool coat and tote him outside. With Arthur safely put in the car, Alfred bounced in his seat as he drove away from the house. The city was bright that day, glistening with the light of a sun that Arthur hadn’t seen for too long. The warmth was nice in the face of his chilling sickness, and he smiled as he and Alfred cruised along the streets of Seattle.

“So,” Arthur murmured as he rubbed the top of his knees to create warmth. “Where are we going?”

Alfred smiled as he made a right turn. “We are going to a totally awesome place. It’s gonna be great. You’ll love it!”

Narrowing his eyes, Arthur muttered, “That doesn’t exactly tell me anything, Alfred.”

“But I know you’ll like it.”

Snorting at the statement, Arthur stared out the window a bit longer before he muttered, “I don’t like surprises.”

“Yeah,” Alfred sighed, “You were always bad at keeping surprises, too. You always wanted to tell me something as soon as possible so you could see my reaction. It was pretty funny.”

Arthur rolled his eyes as he asked, “How is that funny? I ruin surprises. That sounds more irritating than amusing.”

“The way you did it,” Alfred said as he gave Arthur a smile. “It was pretty dang cute.”

Trying to ignore the heat that flooded his chest, Arthur turned to the window said, “Or maybe you’re just easily amused.”

With a slight smile, Alfred reverted his attention back to the road as he continued to drive. The houses that they passed where all tall, glimmering, and impressive. Arthur could see why he’d want to live in a beautiful neighborhood like this, but he wished he remembered some part of their old apartment. Did they get along when they were there? Were things difficult? No doubt they were. It was impossible to guess the circumstances until he asked Alfred himself.

But… Arthur turned to give Alfred a speculative glance, taking in his easygoing smile and lax grip on the steering wheel. He could ask about their life together, but there was something that held Arthur’s tongue. He’d already learned so much about their interactions in the past. Alfred’s kindness, his warmth, his naïveté… there was so much more to Alfred Jones than Arthur had previously realized, and if this little excursion into the city would help him learn more about his husband, then… then perhaps it wasn’t such a terrible idea to wait and learn all that he could before asking frivolous questions.

As they approached their apparent destination, Arthur narrowed his eyes at the buildings around them. There were several toy and game stores, and Arthur’s attention sparked when a bookstore caught his eye. However, when Alfred pulled the car over in front of a clean, brick
building, Arthur felt his interest drop several levels.

“This looks like a candy shop,” he deadpanned before he gave Alfred an unimpressed stare. “Why are we at a candy shop?”

Alfred’s enthusiasm didn’t wane as he smiled and unbuckled his seatbelt. “Candy shops are always fun, Arthur! You love his one!”

“Well, I don’t exactly –” Arthur began as Alfred got out of the car. The door slammed shut before Arthur could say: “Remember this place.”

Something in his stomach struggled with the idea of Alfred’s excitement. There was some part of Arthur that knew he wasn’t going to remember the store, even if Alfred hoped he would. This was going to be the photo album all over again. Arthur would see so many things he should remember, but nothing would come back to him. Alfred would get that sad look on his face. The one that made Arthur’s chest ache.

The door of the car opened, and Arthur jumped in surprise. Alfred leaned in the doorway and gave Arthur a worried smile.

“You okay?” He asked softly. So kind. So concerned. Arthur pasted a fake smile to his lips in response.

“Fine. Everything is fine. Just thinking.”

“Don’t think too hard,” Alfred said as he helped Arthur out of the car. “You’ll give yourself another fever.”

“Very funny,” Arthur grumbled as Alfred locked the car and headed for the entrance of the candy shop.

When the glass doors of the store slid open with a quiet, hushing sound, Arthur was bombarded by the thick scent of sugar in the air. Chocolates, caramels, and sour candies lined the walls and several displays around them, and Arthur grasped Alfred’s hand for support as the diverse colors and sounds threatened to turn his brain into mush.

Children were prancing through the store with their poor, tired parents in tow. Children in all directions were saying “I want this!” in the same repetitive, whining tone. A few employees dared to walk the aisles of candy, but the vast majority of them stayed hidden safely behind the front counter, watching the children make messes out of their large, ornate displays.

“This is a madhouse,” Arthur hissed into Alfred’s shoulder. Arthur blinked as he noted his cheek was mere inches from the side of Alfred’s face. When had they gotten so close? He glanced up to see Alfred grinning happily, and Arthur took a liberal step back as he grumbled, “It looks more like a children’s playhouse than a candy store.”

“Oh, come on,” Alfred said as he tugged Arthur forward. “You love chocolate! We used to come here once a month to get the good stuff.” He plucked one candy from a plastic container and held it in front of Arthur’s face with a smile. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll remember some of the chocolate.”

Hesitantly taking the chocolate, Arthur turned the golden, foil wrapped candy in his hands over and over. Alfred was getting hopeful again. Alfred was getting eager. Horrifying nightmares aside, Alfred knew he was remembering things. This small development was enough to make Alfred’s enthusiasm soar in the face of Arthur’s amnesia. Sadly, this meant the pressure was
Pursing his lips, Arthur placed the candy back into its container and looked at his surroundings. Alfred was gone. Feeling a hint of panic seep into his blood, Arthur turned on his heel in frantic search of his husband. His wool coat flared out at his knees and it felt heavy on his shoulders, but it wasn’t a substitute for Alfred’s grounding presence. Nothing could replace Alfred’s unique ability to comfort Arthur.

After turning in a circle for the third time, Arthur spotted Alfred snaking around a crowd of belligerent parents. They were complaining about their children’s boundless energy, but Arthur didn’t have the heart to tell them that sugar only made it worse. So he pursued Alfred instead, grasping his wrist when he was finally close enough and keeping him near.

Alfred turned to give him a vaguely confused look. “What’s wrong? Didn’t want any chocolate?”

“You just left me there,” Arthur grumbled unhappily as a blonde mother bumped into him and glared offensively at Arthur, like he was the one to blame for the collision. Arthur scooted closer to Alfred. “I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

Alfred shrugged helplessly, pulling some sort of packaged taffy from the shelf on the nearest wall and giving it an appraising look. “I figured you would want to look around. That’s what you always do.”

“I don’t remember what I always do,” said Arthur as Alfred put the taffy back on the shelf. Wriggling his wrist out of Arthur’s grasp, Alfred laced their fingers together and led Arthur through the store slowly. Arthur sighed, “I don’t remember this place.”

“Hey, hey,” Alfred said with a smile. Too forced. Not quite happy enough to be sincere. Alfred plucked a wrapped chocolate from a close shelf and held it out to Arthur. “Stay here. I’m gonna go pay for this, and then you can try it.”

“But I don’t want –” Alfred was gone before Arthur could finish, and he was left with words dangling uselessly on his tongue.

Grinding his teeth, Arthur watched the children around him reach up for candy, demanding it from their parents. In some ways, Arthur could nearly muse that they were like imps in the forest hunting for small berries and nuts. The smaller children could have been pixies, fluttering their fingers and reaching for the treasure high above their heads. Arthur smiled at the thought. It would be an interesting idea to write, but there was no plot, no significance… it was merely a spot of inspiration that needed to be noted for posterity.

While Arthur debated the pros and cons of writing a children’s book about fairies, Alfred pushed through the crowd of unhappy parents with a few different candies in hand. Arthur gave them a skeptical look, but Alfred’s smile seemed to cue that he was holding the key to Arthur’s memories in a handful of chocolate.

“Okay! So, I got your favorite kinds, right here,” he plucked one candy up, and Arthur held out his hand tiredly. Alfred dropped the green-foil candy into Arthur’s palm. “This one is chocolate and mint. You love mint. Like, with a passion. When we have cocoa at Christmas, you make me put a candy cane in your cup for you.”

“Fascinating,” Arthur muttered as he gave the candy a hard look.
Alfred put a pink-wrapped candy into Arthur’s hand next. “This one has that creamy raspberry filling in the chocolate. I can’t stand it, but you like it, and that’s what matters.”

“Very interesting,” Arthur said to the candy in his hand.

Finally, Alfred placed a third candy into Arthur’s palm and announced, “This is triple fudge chocolate. You love this one. I’m pretty sure it’s your favorite kind of chocolate from this place!”

Arthur gave the candies a look. They were just little treats. They weren’t special. They weren’t magic. It wouldn’t do any good to put stock in good candy. So, Arthur looked up and Alfred and sighed, “Well, it’s very kind of you to buy these for me, but I don’t think I want to –”

“Just try one? Please?” Alfred asked, pushing the hand that held Arthur’s candy close to Arthur’s chest. “You don’t have to have the whole thing. Just a nibble. And if you don’t like it, we can go somewhere else.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. “I want to see the bookstore we passed.”

“Try one chocolate first,” Alfred replied quickly.

Glancing down at the candy in his hand, Arthur pursed his lips. “If I eat all of them, you have to buy me whatever book I want.”

“Phew, you drive a hard bargain…” Alfred huffed as he adjusted his glasses. “But okay. Go for it.”

Following the order in which he was presented with the candy, Arthur took the mint-chocolate hybrid and unwrapped it. After giving Alfred a look, Arthur popped the small chocolate into his mouth. It took several seconds for anything to happen, but as the chocolate and mint began to melt and mingle on his tongue, Arthur felt a warmth spread through his limbs. Closing his eyes, he could feel Alfred’s warmth pressed close under the weight of a thick blanket. Bare skin burning across bare skin Alfred Arthur pulled Alfred closer. A cozy fire crackled in his ears, and Alfred’s warm whispers washed over his cheeks.

Opening his eyes quickly, Arthur blinked up at Alfred’s expectant eyes.

“Well?” Alfred asked quickly, “Did you like it?”

Humming thoughtfully, Arthur unwrapped the second chocolate and chewed it quickly, closing his eyes and waiting for some sort of sensual memory. There was no crackling fire in this flavor. Alfred was not so close, and no soft caresses washed over Arthur. Instead, he heard something akin to laughter. Sunlight flickered through his mind, and somewhere far away, Arthur nearly heard Alfred calling for him. It was warm and bright. It was summer, far away from the cities. Arthur heard crystal wind chimes. Pages turning. Someone was holding his hand. And he heard Alfred heave one of those soft, contended sighs.

Opening his eyes quickly, Arthur tore open the last chocolate and stuffed it into his mouth, not heeding Alfred’s warning to “take it slow.” These memories were so soft. So easy to feel. None of them made his head feel like it was crumbling apart. Each one was accompanied by an emotion that Arthur didn’t dare to name. Each flavor stuck to Arthur’s tongue and teeth as he closed his eyes and tried to think of the terribly rich chocolate in his mouth.

Too sweet, too sweet… it was rotting him away from the inside out. His stomach was hollow and his limbs were crumbling away into thin air. Disintegrating like sugar. Fading like
laughter on a summer day. Fleeting like a goodbye kiss.

Arthur felt Alfred’s strong hands on his waist, pulling him forward. One slid to the small in his back, dipping him back as their lips brushed ever so softly. So warm, but not hot enough. Sweet, but not like chocolate. Arthur leaned forward into the kiss, tasting along Alfred’s tongue. Sweet like sugar. So quick to taste but fading under his tongue all the same. “Arthur,” Alfred breathed when he pulled back for air. Arthur kissed him again, tasting chocolate syrup on his lips, feeling sweat slick in Alfred’s hair. Alfred kissed him back with vigor, but pulled away to moan the name, “Arthur,” once more. Arthur felt a tug, an urgent ache resounded through his muscles, and he grasped up for Alfred desperately. Pulling, pushing, giving, taking, so much but not enough…

“Arthur?” Arthur’s eyes snapped open to see Alfred giving him a worried look. “Are you okay? You got really quiet for a while.”

Looking around in surprise, Arthur noted that he was still in the candy shop. Children were still shouting in all directions. Parents grumbled along the far wall. Employees checked their cell phones. Turning back to Alfred quickly, Arthur reached up a hand to brush his fingers over his lips. He’d never remembered anything like that. Nothing quite so desperate, no contact so intense… it was nearly shameful to feel.

But it was good. Oh, god, it was good… the way Alfred sounded, the way he grabbed Arthur and held him close. Each part was a perfect fantasy that Arthur would never want to interrupt, no matter how ashamed he was.

Swallowing thickly, Arthur looked down at the candy wrappers in his hand. “I… remembered something.”

“Yeah?” Alfred asked, the pitch of his voice climbing as he stepped closer. “Was it something good? Something about this place?”

Arthur pursed his lips and turned over one of the empty foil wrappers. “No… not quite. I remembered chocolate,” it was the taste on Alfred’s lips. Almost like Alfred had been licking chocolate syrup off of something. Or someone. Arthur shook his head to clear his thoughts. “I remembered several things. It was… it was a tad overwhelming.”

“Oh. Really? We’ve only been here for a half an hour… do you wanna go home already?”

Shaking his head a bit, Arthur closed his hand around the foil wrappers and struggled a smile as he said, “N-no. I’d like to spend a little more time out and about.”

While Alfred laughed and led Arthur around the candy shop, Arthur couldn’t help but notice the way he couldn’t take his eyes off of Alfred. There was something in his smile when he’d turn and show Arthur something new. It was a soft, kind flicker in the light of his eyes. The palms of his hands were tough as they slid against Arthur’s when Alfred handed him something, and every time their hands would part, Arthur found himself wanting to grab those hands and hold them again. It was a perplexing feeling.

It made Arthur’s stomach churn anxiously and his head swim a bit too much. Like he was sick or stood up too fast. Alfred was a big breath of pure oxygen, and Arthur wasn’t ready to breathe that deep. It made his lungs ache and burn for more. It made his heart flutter. Waves of pure, unfiltered excitement poured over Arthur when Alfred would turn to smile at him, and Arthur knew why.
Fiddling with the wrappers in his right hand, Arthur bit the inside of his cheek and sidestepped a whining child. He was falling in love… with his husband. Was that possible? He already loved Alfred. Didn’t he? Somewhere deep, deep down in Arthur’s heart, there were much more complex emotions for Alfred. Arthur just wasn’t sure what they were. Hopefully he could figure them out – or remember them – before they completely consumed him.

“Arthur,” Alfred chimed over the din of children. Arthur looked up immediately, feeling something in his chest hum happily when Alfred grinned. “Ready to go?”

“To the bookstore,” Arthur declared with a nod. Alfred laughed in response, but it was a warm laugh. The kind that stuck to Arthur’s skin and made him feel warm from the inside out.

Alfred took his hand and steered Arthur through the candy store, carefully avoiding the bustling crowds near the registers and doors. That feeling pooled in the pit of Arthur’s stomach; that warm, cozy feeling of molten sentiment that tickled whenever he spoke to Alfred. Whenever Alfred looked back at him. Whenever Arthur thought about his memories of kissing Alfred. Warm, sheltered, and safe.

They arrived at the bookstore too soon, and Alfred released his hand too fast. Arthur stared at the endless shelves that stretched out in front of him with a hint of distain. There were so many things he could enjoy here, but he was so pleasantly distracted by Alfred that he didn’t want to get a book. Arthur wanted to feel Alfred hold him like he used to, and kiss him just the way Arthur remembered. He wanted Alfred to comfort him endlessly, and Arthur wanted to comfort him in return.

However, as Arthur glanced over at Alfred as he announced he was going to check the science section, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to comfort Alfred. He was missing too much of his memory… too many elements of Alfred’s personality. Arthur may have been falling in love with Alfred, but Alfred was in love with a different part of Arthur. A forgotten part. One that had been cast aside the very moment Alistair had decided to drive. The moment that Arthur couldn’t stop him. The moment Arthur woke up in the hospital.

Wrapping his arms around himself, Arthur trudged past the bored sales associate at the front desk and walked to the far corner of the store. A few young women were standing by the fiction section, pointing out books to each other as Arthur headed for a small place called ‘the reading corner.’

A small, plush chair was situated in the middle of a book-encased room. Next to the chair were stacks of books left behind by people that had decided against them, leaving them in an ever-growing pile of disinterest. A claw of disappointment scratched at Arthur’s throat when he saw that one of his own books was in the pile of discarded books, but he didn’t remove it. He had no right to judge whether someone liked his book or not. Just like he had no right to judge whether or not Alfred still loved him. It was a question that only Alfred could answer.

“Um, hey,” Arthur looked back at the group of girls that had been perusing the bookshelves earlier. The three girls stood giving Arthur semi-interested stares, though the first one with blue-tinted hair and bright eyes said, “Oh my god, I’ve seen you on TV!”

Arthur blinked. “I… pardon?”

“Yeah!” The girl exclaimed as she slapped the other girls’ arms. “See! I told you. He’s Arthur Kirkland! I’ve seen him on the news!” She bounced on her heels before giving Arthur a big, excited smile. “You were on Ellen once. I loved it! You and your husband are so cute!”
Nodding along, Arthur made an awkward, embarrassed noise as the teenager continued to fuss over him. Her friends seemed to be a little in awe of Arthur, though he couldn’t tell why. He was extremely ordinary. Were his books really that popular? Had he really been on the news and talk shows? The more Arthur tried to think about it, the more a sharp, biting sensation bit through his skull and made him wince. He tried to turn away and think of something else, but the blue-haired girl reached for his sleeve and tugged.

“Oh my god… I’m totally getting the second book today. Rising Echoes was so good, I read the whole thing in two days!” Arthur nodded in vague interest as the girl held out the second book, Whispering Willows to him. “Can you sign it for me? Please?”

Arthur flinched when his vision blurred on the right, but struggled a smile. “I’m afraid I don’t have a pen, Miss…?”

“Marcy,” she chirped as she dug through her large, black purse. Arthur nearly groaned when she produced a pen and handed it to him along with her book. Arthur’s vision swam, and he squinted at the first blank page of the book pointedly. Marcy stretched on her tiptoes to watch him, whispering, “You can just say ‘To Marcy’ or something. This is so cool!”

Arthur hummed affirmatively as balanced the book in one hand, slowly uncapped the pen, and started to write his dedication on the page. His vision was getting fuzzy around the edges. His head hurt. But this girl was so excited, and Arthur didn’t want to seem like he was brushing her aside. So he struggled to write her name as she spelled it out to him, slowly and surely curving the letters so they wouldn’t look messy. Then came his name. Arthur took a breath and glared down at his hand as it started to shake. Marcy didn’t let this go unnoticed.

“Oh, are you okay?” She asked, her voice echoing in irritating repetitions of genuine concern. One of Marcy’s friends, a tall, brunette girl, stepped forward to say, “He was in a car accident right? Is that what the bandage is for?”

Marcy leaned in close to see Arthur’s bandage, and Arthur stumbled back a few steps. He would’ve regained his balance if his head hadn’t been swimming. But, as black storm clouds closed in around Arthur’s vision, he tumbled back into the suede chair dedicated to reading. His head slammed against the back cushion, but he was thankful that it hadn’t hit the hardwood floor.

“Oh my god!” Marcy chanted as she circled Arthur like a worried mother hen. Arthur set down the book and pen so he could hold a hand to his forehead. Marcy’s friends were talking about calling an ambulance, and Marcy was wholeheartedly agreeing while Arthur gave them all a very irritated look. “He’s so pale! Oh my god, you guys… oh my god…”

Before Alfred could barge in and carry Arthur away in his arms, Arthur sat up straight and barked, “Quiet!”

With that, all of the girls stopped fluttering their hands. No one made a call. All of them stood silently as Arthur bent forward in the chair and massaged his temples. He’d been on Ellen. That sounded familiar, though the only thing that came to mind was laughter ringing through his ears. Marcy asked for his autograph… had that triggered the reaction?

He could almost remember giving autographs. A large bookstore filled with countless people that liked his book series. There were so many young, excited readers that were eager to see where he’d take the characters next. So many adults saying that they liked the diversity in age and race. Each person with a story to tell and only a few short seconds to tell it.

Arthur felt his head cleanly dividing itself in two as footsteps echoed in his ears. Heavy
footsteps. Like the person who was walking was holding up the weight of the world on their shoulders. Arthur jumped when a hand landed on his arm.

“Hey,” Alfred breathed. Gentle, slow. Softer than the hush of falling snow. Arthur pried open his eyes to look up at Alfred sadly. Alfred pasted on a fake smile and said, “Not liking the bookstore as much as you thought you would?” Arthur shook his head once, and Alfred nodded. “How about we head home, huh? Relax for the rest of the day?”

Alfred stood up and held out his hand for Arthur, and Arthur nearly took it until he saw Marcy’s book still sitting next to him atop the pile of unwanted literature. Before he could forget, Arthur took up the book and messily scrawled his name inside. He handed it to Marcy.


“I’m sorry I made such a scene,” Arthur murmured as he took Alfred’s hand and pulled himself out of the chair. “I didn’t mean to frighten anyone.”

Marcy held her book close as she gave Arthur a shy smile. “It’s okay. Sorry to freak you out.”

After making several uncomfortable noises, Arthur felt Alfred start to pull him away. He wasn’t ‘freaked out’ by this young woman… his memory was just going faster than he could follow. His head still spun and his temples ached like someone was attempting to crush Arthur’s head with a sledgehammer. But Alfred was with him, and Alfred steered him to the door of the bookstore. Careful and kind. Alfred was a good man. Arthur knew this well. A very good man.

With Alfred’s arm slung around his shoulders, Arthur leaned into Alfred’s side as they slowly walked down the pavement that lined the shops around them. The car wasn’t far, but Arthur wished it was. He wanted to stay pressed against Alfred’s side like this for a bit longer. He wanted to be sheltered and cared for long after they got home. He wanted Alfred to smile and hover over him with that concerned, warm air that he always had. He wanted those warm hands to brush over his cheeks. For those gentle hands to linger too long. For those lips to come too close.

When Alfred opened the car door for him, Arthur bowed his head shamefully and ducked into the vehicle. He couldn’t even remember everything about his husband, and yet he was having such thoughts… what kind of man did that make him? Arthur frowned at his reflection on the frost-flaked car window. He was a desperate man that wanted to be loved. He wanted Alfred’s approval, and not just his constant fussing.

They didn’t speak as they drove home. Alfred turned on the car radio to listen to a man and woman gossip, but it was hardly louder than a whisper through the stereo speakers. Arthur watched the city rush past him. The gray clouds in the sky signaled an imminent chill that would accompany winter. Arthur closed his eyes, trying to recall those warm, winter memories that had come with chocolate.

But no matter how hard Arthur thought about Alfred’s skin against his, or the countless kisses they no doubt shared, it was too far out of reach. The tangible memories were now nothing but a theory, and Arthur didn’t feel Alfred’s sunshine warmth. So Arthur stared sadly at the clouds. He watched the city he couldn’t remember. He didn’t try to remember the crackling heat of the fireplace. He didn’t try to remember Alfred’s warm, warm arms around him. Arthur closed his eyes, and resigned himself to feeling nothing. But rather than nothing, he felt cold.

Even if he couldn’t remember the warmth of Alfred’s arms, he could perfectly recall what it meant to be without it.
The heavy clouds of sleep parted slowly, leaving Arthur to blink up at the living room ceiling in sleepy bemusement. Arthur rubbed sleep from his eyes as he stretched out on the sofa. There was a foggy thought of confusion that lingered in his mind, but he didn’t give it much thought as he pulled the quilt around him closer. As he glanced around the living room, he saw Alfred sitting comfortably in his armchair, a thick book in his right hand and a coffee mug in his left.

Arthur sniffled. “’Ello.”

Alfred’s eyes rose from his book, and he gave Arthur a warm smile. “Hey, sleepy head. You’ve been out for most of the day. How ya feelin’?”

“I’m feeling tired.” Arthur said as he stretched again before curling up in his quilt. Alfred smiled a little wider, and Arthur returned the expression sleepily. “I don’t remember falling asleep.”

Alfred nodded and returned his gaze to his book. “You fell asleep on the car ride home from the bookstore.”

Arthur squinted down at his quilt. “Then how did I…?”

Alfred turned a page in his book casually as he said, “I picked you up and carried you inside. The stairs to the bedroom are too narrow, and I didn’t want to squish you, so I put you on the couch.” He took a sip of his drink, and calmly licked his lips. “No big deal.”

Giving Alfred an impressed look, Arthur wiggled his toes under the blankets. Alfred must have been very strong if he could hoist Arthur up in his arms and easily carry him inside. Or, it was just as likely that Alfred struggled quite a bit, and could only manage to bring Arthur to the sofa. Arthur smiled at the thought. Alfred looked much too strong to struggle. He probably carried Arthur with ease.

“Thank you,” Arthur sighed. “For bringing me inside.”

Glancing up at Arthur over the rim of his glasses, Alfred smiled. “No problem.”

While Alfred rerouted his eyes to his book, Arthur let his gaze wander about the room. The telly was quiet and dark. The clock ticked routinely on the mantel. And far behind Alfred’s chair, Arthur’s study still sat cluttered with unfinished thoughts. Arthur glared unhappily at the mess.

There were still stacks of papers lining the doorway, and piles of unexplored manuscripts that begged to be read. Arthur wrinkled his nose at the sight. He hadn’t thought about his study in days… he ought to clean up the mess he’d made.

So, kicking his legs to get the blankets off, Arthur unsteadily rose to his feet and shuffled across the living room. Alfred watched him closely, braced for any moment that he’d need to leap up and save Arthur from a disastrous fall. But Arthur simply placed one hand to the wall and used it as a crutch as he trudged to his forgotten mess.

“I should’ve clean this up,” Arthur muttered to no one in particular as he bent down to pick up a tattered manuscript. There was a coffee stain on the title paper, and Arthur tiredly brushed away a thick layer of dust as he gave the book a tired onceover. “There’s just… so much here.”
Alfred hummed thoughtfully from his chair, and Arthur heard him set his book aside. Arthur tiredly knelt down and started to sift through the papers, Alfred came to stand by his side.

“You definitely wrote a lot,” Alfred sighed. “It’s all you’d do in your free time.”

Arthur frowned and looked up at Alfred. “That’s all? Didn’t I ever make time for you?”

Kneeling down beside Arthur, Alfred rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, yes and no. If you were really inspired or close to a deadline, you’d stay in and focus on writing. But normally, we’d go out and do stuff all the time. We’d always have one date night a week.”

Arthur glanced down at the dozens of manuscripts. They must’ve taken months to write. And there were so many. It was no wonder they only had one date night a week. Arthur was writing every other second he could manage. Arthur rolled a piece of lint between his thumb and forefinger as he thought; did he ever regret writing so much? Did Alfred regret letting Arthur lock himself away and write? Arthur gave his husband a sidelong glance, but as the man in question idly smiled at the piles of papers, Arthur couldn’t determine if he was happy to see the writings, or if he was simply melancholic.

Picking up a manuscript, Arthur tucked it under his arm and sighed, “Well, I certainly didn’t neglect my writing.” Alfred chuckled at that, staying on the ground as Arthur stood up and wandered toward the stairs. He glanced back at Alfred. “I’m sure I loved you much more than the writing, though.”

Keeping his eyes on Arthur’s office, Alfred took a deep breath through his nose. “You know, it didn’t always seem that way. But I’d like to think that you did.”

Arthur’s heart sank at Alfred’s words. Was he always so focused that Alfred was left alone? Did Arthur really lock himself away that much? Fanning through the pages of the manuscript in his hand – the title too smeared to be legible – Arthur frowned at the thousands of words before him. How could he ever think that these stories were more important than his own husband?

“Well,” said Arthur softly. “I’m positive that I loved you more than all of this.”

Alfred looked back at Arthur with a hopeful smile. “Yeah?”


He didn’t know anything about his avid writing habits. He simply knew that Alfred had been there. He had been kind. Alfred had loved him. And… Arthur loved him in return, didn’t he? Arthur wanted to be sure that he did. But that certainty would only come with memories.

“I’ll turn in for the night,” Arthur murmured as he headed up the stairs, his manuscript held tight in his hand. He doubted he’d be able to read the first page before he fell asleep, but it didn’t stop him from bringing it along.

Still in front of the office, Alfred hummed in acknowledgement before he called, “Okay. Sleep tight.” Arthur had nearly closed the bedroom door when he heard Alfred’s voice echo in his ears, “And sweet dreams.”

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Arthur sat in his office, bouncing his leg tiredly as he itched to do something. There were papers lying all around him, but nothing that he really needed. The front door slammed. Feet
stomped on the floor angrily. Arthur let out an annoyed growl. Alfred was home.

“Arthur? Arthur, get your ass out here!” Alfred demanded shortly, “We need to talk!”

Without missing a beat, Arthur stood up from his desk chair, went to his door, and slammed it shut. At moments like this, he wished he’d gotten a lock. But past follies wouldn’t stop Alfred. Not today. He was just as high-strung as Arthur. Just as irritated. Just as hot-tempered.

Arthur heard him before he saw him.

“You can’t just hide from me all the time!” He shouted across the house as Arthur returned to his seat. Whenever Alfred shouted, it made Arthur’s palms sweat, but it wouldn’t stop him from yelling back.

“I’m busy!” His hands were shaking – with anger? Or fear? – and he wrung them in the air uselessly as he shouted, “Go tinker with your chemistry set or something! I’ve work to do.”

The stomping footsteps paused, then grew louder as Alfred stormed toward the office. Arthur braced himself for the impending slam, but couldn’t help but jump in his seat with the door swung open and slammed against the wall. Alfred stood huffing and puffing in the doorway, and Arthur swiveled in his chair to give him a rather irritated look.

“You’re just so high and mighty,” Alfred said as he stomped into Arthur’s office, waving his hand at the various stacks of books and papers. “You sit in your little office and pretend that I don’t exist, like I’m not even here!”

Arthur snorted and sat back into his chair with a roll of his eyes. “I’m doing my job, Alfred! The job that keeps this goddamned roof over our heads!” Alfred shook his head in disapproval, and Arthur leaned forward in his chair, pointing at Alfred accusingly. “And, might I add, you are not the center of my universe! I think about other things!”

Putting his hands on his hips, Alfred raised his eyebrows. “Oh yeah? I have a little trouble believing that you think of me at all these days.”

Arthur knew where this was going. “Don’t you dare –”

“You make it sound like I’m sort of inconvenience!” Alfred spat loudly.

Desperately trying to backpedal out of the argument, Arthur indicated to his desk futilely. “For god’s sake, I’m just –”

“Is that what I am to you?” Alfred asked pointedly, narrowing his eyes at Arthur.

Arthur shook his head and huffed. “Alfred, knock it off.”

“Answer me,” Alfred barked, leaning in close to loom over Arthur. “Am I just in your way? A distraction? Inconvenient?”

Arthur was tired of this. They had fought over where the majority of Arthur’s attention had been centered before. It had ended with Arthur simply giving up and having frustrated, angry sex with Alfred. But, as much fun as losing an argument was, he was busy. He had work to do. And like it or not, Alfred was in his way.

“You know what? Right now? You are in my way.” Arthur said stiffly, standing up and stabbing his index finger at Alfred’s chest sharply. Alfred took a step back with wide eyes, as if he
hadn’t expected Arthur to ever say he was in inconvenience. Arthur went on, “You’re getting in my way all the time! *Always!* I can’t do a thing without you breathing down my neck!”

Alfred recoiled from the statement. “Now, hang on a minute –”

“I’m not finished, you slack-jawed twit! This is my living! This my house! Just because we’re married, doesn’t mean you get to monopolize my time.”

“I’m not, I’m –”

“Yes, you are. Now, I’m very busy. I’m trying to do my job, and you’re waltzing in here acting like the Queen of Sheba!” Arthur huffed while Alfred took another wounded step back. “I don’t have time for your nonsense today! I have seventeen chapters to write; I don’t have time for you!”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Arthur felt his heart squeeze and his stomach churn guiltily. That wasn’t right. He loved Alfred; why did he say that? *Why did he say that?* It wasn’t for the sake of his work. It wasn’t for Alfred’s own good. He had just wanted to win the fight. And judging from the way Alfred’s expression darkened to a painfully burning scowl, Arthur could tell that he’d accomplished his goal; he won.

“Well,” Alfred breathed, shrugging loosely as he stepped out of Arthur’s office. “Let me just get out of your way.”

With wide eyes, Arthur watched Alfred slink out of the study, through the living room, and toward the front door. His heart was caught in his throat. What happened if Alfred left angry? Would he ever forgive Arthur? Would he come back? Before he could stop himself, Arthur was careening forward, tripping over his own feet as he charged after Alfred.

“Wait!” He called, knocking into the side of the sofa as he ran through the living room. “Alfred, wait! I didn’t mean it!”

Before Arthur even heard the front door open, it slammed shut, leaving him to stand in the entryway on his own.

His heart raced and his hands shook; Alfred was really leaving. He said he was “getting out of the way,” but what exactly did that mean? Was he ever coming back? Desperately trying to stop him, Arthur pulled open the door and stumbled down the front steps.

“Alfred,” he said urgently, seeing Alfred through the window of the car, putting their car into drive. Arthur pulled at the handle of the door to no avail. Alfred had locked him out. That only made Arthur more desperate. Slamming his palms against the windows, Arthur continued to call for him. “Alfred! Alfred, please! Please, stop!”

Not even bothering to look at Arthur, Alfred pulled away from the curb with a resounding *screech* of the car tires. Arthur tripped forward into the street as he watched Alfred drive away, breathless and wide-eyed. He was gone. All around him, people were murmuring as they walked past him and his house. The door was still standing open, and Arthur grasped the hem of his sweater anxiously. He’d practically chased Alfred out of the house.

How could he move forward, now? Alfred was the only person Arthur could imagine spending the rest of his life with... if he’d pushed him away, what was Arthur going to do with his life? He couldn’t imagine smiling without Alfred. He couldn’t think of sleeping without Alfred being there next to him. And, sadly, he couldn’t face the idea of going back into the enormous
they’d bought together and live there happily. No, he wouldn’t be able to live in that house without Alfred. Almost everything in it belonged to Alfred.

Swallowing thickly, Arthur shuffled back up the stairs and into his house, slowly closing the door behind him. He never even got the chance to apologize. He had to fix it. Rushing through the house, Arthur tore the living room apart in search of his phone. He needed to call Alfred and apologize before he disappeared somewhere far away. He needed to ask for forgiveness before Alfred bought a plane ticket to anywhere and Arthur never saw him again.

His hands shook as he unlocked the phone and speed dialed Alfred’s number. The house was frighteningly quiet as he waited with bated breath; one ring… two… three… a slight click of the line made Arthur’s heart jump, but it was merely followed up by two more rings.

“Hey,” Alfred’s voice came through the line clearly, and Arthur’s eyes welled as he held his phone to his ear.

“Alfred,” he breathed, feeling his voice catch in his throat as he took the shaking, fitful breaths that preceded crying. “Alfred, I’m so sorry –”

“This is Alfred Jones,” Alfred said evenly in a tone that Arthur had heard countless times before. It was his voicemail. “Sorry, I can’t answer the phone right now. Leave a message, and I’ll get back to you.”

Listening to the long beep that preceded the recording process, Arthur stood slack jawed in the living room. Alfred wasn’t even answering his phone. Arthur had single-handedly ruined everything. Feeling a tear roll down his cheek, he ran a hand through his hair anxiously. Alfred was never coming back.

Realizing that he wasn’t saying anything for the recording, Arthur took a shaking breath and muttered, “A-Alfred,” before another beep sounded. The time for the recording had been used up.

With that, his phone started singing the drone of the dial-tone. Arthur didn’t have the willpower to hang up. He was scared. Too scared to sit down, too scared to move… too scared to breathe. Alfred was gone. Leaving. Never coming back.

Swallowing, Arthur blinked and broke himself out of his stupor, pulling his phone from his ear to properly hang up. His heart ached, and he couldn’t take a deep enough breath to recover from the shaking, fretful sobs that rose up in his throat. Pulling at his hair, Arthur shuffled across the hall and into the kitchen. His quaking hands speed dialed Alfred’s number again numbly, and he held the phone to his ear, listening to the repetitive sounds of ringing before Alfred’s voicemail spoke to him.

“Hey, this is Alfred Jones.” The voicemail said personably as Arthur slowly lowered himself into a chair. “Sorry, I can’t answer the phone right now. Leave a message, and I’ll get back to you.”

Anticipating the beep, Arthur took a breath and absently wiped tears from his eyes, speaking into the receiver of his phone in broken tones. “Alfred, I’m… I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it. You have to know I didn’t mean it… You’re not in my way. You’ve never been an inconvenience… I was just being stupid. I just wanted to be mad, and I shouldn’t have…” Arthur took a breath and scrubbed his empty hand over his face. “A-Alfred, I’m so… s-sorry,” his breath hitched, and Arthur winced at the sound. “Please, I’m so sorry, I –” another beep. The recording time was all used up.
Lowering his phone, Arthur hung up, and dialed again. Biting his lip, he waited for the voicemail diligently. He needed to apologize. Alfréd had to know that he was sorry.

“Hey, this is Alfréd Jones.” Arthur felt his lungs burn as he started to cry, coughing out uneven sobs as he heard Alfréd’s calm voice. “Sorry, I can’t answer the phone right now.” Arthur put his head down on the table. “Leave a message, and I’ll get back to you.”

After the beep, Arthur sniffled and murmured. “I… your voicemail cut me off. I was saying, um… I’m just so,” another sad, broken sob, “I’m so sorry, Alfréd.” He cried a little bit, feeling a little better when his lungs didn’t hurt so much. “Please come home,” he breathed into the receiver, hoping that Alfréd could find it in his heart to forgive him. “P-please, Alfréd… I’m sorry. I’m sorry! Please don’t leave, please don’t…”

Beep. Again, the recording was finished. Frustrated with the short length of the voicemail, Arthur stood up and threw his phone across the kitchen as hard as he could, watching it shatter against the oak cabinets. Arthur immediately felt regret bubble in his stomach after the broken pieces of his phone skittered across the countertop and floor. Alfréd had picked out that phone for him. Arthur had never tech savvy… but Alfréd was. He’d bought that phone because he knew which ones were the best. And Arthur had loved it. It was a gift.

Now it was broken on the kitchen floor.

Steering himself out of the kitchen, Arthur shuffled up the stairs. Each step felt heavier, like weights were strapped to his feet and chains pulled his hands toward the floor. If his own conscience was trying to punish him, it was working. As he reached the top of the stairs, Arthur felt like he was melting down into an insignificant puddle of mush, becoming the dirt that he was worse than… closer and closer to the center of the earth and the hell that lay beneath it.

Pushing the door to the bedroom open, Arthur walked over to the bed and fell forward into the pillows. And there he stayed with no intention of ever moving again.

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Arthur’s eyes opened slowly, blurred with hot tears that made his eyelashes stick together. He was shaking from head to toe, and he brought up a trembling hand to wipe at his burning, tired eyes. Alfréd had left him. Arthur blinked slowly. Why had he come back? Arthur had said such horrible things, and yet… Alfréd was there, in their house. He was still so kind. Arthur took a shuddering breath. How long ago had that memory occurred? A year before the accident? A month? A week?

Casting the blankets off of the bed, Arthur stumbled down the stairs in search of Alfréd. He tripped on one of the bottom stairs, but held himself up on the railing before he could embrace the floor face first. He rushed to the sofa, shaking Alfréd’s shoulder with one hand and wiping away his incessant tears with the other.

“Wha… I’m up. I’m awake,” Alfréd groaned as he rubbed his eyes tiredly. He gave Arthur a confused squint, trying to see who he was through the bleak dark of nighttime. “Arthur? What’s wrong? Are… are you crying?”

“I… I r-remembered that I s-said… something awful, I…” Arthur blubbered sadly as Alfréd fumbled for his glasses on the coffee table. “And, a-and you know I didn’t mean it, r-right? Y-you have to know I didn’t mean a w-word of it, Alfréd! A-Alfréd, Alfréd…”

“Okay. I know,” Alfréd nodded as he sat up and pushed hair from his eyes. He grabbed a
tissue from the table and wiped it messily across Arthur’s face. “I know you didn’t mean it.”

Crawling up onto the sofa, Arthur burrowed himself in Alfred’s arms and indulgently let himself be comforted. Alfred had been wronged. He deserved comfort. But Arthur didn’t deny the gentle rocking back and forth or the quiet ‘shhh’s from Alfred’s lips as he cried.

The idea of Alfred leaving him was… well, it was… Arthur smooshed his cheek against Alfred’s neck and let out a sad noise. Alfred patted his back and continued to sway. One of his feet was dangling over the edge of the couch, but he never complained or tried to wriggle into a more comfortable position. He simply held Arthur and hushed every so often.

Arthur knew he should’ve just apologized for what he said, but somehow, some part of his brain was convinced that this was the better solution. His legs were wrapped around Alfred’s hips, and his arms were thrown shamelessly around his neck. He held on tight, desperate to make sure that Alfred wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon. Arthur closed his eyes.

“That must’ve been one hell of a dream,” Alfred whispered as he rocked Arthur back and forth gently. Arthur hummed, and Alfred slowly combed his fingers through his hair. “What happened? What did you remember?”

Dragging his fingers across the soft fabric of Alfred’s nightshirt, Arthur murmured into Alfred’s shoulder, “I said such terrible things to you,” he paused, then repeated, “Terrible.” Alfred remained quiet, and Arthur turned his head a bit so Alfred could hear him clearly. “We had a fight about how I was always writing. I said you were –”

“An inconvenience. Yeah, I remember that fight.”

Alfred sat back with Arthur in his arms, letting Arthur untangle his legs from around Alfred’s hips so he could lay on the sofa properly. Arthur placed his head back on Alfred’s shoulder, and Alfred rubbed his back. For a long while, he was quiet. Arthur only had Alfred’s deep, easy breathing to reassure him that his husband wasn’t still upset. Arthur opened his eyes and tried to read his expression, but Alfred’s face was carved from stone, and the room was too dark to see the emotion lingering in his eyes.

Alfred finally spoke. “That was seven months ago.” He pat Arthur’s hand where it rested on his chest, and nodded to himself thoughtfully. “Only seven months… not very long after we moved into this house. We’d been drifting apart ever since Edith became your publisher. She was always running you ragged, but you wouldn’t listen to me.” There was a bite in his words, and Arthur pressed himself closer to Alfred in an attempt to soften the rough edges of his memory. Alfred relaxed a bit and sighed. “I just… I didn’t want your passion to take over your life. You weren’t sleeping. You weren’t eating. I was… I was scared for you.”

“And… that day when you came home…?”

“I wanted to talk to you about it. About how you just kept brushing me off. Hell, you brushed everything off,” his words started to crackle again, and Arthur closed his eyes tight against the prickling atmosphere. Another deep breath, and Alfred was relaxed again, soft and complacent beneath Arthur as he carefully picked and chose his words. “I just wanted the real you back. You were becoming this… this book-driven robot with Edith. It’s like you lost that little excited spark you got when you were really happy about writing. You weren’t sleeping. You weren’t eating. I was… I was scared for you.”

Arthur lowered his eyes to Alfred’s collar shamefully. “And… that day when you came home…?”

“And then I said you were in my way,” Arthur grumbled. His stomach turned uncomfortably at the statement, and he curled against Alfred for comfort. Alfred didn’t move. “I… said that, and I knew I didn’t mean it. I just said it to win the fight. I didn’t want you to –”
“I know,” Alfred interrupted. “I know you didn’t mean it.”

Arthur sat up and away from Alfred, struggling to clearly see his blue eyes in the dark. “Why would you come back after I said something like that? Why would you bother to even consider it? I was awful to you! Acting like you weren’t worth the time of day… it’s not how a husband should act!”

Alfred only smiled. “I know. But hey, no marriage is perfect. Everyone has bad days. Everyone blows up. And I know that I made a commitment to you. I gave vows that I would love you no matter what.” Arthur felt his chest swell at the statement, but he made sure to bite back an idiotic grin. Alfred continued, “I got in the car and went for a drive. I was out for… hours, I guess. It was nearly two in the morning when I came home.”

Arthur leaned forward eagerly. “And then? What happened when you came home?”

Cocking his head to the side, Alfred’s smile shone through the dark. “We apologized to each other. We cried a little. And then we agreed that we didn’t want to fight like that again.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Arthur murmured to himself. He glanced in the direction of his office, barely seeing the vague outline of his manuscripts piled on the floor. He turned back to Alfred. “And what about my writing habits?” He wondered, “Did I start making time for you?”

“Of course you did,” Alfred chuckled to himself, scratching a hand through his hair. “After that fight, you agreed to take a break every now and then. That’s all I wanted. Just for you to take a break and breathe, relax, eat. All that good stuff” Alfred reached over for another tissue, and held it out to Arthur. “You okay, now? Feelin’ a little better?”

Arthur nodded a few times. “A bit, yes.”

Alfred’s smile was gentle as he asked, “Tired?” Arthur nodded. “Wanna go back to sleep?” Another nod, and Alfred was off the sofa and walking Arthur back up the stairs. Arthur almost felt a nostalgic tingle down his spine when Alfred lifted up the covers for him, but it was gone when Alfred yawned and walked out of the room.

Alfred had brought so many memories to him. So many good, warm, terrible, frightening memories… ones that no doubt shaped who Arthur was. Without Alfred, Arthur wouldn’t be the same person. His distress was natural. If Alfred had left, Arthur would have been alone with a lopsided personality. That was it… wasn’t it?

Arthur tried to think of a better reason for why he’d been so distraught, but sleep was dragging him down. Down, into dreams that were sticky like caramel, warm like melted chocolate, and sweet like Alfred’s lips. Arthur sighed into the honeycomb-colored dreams, and let his desires embrace him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you!
See you next chapter!
Chapter 8

Arthur couldn’t sleep. His ears rang as Katy Perry echoed dully through the wall of the flat next to theirs. The same song had been on repeat for the past two hours, and Arthur was ten seconds from pulling his hair out and screaming at the top of his lungs to drown out the lyrics.

Next to him, Alfred snored loudly and rolled over in his sleep. Arthur envied his ability to sleep so heavily. Arthur remembered how Alfred’s parents would often fight at night… Alfred must’ve grown used to the noise. He was able to block it out. Arthur, on the other hand, grew up with hushed, gentle nights in the English countryside. The evenings were filled with the soft rush of winds over the fields and the muted fall of rain.

A loud, repeated, thumping song was not in Arthur’s normal sleeping setting.

Grabbing Alfred’s pillow from under his partner’s head, Arthur held the cushy, cottony fabric over his face. The bass still thudded through the floor. He could feel the vibration in his chest. Arthur moaned into the pillow, and threw it across the room. Alfred continued to snore.

Somewhere in a far corner, Arthur heard a mouse scratching at the floorboards. At least, Arthur hoped it was a mouse. Mice were easy to handle. However, rats were too large and too dangerous. Trying not to scare himself with the idea of rats in the flat, Arthur rolled over and pressed himself against Alfred’s side.

Snorting lightly, Alfred drooled on the bedsheet as Arthur snuggled closer to him. Arthur could still hardly believe they were still living in the tiny flat.

Alfred was on his last year of university… that meant they’d been living in the tattered, run-down flat for nearly four years. After their fiasco with Alfred’s father in the college dorm, Arthur had nearly begged Alfred to change their housing. And ever since that, they’d been shacked up in a matchbox living space with hardly a breath of room to share.

Arthur’s job as a bookstore clerk wouldn’t last much longer; the bookstore was going out of business. And no matter how many publishing agencies Arthur visited and contacted, he was rejected day after day. It had been six months since Arthur had graduated from university with a degree in writing and literature… and six months since his very first rejection from a publishing company.

Alfred constantly supported him, telling him that his book would be endorsed soon, but Arthur was far past discouraged. His heart fell when he’d receive messages of denial, and bits of his passion for writing would crumble as he saw the disappointed frown of a new publisher. He was tired of trying with no results. He was exhausted from running around town, contacting anyone and everyone he was redirected to, trying to show them his hard work.

“You’re thinking about something,” Alfred groaned into the sheets. Arthur jumped at the sound of Alfred’s voice, and wriggled up on the mattress to look at Alfred’s half-lidded eyes. Alfred blinked slowly. “I can almost hear the wheels in your head turning.”


“And now there’s steam coming from your ears.” Alfred smiled, reaching up one of his hands to cover the right side of Arthur’s head. Arthur frowned. “I think there’s a fire in there.”

“Bugger off,” Arthur growled as he swatted Alfred’s hand away. His heart still stung
with the bitter feeling of failure… Alfred had to notice it. Didn’t he? The defeated look Arthur had
every time he came home with nothing to show for his hard work but a pair of worn-out shoes, the
dull glint in his eyes that used to be bright and excited when he spoke about writing, and the sad,
sad sighs he would heave every night before he laid down to sleep. Arthur closed his eyes sadly.
“It’s never going to get published.”

“Yeah, it will.”

“No,” Arthur insisted tiredly. “This whole… writing thing… it was a mistake. My four
years at university were a mistake. All of this was stupid. Why did I think I could be a writer?”

Alfred wrapped an arm around Arthur and tucked him into his chest. “Don’t say that.
You’re an amazing writer. You just need to find the right –”

“The right publisher. Yes, I know. You’ve been telling me that for half a year!” Arthur
wriggled away and sat up in bed. “Alfred, I’m almost twenty-four years old and I’ve nothing to
show for it aside from our marriage! Thousands of dollars at uni, and I haven’t even done anything
with my degree.” Standing up, Arthur put his hands on his hips and wrung his hands as he started
to pace around their bedroom madly. “I have a dead-end job, I live in the world’s worst flat,”
Arthur pivoted his hips and pointed at the thin wall and shouted, “And I can’t sleep because some
noisy teenager has to listen to Katy Perry at two in the goddamned morning!”

Alfred sat up on their mattress quietly, giving Arthur sad, tired look. “I’m sorry.” Arthur
hummed in frustration, feeling his cheeks heat with embarrassment and sadness. He marched back
to the mattress and flopped down onto his stomach, burying his face in his pillow. Alfred pet his
hair. “I’m sorry. I know this is hard for you.”

“Of course it’s hard,” Arthur grumbled. “I’m being told that my writing is ‘good, but not
good enough’ all day, every day.”

Alfred sighed. “I can’t fix that… but I can fix your sleeping problem.”

Turning his head to give Alfred a considering glance, Arthur quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?
How’re you going to do that? Smother me?” He pushed his pillow towards Alfred. “Hop to it. I
welcome death at this point.”

Alfred laughed and ruffled Arthur’s hair. “Not quite, baby.” Before Arthur could ask
where Alfred was going, he was out of bed and padding across the floor of their apartment. Arthur
didn’t bother to sit up as the door opened and shut quietly.

Through the thin walls, Arthur heard someone pounding on the next flat’s door
incessantly. It must’ve been Alfred. Arthur listened quietly as he calmly spoke to the neighbor.
Soft and apologetic. But the neighbor must’ve been in the mood for a fight. They raised their voice
first, and Arthur felt his heartbeat pick up with Alfred raised his voice as well. The neighbor was
obviously afraid, because the door slammed shut. Seconds later, the music was turned off. Arthur
smiled into the sheets as their front door opened and shut once again. Alfred’s footsteps pattered
over the floor as Arthur grabbed his discarded pillow and snuggled his face into it.

“You’re too good to me,” Arthur sighed, “Making them turn off that music.”

“What music?”

Arthur blinked as he sat up to give Alfred a confused look. Alfred stood in front of the
wardrobe with a tie in his hand and a bemused smile on his face. Arthur squinted at him. Alfred
had been in pajama pants and a nightshirt only a moment ago. Their flat didn’t have a wardrobe… where were they?

Rubbing his eyes tiredly, Arthur felt his thumb catch on a band of adhesive that tugged painfully at his skin. Reaching up to feel across the left side of his forehead, Arthur felt a stiff bandage meet his hand. Arthur sighed. He’d forgotten the accident again. It was all beginning to blur together.

Across the room, Alfred wrapped his tie around his neck. “Have a dream about music?”

Arthur unstuck his finger from the loose medical tape and winced. “I remembered our old flat.” Alfred made a disgusted face, and Arthur sighed. “I remember not being able to sleep. I suppose the people next door were playing Katy Perry? At two o’clock in the morning?”

Alfred hummed thoughtfully as he came to sit on the edge of the bed. Arthur slid over in bed to reach up and tie his tie. Alfred lifted his chin and pursed his lips thoughtfully. “I don’t remember that, but I remember how shitty our old place was. You probably didn’t need to remember that.”

Pulling the end of Alfred’s tie through a loop, Arthur made a face. “I remember being worried about rats.” Alfred laughed at that, and Arthur smiled just a bit. “And mice.”

“At least you don’t remember the mold in the corners.”

Arthur leaned away from Alfred with a horrified look. Mold? In their home? How had they not gotten sick from all of the vermin and rot in the shoddy little flat? Arthur grimaced at the thought; they probably had gotten sick at one point. Arthur just didn’t remember it. At least, not yet.

Straightening Alfred’s tie, Arthur sighed. “You told me a while ago that you rarely wear ties. What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, it’s a little presentation I’ve got for the board of directors.” Turning down his collar, Alfred stood up and went to retrieve socks from his dresser drawer. Arthur raised his eyebrows.

“That sounds intimidating.”

Alfred laughed as he sat on the edge of the bed next to Arthur’s thigh and pulled on a pair of thick, black socks. “No, it’s not really. I could blabber about nothing and they would find it impressive. I just need to show them the test vaccine I’m working on.”

Arthur pulled his fingers through his hair. “Test vaccine?”

Alfred nodded. “I’m researching Alzheimer’s,” he said softly. Arthur’s heart leapt up to his throat. His father apparently had the Alzheimer’s gene. Is that why Alfred was researching it? Before Arthur could ask, Alfred stood up and smoothed the front of his pale-green, button-down shirt. “I know it runs in your family, and it really makes you worried. Everyone was pretty upset when Alistair started showing symptoms… and I wanted to help. I’ve been working on a lot of projects over the past few years, but I always came back to this one.” Alfred’s eyes sparkled as he gave Arthur a hopeful look. “I think I’m close to a breakthrough. I can feel it.”

Arthur tried to give him a hopeful smile. “That’s wonderful, isn’t it? Congratulations.”

“Yeah!” Alfred chirped when he jumped up from the bed and walked confidently for the bedroom door. His voice echoed down the stairs as he announced, “I’m gonna change the world!”
Arthur quirked an eyebrow at that. Alfred was certainly optimistic when he wanted to be. Arthur liked that. He liked the never-ending enthusiasm that seemed to shine through every one of Alfred’s pores. He admired the way that Alfred could bend a bleak outlook into something bright. His family’s Alzheimer’s was just another problem for Alfred to solve… and he seemed well on his way to finding a solution.

Looking down at his hands in his lap, Arthur couldn’t help but feel extremely useless. He couldn’t do anything to help his family with their sickness. From the looks of it, Arthur had been dead weight after he’d gotten out of school. And though Alfred had still been working on his doctorate, he’d supported Arthur unconditionally. Loving Arthur, reassuring him… Alfred was a very selfless man. It was no wonder that Arthur had felt awful in his dream; he was always dragging Alfred down with his failures.

Quickly slipping out of bed and changing into presentable clothing, Arthur padded down the stairs to the sound of Alfred arguing with the newscaster on the telly. When he peeked his head around the corner of the living room, he saw a lovely blonde woman announcing that temperatures were going to fall drastically throughout the day.

“That’s bogus!” Alfred huffed as he stomped about the living room, collecting miscellaneous papers from the sofa and coffee table as he went. Arthur watched quietly as Alfred paused, glanced at Arthur’s office, and turned away to head toward the kitchen. Arthur followed close after as Alfred growled, “It’s hardly winter, yet. It shouldn’t get this cold.”

For a moment, Arthur stood in the kitchen doorway and watched Alfred drink his mug of coffee. He could smell the dark roast beans in the air, and it reminded him of something just out of reach. He could almost think of Alfred knocking back coffee like his life depended on it. He could nearly imagine long nights in their old flat, sitting up and awake, waiting for Alfred to crash from his caffeine highs. There may have been sleepless nights of science-filled mumbles that Arthur couldn’t understand. Or even slow, careful murmurs into the bedsheets as Alfred’s coffee-scented breath washed over Arthur’s cheeks.

Holding his hand to his forehead, Arthur squinted at the memory. Coffee must’ve been very important to Alfred. Or, at the very least, it had been a necessity when he was going through university and forced to think longer and harder about increasingly difficult things.

Finally stepping over the threshold of the kitchen, Arthur seated himself at the table and twiddled his thumbs as Alfred munched on a bagel. His dream still niggled at the back of his mind along with his constant reliance on Alfred.

“Alfred,” he started carefully. Alfred looked up from one of his papers with a mouthful of bagel, and Arthur smiled at the sight. His nerves were soothed by the amusing vision, but there was still tension in his voice when he asked, “How long did it take to get my first book published?”

Pausing a moment, Alfred squinted up at the ceiling and swallowed his mouthful of food. “Let’s see… I was on my final year of school, so… that would be five years after high school, and -”

“What?” Arthur sputtered, his eyes wide with disbelief. “I thought you had to go to school much longer for a doctorate.”

Alfred nodded. “Yeah, you do… but I tested way over the national average in math and science,” he laughed a bit, then said, “I tested out of a bunch of classes.”

Humming thoughtfully, Arthur waited as Alfred took another bite of his breakfast. “So, you
only had to attend uni for… five years?” Alfred nodded. “That’s quite impressive.”

“I know,” Alfred smiled. “My coworkers are jealous. Anyway… your first book? It was, like… maybe the spring after you graduated? Eight months? Nine?” Arthur’s heart dropped down to his stomach, and Alfred nodded to himself as he repeated, “Yeah, nine months. I guess it had to wait to mature. Like a baby!”

Alfred laughed at his own joke, but Arthur stared down at the tabletop in disheartened awe. He’d almost gone an entire year going through publishing agents and companies, desperate for a break. Nine months after school, and Arthur had still been pushing his book. It seemed so… stupid. And irresponsible. And… Arthur glanced up at Alfred, seeing his concerned expression and pursed lips. Arthur sighed softly. He’d been nothing but a burden on Alfred.

I’m sorry, Arthur wanted to say. I’m sorry I was such a burden to you when you were still working hard at school. He wanted to say it, but Alfred’s worried gaze threw him off. If he apologized, Alfred might think that Arthur was depressed. Arthur sighed. He probably was depressed; his memories were slowly and surely making him feel worse about himself.

But before Arthur could grit his teeth and tell Alfred the truth, the phone rang. Both men jumped when they heard it, and Alfred let out a tired laugh as he went to take the cell phone from the table.

“Hello!” Alfred answered brightly, swinging his hips to and fro as he listened to the caller. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at the movement and didn’t hold back a smile as Alfred swayed around the kitchen. The swaying soon stopped when Arthur placed the kettle on the stove, and Arthur turned to see Alfred frowning as he held his cell phone to his ear.

“No,” Alfred started, then stopped to grit his teeth. The caller had cut him off. Arthur stood back while Alfred anxiously adjusted his glasses several times. “That’s not what we agreed. I told you that he’s – no, stop telling me you’re going to… you can’t just decide that stuff on your own!”

Arthur nearly asked who Alfred was talking to, but Alfred stomped out of the kitchen and into the living room. Arthur flicked on the stove burner quietly, and crept to the hallway to see Alfred pacing angrily in the living room. He was muttering lowly to the caller, making small, pointed gestures as he marched a straight line across the living room.

“You need to stop assuming that everything is fine. Everything is not fine.” Alfred pushed his hand through his hair, and stopped his paced abruptly to shout, “Edith, for god’s sake! The man doesn’t remember his own life, so give it a rest! He can’t do this right now! Let him try to recover!”

Arthur flinched at the tone. The words felt like a swift kick in the stomach, and it nearly left him on his knees, unable to breathe.

Arthur knew things weren’t fine. He wasn’t really hopeful. He was merely a master at concealing his emotions. Arthur had been resting easy under the pretenses that Alfred was happy with him the way he was. But now, Arthur knew he wasn’t. Alfred lied. He wanted the real Arthur back. He didn’t want this broken, blank CD of a husband… he wanted the real Arthur Kirkland.

While Alfred continued to bicker with Edith, Arthur slunk back into the kitchen and stood over the stove, waiting for the kettle to whistle. He felt hollow inside. Like all of the memories he had painstakingly recovered had been thrown away. Like everything he’d tried to remember was useless. Arthur was useless. As a husband, as a son, as a writer… it would’ve been
better if Arthur hadn’t survived the crash.

It would’ve been easier on Alfred.

“Hey,” Alfred’s sunny sigh echoed through the kitchen as he walked through the doorway. Arthur heard him set his phone on the table. “Sorry… I didn’t mean to get loud. Edith is just trying to push a book signing. I told her it’d be best to give you some time.”

Arthur gave a single nod. “Right.”

There was a hushed movement behind Arthur. Perhaps Alfred turned to look at him. Arthur continued to watch the kettle.

“Are you okay?” Alfred murmured, stepping closer as Arthur clenched his fists against the countertop.

“I’m fine,” Arthur lied.

His sight of the kettle was getting blurry. His head hurt. Why had he lived? It would have been easier for everyone if Alistair had survived. He could have gotten help for his drinking. His parents would’ve been able to see him again after he disappeared into the cities. It was a mistake Arthur had lived. A cruel twist of fate.

“Arthur. Arthur, the water is done,” Alfred said, reaching in front of Arthur to turn off the burner. Arthur stepped back, trying to move out of the way, only to press his back into Alfred’s chest. Arthur frowned at his wobbly view of the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” for living. For surviving. For forgetting. Arthur felt warm, twin tears run down his cheeks, spilling over his chin and onto his brown sweater. Behind him, Alfred laughed.

“No problem. It’s not like you ran me over. You just bumped into me,” Alfred took the kettle from the stove and walked around Arthur to make him a cup of tea. Arthur’s throat constricted, and he stayed in front of the stove, his hands grasping the hem of his sweater sadly.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur repeated. If he said it enough, Alfred might understand. “I’m sorry, Alfred. I’m sorry.”

Arthur lived, but only just. It came at a price. One that was slowly chipping away at Alfred’s heart. Arthur hadn’t seen it. He was too in love with the idea of such a wonderful man. He was in love with what Alfred seemed to be… Arthur didn’t want to see the broken side anymore. He’d ignored it. And now, confronted with reality, Arthur wanted to bury himself alive.

“I – I’m sorry,” Arthur gasped. Alfred turned him around immediately, brushing his warm hands over Arthur’s cheeks and wiping away his tears.

“H-hey, it’s okay! It’s no big deal,” Alfred tried to smile away Arthur’s sadness, but Arthur wouldn’t have it. He shook his head, and Alfred leaned down to give him another nervous smile. “You just bumped into me, Arthur. You don’t have to get this upset. It happens! It’s okay!”

“No. That’s not…” Arthur stepped back and wrung his hands in the air. “I forgot you! I forgot you and my family and…” Arthur looked around the kitchen sadly as his eyes blurred with fresh tears. “I forgot my own home! And you’re being so kind and you’re trying so hard… but I… I c-can’t even remember…”

Taking a big step forward, Alfred shook his head quickly. “It’s not your fault. It was an
accident. I’m not mad at you, Arthur. I’m not mad you can’t remember. Don’t apologize.”

“Y-you sounded upset when you spoke to Edith.” Arthur countered, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. Why was he crying so much? Did he always cry this easily? He couldn’t be sure.

“Well,” Alfred sputtered, looking for a way out of Arthur’s point. “Well… that’s because she’s –”

“You are upset!” Arthur stomped his foot, and Alfred leaned back with wide eyes. Grinding his teeth together, Arthur brought his hands up to his hair, pulling at the roots and feeling the slowly dissolving stitches on the left side of his face tug and break in a few places. Arthur closed his eyes tight and made a frustrated noise as he shook his head. “I’m just making everything worse! I thought it was fine, but it’s not.”

Alfred grasped Arthur’s wrists and gently tried to pry them away from Arthur’s hair. “It is! It’s fine, Arthur. Accidents happen. I’m not mad. I’m so glad you’re alive.”

Opening his eyes, Arthur gave Alfred a hazy frown. “No. You want the real Arthur. You want the Arthur that remembers you. But I don’t. I can’t remember, no matter how hard I try. I just… remember these useless things…” Arthur hiccupped, and Alfred pulled his hands from his hair, holding onto Arthur’s wrists as he sadly blubbered, “I would’ve been better if I haven’t lived. It would’ve been easier for you. You wouldn’t be so sad, and I –”

Alfred crushed Arthur into a hug, pressing Arthur’s aching forehead against his shoulder as Arthur’s hands were trapped against Alfred’s chest. “Don’t,” he ordered. “Don’t you ever say that again.”

Arthur was quiet, feeling the racing thrum of Alfred’s heartbeat beneath his hands. Alfred was scared. Arthur was scaring him. Feeling more crystalline pearls of sadness pour over his cheeks, Arthur sniffled sadly. He couldn’t even apologize properly. He couldn’t do anything right. It was hopeless.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur breathed as he wrapped his arms around Alfred’s back and clung to his dress shirt. “I just keep making things w-worse… you’re sad and I just… keep m-making things worse…”

Alfred shook his head and held Arthur with a steadfast grip. “No. You’re alive, Arthur. I wouldn’t know what to do with my life if you weren’t here. That would be…” Alfred took a shaky breath, then said, “It would be the most horrible thing… I can’t imagine what I’d do. If you weren’t here, I’d really be sad. But you’re not dead. You’re here. Trying so hard to remember things, going out of your way to understand and adapt… you’re amazing.”

Closing his eyes, Arthur took a deep breath and smelled Alfred’s cologne. It was musky, but comforting. It was nearly familiar… almost like wrapping himself in an old, wool blanket and hiding from a winter far, far away. Like bare feet on hardwood floors and a fireplace crackling in another room. Arthur pressed himself closer to Alfred and let out a soft sigh.

“I’m not amazing,” Arthur murmured. “I’m pathetic. I can’t even remember my husband.”

“When you woke up, you couldn’t even remember your own name,” Alfred said brightly. Arthur could hear the smile in his voice, but it wasn’t contagious enough to wipe the frown from Arthur’s lips. So he sniffed and wiped his tear-dampened cheek against Alfred’s shoulder as Alfred rubbed his back. “And now you’re home, learning more about everything. It
just takes time, sweetheart. It’s okay.”

“It’s frustrating. I don’t want to wait.”

Alfred chuckled, and Arthur felt the vibrations against his chest. “Well, you were always impatient. Sorry to admit it, but you can’t rush this one, Arthur. You just have to wait.”

“I wish I could rush it,” Arthur sighed into Alfred’s shoulder. Alfred hummed thoughtfully, and Arthur smiled just a bit. “I want to remember falling in love with you. I want to remember which one of us proposed. I want to remember our wedding.”

Letting out one, loud laugh, Alfred gave Arthur a hearty pat on the back. “First of all, falling in love with me isn’t really that glamorous, but all right. Second, you proposed to me and we got married the winter of your senior year of college. And third, our wedding was awesome. I’m sure we’ve got a DVD of the service somewhere.”

Arthur leaned back quickly. “Really?” Alfred’s eyes were glittering with warm memories, the previous conversation already melting away into a momentary lack of though. Alfred nodded, and Arthur tugged on his sleeve. “Where? I want to see. Maybe if I watch, I’ll remember something. If I could see it, then –”

“Easy there, cowboy,” Alfred laughed as he pulled away from Arthur and knocked back the last of his coffee. “I don’t know where we stashed it, but I’ll help you look when I get home, okay?” He gave Arthur one long, considering look. His eyes scanned Arthur’s red eyes and cheeks carefully, as if there was something sinister hidden under Arthur’s exterior. A memory that couldn’t be reached. An answer to a question no one asked. Alfred leaned forward to pass his thumb over Arthur’s cheek. “You okay?”

Ducking his head to avoid those probing, blue eyes, Arthur nodded. “I’m fine,” he murmured, trying to erase his earlier thoughts of despair. Though Alfred had done a wonderful job of distracting him, Arthur was no painfully aware of how his memory affected his husband… and himself.

When Alfred left, he swept out of the house like a newly freed man, clean of guilt and worry. Arthur, however, was stuck with the remaining emotions in the kitchen. Heavy, deadening emotions that made Arthur want to hide away where no one would ever find him.

He wandered about the house, searching for a small fraction of Alfred that would comfort him. The clock ticked idly in the living room. The telly was silent. The house was hushed and chilled without Alfred to fill the atmosphere with his sunlight personality.

Arthur hugged himself restlessly, looking for some kind of distraction from his thoughts when he spotted his still cluttered office. The papers still leaned against the wall sadly, and manuscripts were pushed close to the wall so no one could trip on them in the middle of the floor. Arthur blinked sadly at the abandoned works. It was a depressing job, but it was a good diversion from his self-destructive thoughts.

Rolling up the sleeves of his jumper, Arthur walked to his office and knelt down on the floor. He needed to do something. And if organizing his mess of an office was all he could think of, it would have to do.

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One thousand pages fluttered in a cool, Seattle breeze. Arthur listened to the chorus of
parchment, eyeing the hazy promise of sunlight that merely grazed past the clouds. His office was finally clean of dust and cobwebs, and it felt like he’d removed a bundle of nerves from his chest, leaving him with a gaping hole that had no emotion. Merely silence.

Arthur sat on the hardwood floor of his office, his knees draw up and his arms wrapped around them. The window was open. Though it only gave Arthur a sad view of the alley next to his house, the crisp air of winter was grounding. He’d scrubbed the floors until he’d gotten dizzy and laid down for a rest. He didn’t have any dreams. He’d woken, organized his manuscripts on the clean bookshelf alphabetically, and combed through endless, unspecified papers with names, numbers, and lists scrawled in all directions.

He’d run out of movements that made sense. So he sat in his hushed home, void of emotion and confused by his own stalling. What was he feeling? This hollow, cool emotion that left him emotionally exhausted… it was something like depression, but just lacking. A step behind, a heartbeat too slow. Arthur stood up, and tried to escape the feeling.

He wished Alfred was with him. He wanted Alfred to laugh and make jokes as they went through the cluttered office together. He missed Alfred’s thoroughly American accent that slowed down his words and softened the rough edges of speech. Arthur knew he spoke quickly; he’d been taught to say things in a straightforward, no-nonsense way. But Alfred… he was taught a linguistic leisure that Arthur just couldn’t afford to try. It made each words flow like caramel. Sweet, soft, and sticky.

Alfred’s words always stuck to him in that sense. Those tacky, sticky words that clung to Arthur’s skin and made him feel unclean. He was tired of Alfred’s kind words, but he couldn’t get enough of them. He wanted to see Alfred’s real feelings, but the bland sweetness was too nice to give up. Arthur knew that Alfred was being nice… but only to a fault. He was hiding the truly sour reality of disappointment under his sweet façade. Arthur had only gotten a fraction of the taste, but already it left him feeling hollow and jittery.

Arthur traced his fingers along the spines of countless novels and stories on his newly cleaned bookshelf. There was no more dust to clog his pores. He glanced at the open window, seeing the sheer curtains in front of them flutter in the early winter breeze. It was so quiet. Too quiet. Quiet enough that Arthur was painfully aware of his heartbeat. His movements. His breathing.

In an attempt to keep himself from drowning in this unknown feeling, Arthur went to his desk and picked up his laptop. He’d dusted beneath it already. There had been dozens of messy papers tucked underneath it at one point, but now they were safely tucked away in a binder. Not to be seen until Arthur could remember what they meant. He placed his laptop on his cracked, peeling, leather desk chair and eyed the drawer of the desk. It was just a small one. One that he’d ignored.

One that felt too private to peruse.

Throwing caution into the winter wind, Arthur tugged at the drawer. It stuck at first, but slowly slid open to reveal a mountain of red and black pens. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at the few, scattered highlighters, but didn’t pay them any mind as he started to sort through the pens.

Arthur pulled a piece of scrap paper onto the desk and started to scribble with the pens, steadily growing more irritated as many of them refused to work. Less than half of them were functional. Arthur set the newly emptied trash bin close to the desk and threw away several of the pens. Then dozens. Then countless more. By the time Arthur was finished, he’d scratched through the paper ten times and left a grand total of three black pens and five red. But that was no matter.
Arthur was much more interested in the photograph that was stowed in the far back of
the drawer. He pulled the thin picture out slowly, wiping off the small traces of dust on his sleeve
as he took in the photo.

It was Alfred and him and their wedding day. It must’ve been, from the view of the
minister standing behind them with a large smile on his face. Alfred and Arthur were standing at
the front of a church, it would seem. Their arms wrapped desperately around each other, clinging
tight as if the other would disappear if they let go. Arthur’s face was buried in Alfred’s shoulder,
but Alfred’s tear-streaked face was perfectly visible, along with his wide, wonderful smile.

Arthur smiled a bit at the scene. It looked lovely. They were together. Happy, connected,
and thoroughly satisfied with their life. Though, there was one thing that bothered Arthur… why
was this picture hidden in his desk? Why wasn’t it stowed in a frame, safely documented for
posterity? Was Arthur hiding it? Had he wanted to forget his own wedding?

Biting his lip, Arthur shuffled out into the living room with the photograph still clamped
tightly in his fingers. Did he regret his wedding? Did he hate his choice of partner, or was Arthur
simply mistaken? He could’ve been keeping that picture in his desk to have a comfortable memory
in his workspace. But, if that were the case… why not hang it above his desk or frame it on a
bookshelf?

Arthur sat on the sofa, and stared down at his candid wedding picture. They looked so
happy together… as if nothing in the world could possibly ruin their moment.

What went wrong?

Laying back on the sofa, Arthur held up the picture to give it one more hard look. The
minister was smiling. Alfred was crying tears of joy, and Arthur… his face was hidden. Tucked
into the shoulder of Alfred’s black tuxedo jacket. What had he been feeling? Was he happy to be
married to the love of his life? Fearing the immense commitment? He didn’t know.

Setting the picture on the coffee table, Arthur closed his eyes and tried to imagine the
wedding ceremony. In the picture, there had been flowers everywhere in the church. Lilies, daisies,
mums… Arthur loved lilies. Without thinking, he knew it. Had Alfred ordered them for him? Had
Arthur insisted on them? He couldn’t tell. So he simply sighed and turned his face into the cushion
of the sofa, thinking of the flower-encased coffin where his wedding memories now resided.

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“My hands are sweating,” Arthur said restlessly. He was pacing frantically, trying to
avoid looking in the large mirror to his left. On the far side of the room, his father chuckled.
Arthur wrung his hands and repeated, “My hands are sweating.”

“We heard you the first time, Arthur,” Seamus laughed from his seat by the window.

Arthur gave Seamus a conspicuous look. He was wearing a grey suit. Very sharp. Had his hair
always been combed back like that? Arthur couldn’t remember him pulling a comb through those
red locks earlier today… then again, Arthur was struggling to remember if he’d eaten breakfast
that morning.

Sitting back in his seat, Seamus smiled easily. “Relax, Arthur. You’ll be fine.”

Alistair sniffed haughtily as he pulled a cigarette from his own grey jacket and started to light it.
His father was quick to point him towards the window, knowing very well that Arthur didn’t like
cigarette smoke. Arthur gave Alistair an apologetic look as his elder brother was forced to open the far window and smoke in solitude.

“Was it like this for you?” Arthur asked his father. George Kirkland heaved a sigh and shrugged.

“Can’t really say. I was half-smashed from the night before.”

Seamus laughed at that as he loosened his tie. He gave Arthur a wink. “Maybe we should have taken you out for a stag night. A drink or two might help those nerves.”

From the window, Alistair grumbled, “A drink sounds good.”

For a moment, everyone was quiet. No one dared to look in Alistair’s direction, let alone comment on his retort. Drinking, drinking, drinking… it’s all Alistair had been doing since Marie had passed. Now, after his slip of the tongue, Seamus looked downright sick to his stomach. He tugged at his tie anxiously, as if he couldn’t breathe quite right. Arthur understood the feeling. Just standing in the same room with Alistair was enough to put him on edge.

His own brother felt like a stranger. It was Arthur’s wedding day… shouldn’t he be excited? Not picking and choosing his words in fear of triggering the addiction of his sibling?

George broke the silence first, stepping forward to place his heavy hands on Arthur’s shoulders.

“Look at you… my youngest boy… already getting married.” There was a glimmer of emotion in his eyes, but Arthur was distracted by the way Alistair curled in on himself and glared out the window. When his father spoke again, Arthur redirected his attention to him. “I’m proud of you, Arthur. You picked a good man.”

While Arthur felt heat rise to his cheeks, Seamus laughed again. “I still remember when that ‘man’ of yours was just a kid!” He slicked back his hair and looked fondly into the distance. “He would drag you this way and that, playing… what was it? Super-magic-heroes?”

Arthur rolled his eyes with a smile as his father straightened his bowtie. “Alfred liked super heroes and I liked magic. Naturally, we combined the two.”

“Naturally,” Alistair grumbled by the window. Arthur’s smile drooped, but his father was quick to throw a soft comment over Alistair’s damp mood.

“God in heaven… you look as lovely as your mother.” George got a glimmer in his eye, and Arthur smiled warmly as his father cupped his cheeks and gave him a long look. “You’re a good boy, Arthur. I raised you right.”

Before Arthur could let tears run down over his father’s hands, the door of his changing room opened and Delilah slipped inside. The light pink dress that Alfred and Arthur had chosen for her looked lovely. It draped over her shoulders and flared at her knees… the lace at the hem was perfect. Her long, golden hair was braided and pinned up in an intricate bun. The work of their mother, no doubt. Delilah smiled brightly as she pushed the door shut behind her.

“Arthur, Arthur, Arthur… look at you!” She fluttered her hands over her face as she spoke, as if she was trying to hold in her words and realign them for another time. Arthur’s father took a step back and sat down as Delilah rushed in to give Arthur a tight hug. “Oh, my baby brother getting married already! And you’re so handsome!” She held Arthur at arm’s length to get a good look at his black tuxedo. “Very sharp.”

“Dad says he takes after Mum,” Seamus said giddily. He clapped his hands together excitably. “You should’ve worn white, Arthur. It would’ve been proper.”
“Oh, hush,” Delilah hissed. She pulled Arthur away from the other men of the family to speak by the door. Her blue eyes were oddly serious as she murmured, “Now, Arthur. If you’re not sure about this, you can tell me.”

Arthur sighed. “Delilah, I know you don’t like Alfred, but –”

“Now, now… this doesn’t have anything to do with that,” she assured him as she squeezed his arm tightly. Arthur winced at the grip, but didn’t complain. “It’s okay to have second thoughts. It happens to people all the time.”

“I’m not having second thoughts, Delilah.”

She leaned close. “But if you did, you can’t just give me a little signal, and I’ll get you out of here in the blink of an eye.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. “Are you offering to help me run away from my own wedding?”

Before Delilah had a chance to bumble around her offer, the door opened and Arthur’s mother stepped through in all of her lovely glory. Alfred had pointed out her pale-blue dress first. She looked more elegant than Arthur could have imagined. The moment she laid eyes on Arthur, her eyes filled with tears and she swept him up in a tight hug, rescuing him from Delilah.

“You’re not a moment too soon, Mummy,” he breathed happily as he hugged her. “You look lovely.”

“Never mind me,” she ordered as she leaned back to look at Arthur. “You look wonderful! So handsome, just like your father.” Arthur only had a moment to duck his head and blush before his mother leaned in to kiss his cheek. She smiled warmly when she stood back. “Hold on, little love. Everyone is ready for you.”

With one last glance at Delilah’s disapproving frown, Arthur was swept out of the room with his parents and siblings, each one preceding him as he stood stiff and anxious at the back of a large, open church. His mother ran her hands over the front of his tuxedo, straightening his shirt here, smoothing his jacket there, brushing away a piece of lint. Arthur’s siblings stood to the side, muttering to each other with smiles on their cheeky faces. Arthur tried to ignore their stares.

“Now, you know what do to,” Arthur’s mother said with a nod as she patted his smooth, product filled hair. “We go first and you wait for the music.”

“I know, Mum.” Arthur tried to smile, but his lips were shaking. He settled with keeping his lips together in a tight line. His mother gave him a knowing smile.

“You’ll be just fine, love.” She nodded as she pinched Arthur’s cheek. She nodded once more and pat his shoulder. “Just fine.”

His father stepped up to take his wife’s arm, winking at Arthur as he went. “You won’t be alone up there, son. Alfred will hold you steady.”

Though the words were meant to be comforting, Arthur found his heart racing as his family left him at the back of the church. They all walked down the aisle easily. His parents, Seamus and Alfred’s cousin, Madeline, Delilah and her husband, and Alistair on his own.

Alfred was going to meet him here, in the back, and they would walk down the aisle together. It was planned, it was practiced, it was expected… so why was Arthur so nervous? His
palms were sweating again… what if he tripped? What if Alfred’s hands were sweaty? What if –

“Come here often?” A soft voice asked to the left. Arthur turned quickly to see Alfred standing in his wedding tux, dashing and perfect as she smiled at Arthur.

Oh, Arthur’s knees nearly gave out. He was getting married to this man. This perfect, wonderful man that he loved so much he could hardly breathe. His legs were shaking, but that didn’t stop him from stepping forward to give Alfred a tight hug. He smelled like the musky cologne that Arthur liked. The kind he’d been wearing since high school. Arthur closed his eyes.

“We’re getting married,” he whispered into Alfred’s shoulder. Alfred nodded, and Arthur could feel the slight tremble of Alfred’s hands against his back as he spoke.

“We’re getting married.”

As if on cue, the wedding procession music began to play, and Arthur’s stomach twisted anxiously. He couldn’t make any mistakes. If he did, it would haunt he and Alfred for the rest of their lives. With that thought in mind, Arthur felt a little dizzy as he faced the open doors that awaited him. People stood from their seats and turned to watch the couple walk through the doorway, only increasing Arthur’s anxiety.

When Alfred took his hand, Arthur nearly jumped out of his skin, but Alfred held firm. Arthur smiled a bit. That’s right… Alfred was always steady. Strong in the face of something terrifying, Alfred was his strength. And he was Alfred’s rationality. They leveled each other. Completed each other. Holding tight, Arthur gave Alfred a trusting smile, and walked through the double doors of the church.

Though Alfred held him upright and moving forward, Arthur’s legs still shook as he eyed the wedding attendants. There were smiling faces and teary eyes, each family member and friend lined the pews. It was the most bizarre family and friend reunion Arthur had ever attended. He would’ve been happy just inviting his immediate family, but Alfred had insisted that because his family got along so well, he should invite them all.

So he walked along lines of Kirklands to his right and sparse Jones’ on his left. Alfred’s cousin stood lovely and smiling at the head of the church, her honey-colored hair twisted into a beautiful braid that fell over her shoulder. She looked so happy. Her parents, Alfred’s close aunt and uncle, were in the front pews where only the closest family should sit. Arthur felt his stomach twinge at the sight; his father was restricted from coming because of the restraining order he and Alfred had placed on him, but Alfred’s mother hadn’t come. She hadn’t even responded to the invite they sent her. As he and Alfred neared the front of the church, Arthur squeezed his hand tightly.

The reverend welcomed them with a warm smile and a nod. Arthur couldn’t help but smile in return. He’d made it all the way down the aisle without tripping. He wasn’t crying. Everything was going swimmingly. All he had to do was deliver his vows without any mistakes, and – Arthur’s smile immediately dropped. His vows. What were they? He practiced them a dozen times in the mirror last night, hadn’t he? He was ready. He memorized them. He’d worked so hard on them. So… what where they?

“Dearly beloved,” the reverend began happily as Arthur panicked. “We are gathered here today to join these two men in holy matrimony.”

Arthur almost turned around and requested a time-out. Did he bring notecards? No, no… he didn’t want to be fumbling with them during the service. He assumed that he wouldn’t forget
anything. His mouth was getting dry. He felt sick to his stomach. How did his vows start? Something about love being good… good god, Arthur was going to faint.

Nearly keeling over when Alfred turned to face him, Arthur felt all of the blood drain from his face as he saw Alfred’s hopeful smile. His hands were numb. He was supposed to go first, wasn’t he? Could he lean forward and tell Alfred to go first instead? No, that was against tradition. Oh god, Arthur’s vision was swimming. Why couldn’t he remember his vows?

The reverend cleared his throat quietly, and said loudly, “Mr. Kirkland, your vows?”

Nodding his head fervently, Arthur stared wide-eyed at Alfred’s now anxious expression. He opened his mouth, trying to force the rehearsed words from his lips, but nothing came out. He had nothing. His mind was a blank slate. He searched for words, and merely found the same phrase stuck on repeat: I’ve forgotten my vows.

When the wedding attendants began to lean toward each other and whisper lowly, Arthur tried again. He was ruining his wedding. Alfred’s wedding. Their wedding. He looked frantically to his parents, seeing his mother watching him with confusion and his father gripping her hand tightly. No help there. They didn’t know his vows. Turning back to Alfred, Arthur saw a look of palpable fear on his fiancé’s face. He probably thought Arthur was second-guessing the wedding. He was probably panicking, too, just for a different reason.

Arthur couldn’t keep him waiting like this. It was like leading Alfred onto the high wire in a circus and just disappearing halfway through. The poor man was trying to keep his balance as Arthur was tangled in the safety net, dozens of feet below him.

Leaning forward just a bit, Arthur forced his mouth to open and announce, “You… you always hear about people getting married in a rush.”

The whispering was immediately hushed, and Alfred’s eyes glinted with relief. Arthur held his hands tighter. He could do this. He just had to write out the words quickly. Tell Alfred how he really felt. That’s what vows were for, weren’t they? Nodding to himself, Arthur continued.

“You always hear those stories about how… how they were just caught up in the moment. Three months of dating and already… th-they’re getting married.” Arthur smiled a bit at the idea, and went on. “I can’t seem to understand those people. They’re marrying those other people just for excitement. Because they think that everything is perfect and they’ll never fight. There’s no real connection. But we –” he smiled at Alfred, “We have a connection.

“You’re my best friend. You’ve… you’ve always been my best friend. And that’s how it should be, shouldn’t it?” Arthur looked to his parents for reassurance, and found nothing but smiles waiting for him. When he looked back to Alfred, there was something akin to joy looking back at him. That smile… it drove Arthur forward. He smiled back with vigor, and nodded at his own words. “That’s what all of the older couples say. The ones that have been married for sixty years. They… they say that their spouse is their best friend. It’s why things last so long. There’s a real connection.”

Pausing to wipe at his teary eyes, Arthur heard Alfred chuckle a bit under his breath. Did he think it was funny that Arthur was getting misty? It was true, Arthur didn’t like to cry, but… he was telling the truth. He was laying his heart bare for the world to see. That deserved a few tears.

“I want things to last that long. I want to grow old with you, laugh with you, be happy with you…” he smiled shakily. “I love you, Alfred. I always have. For years. You’ve been my best
friend for years. And that… that’s not a rush. It’s something real. Real love takes time. And this…” he looked down at their joined hands and smiled. “This took a long time to happen. And I’m so happy I get to be married to you. I’m so glad you picked me. I… um…”

And what? What else? That was all he could come up with at the last minute. He was grasping at straws. There were no more adequate words to write on the canvas of his marriage vows. He was out of vocabulary… he needed to take a break and consult other writings. But there was no break here. He couldn’t stand up and walk out of the room for a moment.

Trying to somehow smoothly end his vows, Arthur heard his voice shake as he said, “If I could… no, wait. I meant to say if we were to – I…” he closed his eyes and shook his head. “I forgot my vows and n-now I’m making a mess of things. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he leaned forward to whisper to Alfred who was grinning like an idiot. “Please make me stop talking.”

Letting out a loud laugh, Alfred led the church in a round of uplifting laughter. When he heard Alfred’s laugh, Arthur nearly crumbled to the ground into a pile of overjoyed dust. Alfred wasn’t upset… he was laughing. He’d admitted his mistake, and now Alfred’s eyes were filled to the brim with tears as he laughed. It wasn’t mocking… no, it was relief. Relief that Arthur wasn’t second-guessing their wedding. Relief that Arthur still loved him. Relief that Arthur didn’t regret anything.

Strong hands held Arthur’s tight while Alfred’s eyes met his. Warmth washed over Arthur and filled in all of the anxious, hollow spaces left from his prior worries. Regardless of whether or not he delivered his rehearsed vows, Arthur had told the truth. He was very much in love with the man standing before him. It was a miracle the two had met, and even more a miracle that Alfred fell in love with him. Reaching up a hand to wipe a tear from his eye, Arthur sniffled as the reverend cleared his throat loudly.

“And now, Mr. Jones,” the reverend said after the guests had quieted themselves. “Your vows.”

Taking a breath, Alfred braced himself as he smiled at Arthur. Arthur’s knees quaked at the perfect smile, but he held steady. He needed to absorb every word. To bind it all together when Alfred was done and seal it away in a special place in his heart. Alfred was no writer, but when he tried, he was a damn good poet. And so, Arthur smiled right back and waited patiently.

"Arthur, I have known you longer than I’ve known myself,” he stated evenly and carefully. Each word was precise. Not a single one out of place. He’d been practicing, too. “When I was ten, and I met you, I didn’t know that I’d fall in love with you. I just knew that you were my first real friend,” Alfred paused, took a breath, and said, “My best friend.

When we were just ten, I knew that I loved being with you. You were smart, funny, sweet… you were… no, you’ve always been an amazing person.” Alfred smiled to himself before continuing. “At thirteen years old, you showed me compassion by letting me into your home. At fifteen, you forgave me when my temper was out of control. And at nineteen –” Alfred paused, “— At nineteen, you saved me from myself.” Arthur felt his chest ache at the memories that Alfred provoked, but Alfred didn’t stop. He simply gave Arthur an even look as he said, “I love you, Arthur Kirkland. And I want to repay all of the kindness you’ve given me for the rest of my life. I want to be there for you. Always. Just like you’ve been here for me.”

Though Arthur tried to keep his composure, his vision blurred. God, he hated crying. It was so messy. But Alfred was speaking so earnestly. So genuinely. It was like he was trying to tug each of Arthur’s heartstrings one by one, plucking each one to create a tune to a love song that always brought Arthur to tears.
When Arthur blinked, tears rolled down his cheeks. He couldn’t really see Alfred’s quivering lip anymore, and the line of his thick-framed glasses wobbled in his vision. As the reverend gave them the instruction to put rings on each other’s fingers, Arthur’s hands shook. He couldn’t even see Alfred’s finger. But Alfred helped him guide the thin, silver band onto his ring finger. It was all they could afford on a student’s salary. Nonetheless, they were happy.

“By the power vested in me and the state of Washington, I now pronounce you married,” the reverend announced loudly. The wedding attendees were already standing and clapping. Arthur couldn’t stop crying. He felt Alfred’s hands on his waist, pulling him forward, lifting him onto the tips of his toes. Arthur hardly heard the words “You may kiss the groom,” before Alfred’s lips were on his.

Whooping and hollering echoed off of the walls of the church, but Arthur didn’t mind it. He was busy wrapping his arms around Alfred’s shoulders and holding tight. They were married. Tied together in holy matrimony. Arthur felt his chest ache with something that resembled relief and fear. It was so much all at once, too many emotions rattled around in his chest. He pulled back from Alfred’s kiss breathless and wide-eyed. They were married.

Was he elated, or anxious? Excited or afraid? Arthur couldn’t quite tell. He held onto Alfred’s shoulders as if his life depended on it. The voices around him sounded blurred and muffled. His vision was still hazy with tears. He… he was happy, wasn’t he? Was this some level of joy he’d never experienced? Was it leaving him overstimulated and buzzing with too much energy?

Before he had a chance to delve into his subconscious, he felt Alfred’s thumb wiping tears from his cheeks. Arthur blinked hard. Alfred. His steadying rock, his warming sun. His husband. Arthur couldn’t help but smiled at that wonderful face. Alfred smiled back.

“You okay?” He mouthed, knowing that he couldn’t be heard over the sound of Arthur’s Irish family members. Arthur laughed at Alfred’s tear-streaked cheeks. How could he ask if Arthur was okay? He looked like a wreck. Then again, Arthur was sure that he looked awful as well. They were a matching pair.

Pulling himself against Alfred once more, Arthur buried his face in Alfred’s shoulder and laughed. He was twenty-three years old and married to the love of his life. He was more than okay. He was… he was… oh, this emotion was something Arthur wanted to write down. To preserve. He’d have to find a pen and a napkin at the reception, or peck out the major descriptions on his mobile. Alfred would get a kick out of that.

“I love you,” Arthur said loudly in Alfred’s ear. Hopefully, Alfred could hear him over the continuous celebration around them. “I love you so much!”

No written word could properly describe the sensation Arthur felt when Alfred held him tight and declared, “I love you, too.”

Arthur blinked himself awake slowly. He remembered their wedding… though it was a little more exhausting than he expected. Forgotten vows, nosy sisters, and Alfred. There were so many elements and only one Arthur to absorb them all.

Pushing himself up from the blankets beneath him, Arthur rubbed at his tired eyes. The room was dark… had he slept that long? Arthur blinked tiredly. There hadn’t been blankets on the sofa when he’d fallen asleep. Perhaps Alfred had brought him upstairs and put him in bed. It would
make sense, considering he’d been stripped of his sweater and left with only his trousers. He could’ve done without Alfred taking off his shirt, but he was extremely warm, so it made sense that Alfred had tried to keep him cool while preserving his dignity. Satisfied with this option, Arthur laid back down and sighed into the pillow.

Next to him, the bed dipped and shook as someone adjusted on the mattress. Arthur’s eyes opened immediately as he sat up. The room was quiet aside from Arthur’s now harried breathing. Someone was in bed with him. Alfred? It was too dark to tell.

Sliding his hand across the sheets, Arthur’s fingertips met bare skin first. He took his hand back as if he’d touched fire. There was a naked person in bed with him. It couldn’t be Alfred. He had too much respect for Arthur to be crawling in bed with him buck naked. Should he scream? Was Alfred even home? What if the stranger had killed Alfred and crawled into bed with Arthur? The idea was enough to make Arthur dizzy. Wiping the back of his hand across his forehead – had his bandage fallen off? – Arthur slowly pushed himself toward the edge of the bed.

Carefully and quietly, Arthur reached for the nightstand. If he could just switch on the lamp, then he could tell where he was going. He could get away from the stranger in the bed. Fumbling for a moment, Arthur felt his stomach drop as his hand met empty air. His nightstand was gone.

“Hey,” his bedmate yawned tiredly. That voice was too familiar. It wasn’t real. Arthur felt sick. “Baby, what’re you doin’?”

It was Alfred’s voice. That only voice that Arthur knew so well, it haunted him. Arthur’s mouth went dry as he continued to scrabble for a light switch. What was happening?

“I can’t find the light,” Arthur said shakily, trying to remain calm.

“Mmm… I got it,” Alfred sighed as he rolled on the bed and pulled a chain with a slight click. Arthur squinted at the light that greeted him.

Warm, orange walls lined the room. Arthur felt his sense of balance skew as he realized he was not in his bedroom. His bed had been replaced with a canopy bed that was covered in a veil of sheer, white curtains. Plush, satin pillows sat at the head of the bed, and just behind Arthur sat a wonderfully handsome, perfectly naked Alfred Jones.

Slapping his hands over his eyes, Arthur turned around and squeaked, “What are you – why is… What is going on here?”

Alfred laughed a bit as he shifted on the bed. “Babe, I know you’ve seen my junk before.”

Arthur swung his legs over the edge of the bed and blinked down at his black trousers in confusion. Hadn’t he been wearing khakis earlier? Arthur glanced around the room. There was a dresser, but it was sitting along the wrong wall. There were suitcases next it that were half-opened with several articles of clothing tossed about the room. Arthur glanced back at the wall behind Alfred. Their wardrobe was missing. Arthur felt dizzy.

Sniffing haughtily, Alfred sighed, “Arthur, I told you not to drink so much champagne. You’re a real lightweight.”

“Ch-champagne?” Arthur sputtered as he up on shaky legs. He refused to look back at Alfred, regardless of how tantalizing those abdominal muscles were. Nothing made sense. The
world was topsy-turvy. “The doctor said I shouldn’t drink for a while, yet. We don’t even have any alcohol in the house.”

Alfred let out a long whistle. “Wow… you musta been plastered. Do you not remember anything?”

Arthur stumbled about the room, awkwardly trying to piece together the evening as Alfred watched him from the foreign bed. No matter what way he twisted the night, none of it fit together to result in this… this… whatever this was. From the looks of the room, they weren’t at home. They suitcases were another dead giveaway. Alfred couldn’t have plucked Arthur off of the sofa and dragged him to another city in such a short time… not unless Arthur really had gotten drunk.

But… Alfred was so careful when it came to following the orders of Arthur’s doctor. He wouldn’t let Arthur drink and risk worsening his condition. Arthur held a hand to his head as he turned back to look at Alfred. His husband had thoughtfully pulled a blanket across his lap, but he still looked painfully attractive in his half-awake state.

“Where are we?”

Alfred threw his arms into the air and announced, “Honeymoon central, baby! We’re in Hawaii!”

Stumbling back a few steps, Arthur caught himself on the wall. Hawaii. Where was that, again? That was a state in America… somewhere in the middle of the ocean. Far, far away from Washington. Arthur nearly fainted until he zeroed in on Alfred’s initial statement. Honeymoon central. That wasn’t right… their wedding was years ago. Why would they be on their honeymoon now?

“Sweetheart? You okay?” Alfred asked thoughtfully as he put his arm down. Arthur gave him a blank stare, and Alfred smiled a bit. “I know you don’t like flying, but I really think that champagne threw you for a loop.”

Arthur squinted. “What champagne?”

“Wow. You really don’t remember any of the flight?” Alfred laughed and laid back against the pillow as he spoke. “We woulda never been able to afford this place, but your parents bought us tickets to Hawaii as a wedding present. But you hate flying… so when we got on the plane, you got a little thingy of champagne. You just kept knocking them back.”

Arthur swallowed anxiously. “Is that so?”

“Yup,” Alfred said, his lips popping loudly at the end. He folded his arms under his head calmly. “When we got out of the plane, you were trippin’ and swayin’… I had to practically carry you to the room.” Alfred laughed again and said, “When we got in here, you ordered me to strip! Too bad you don’t remember last night. It was fun.”

Wedding present, honeymoon, Hawaii… this wasn’t real. Arthur was stuck. He wanted to wake up. He should’ve been awake. But he was caught. Stuck in the memory of his honeymoon three years in the past. It was no longer warm and cozy. It was frightening.

Crawling back onto the bed, Arthur loomed over Arthur and ordered, “Pinch me.”

Alfred opened one blue eye to give Arthur a look. “What?”
“Pinch me,” Arthur repeated. “I’d like to wake up, now.”

Without warning, Alfred flipped their positions and pressed Arthur down onto the mattress. Alfred smiled over him, hovering over him with an authority that made Arthur’s heart pound. Heat tingled in his stomach, but Arthur forced his eyes to stay focused on Alfred’s. Oh, but Alfred was there, above him… strong arms and a lean body as far as Arthur dared to see.

“You think it’s too good to be true, baby?” Alfred purred, leaning down to press a kiss to Arthur’s lips. Arthur couldn’t help but let his eyes flutter shut. Alfred pulled back and whispered, “You think you’re dreamin’? I’ll make this the best dream you’ve ever had.”

He could if he wanted. Arthur would let him. So enticing, so warm, Arthur would let him do anything he wanted… but wait. This was only a dream. Arthur could only be remembering this. It wasn’t real. He was just indulging in his own fantasy of what he assumed Alfred was like.

Prying his eyes open, Arthur blinked up at the beige ceiling of the living room. His heart was still racing, but Alfred was nowhere to be found. Reaching up a trembling hand, Arthur felt along his forehead, feeling the thick bandage over his cut. Arthur sighed. He was home. Awake and real. Sitting up on the sofa, Arthur glanced at the coffee table where his wedding photo still sat.

At the very least, he remembered something good that day. He did not regret his wedding.

As the lock on the front door clunked and the door opened, Arthur pushed himself up and brushed off the front of his trousers, resigning himself to an evening of comfortable domesticity. He could tell Alfred about the wedding, but the honeymoon… that would have to wait until another day.
“So, let me see if I’ve got this right,” Alfred said lowly as he sat at the kitchen table with his hands curled around an empty can of soda. “You remembered the wedding, but not the reception?”

Leaning against the kitchen counter eating a cup of chocolate pudding, Arthur nodded. It had been just over an hour after his dream of the wedding, and already Arthur was tired. Somehow, his memory-dreams didn’t serve very well as sleep. Nevertheless, he stood tall and proudly told Alfred that he remembered their wedding ceremony. “That’s right.”

Alfred looked exhausted as he stared at the tabletop and asked, “And you don’t remember the reception?”

“No,” Arthur sighed as he stirred his spoon around his newly emptied cup of pudding. The memory of their honeymoon suite was still fresh in his mind, but Arthur kept that to himself. Alfred didn’t need to know quite that much. So, tapping his spoon against the side of his empty cup, Arthur gave Alfred a tired smile. “I just remember getting ready and going through the service.”

Leaning back in his chair, Alfred let out a long sigh. “Well, that’s still a lot to remember. I mean… a wedding is a big thing.” Arthur nodded in agreement, and Alfred coughed lightly. “In retrospect, it’s probably a good thing you don’t remember the reception… Seamus got hammered and started dancing on the tables.”

Arthur laughed, but it was high and caught in his throat. Talk of alcohol made him nervous, now. Seamus was drinking wildly at his reception; had there been an open bar where anyone could get their fix of liquid courage? Alistair could have sat at that bar and drunk away his sorrows all night and Arthur would’ve been none the wiser. There had also been champagne on his wedding night… enough to make him black out, it would seem.

Clenching his hands around the plastic cup in his hands, Arthur frowned at the thought. Alzheimer’s ran in his family… did alcoholism run in his blood as well? The thought made him jittery and impatient. He needed to move and get away from his thoughts, away from the lingering, bitter sentiments of his family’s drunken escapades.

Turning around, Arthur was eager to throw his pudding cup into the garbage until he froze, looking at his view of the street through the window over the kitchen sink. No cars drove passed the house. The roads were deathly still, the only interruption of the peace being the occasional shiver of a bush in the breeze. Arthur eyed the scene serenely, taking in the weather with a sense of awe.

It was snow. The first he’d ever seen since he’d woken from the hospital. Bits of crystalline loneliness fell from the sky. They were small, fragmented shards of winters long past simply fluttering through the air toward the ground. Soon to melt and be forgotten. Arthur blinked slowly at the sight.

“It’s snowing,” he breathed. There was a creak of wood as Alfred stood from the kitchen table and met Arthur at the sink. For a moment, they watched the snow fall together. There was a
faint sound that echoed in Arthur’s ear, like the gentle laugh of someone he loved, long ago.

With his feet moving on their own accord, Arthur stepped away from the kitchen and went to the front door, opening it and leaning forward in the doorway. The snow continued to fall, hitting the warm pavement and melting so quickly, it could’ve been easily mistaken for a mirage. But Arthur reached out a hand to feel the snow anyway, adoring the small, tickling prickles of each snowflake as they kissed the palm of his right hand.

“Hey,” Alfred said quietly in the doorway. Arthur jumped at the sound of his voice and tucked his hand back inside the house, safe within the threshold. Alfred laughed at the sight, and held up a pair of faded, brown boots. “We can go for a walk, if you want. But you’ll need shoes.”

After listening to Alfred insist that it was indeed very cold outside, Arthur was bundled up in a warm hat, a long scarf, a pair of mittens, and his wool coat. Alfred looked far more comfortable in his jacket and a winter hat.

They left the house without speaking, shuffling down the street at a slow pace, just enough for Arthur to admire the snow. Something about it enticed him, though he couldn’t be sure what it was. What was the majesty of falling snow? The romance in frozen water? Arthur couldn’t pinpoint it, but he knew that he loved it. The sound of quickly melting snow lightly crunching beneath his boots, the gentle patter of snowflakes as they fell onto his cheeks and melted away into watery whispers, and the steamy cloud of his breath as he let out a peaceful exhale. He loved the snow.

Next to him, Alfred was quiet and complacent with their little promenade. His hands were comfortably tucked into the pockets of his jacket, and the strolled forward with the hint of a smile tugging at his lips. Arthur eyed it with interest. Was he remembering something? Something that happened with Arthur in the snow? Snowball fights as young boys, or perhaps a shy kiss shared in freshly falling snow. It could be any number of things.

Turning his eyes back to the pavement in front of them, Arthur held out his hands and watched snowflakes catch on the navy blue material. He smiled and said, “I think… I’ve almost missed the snow.”

Letting out a cloudy breath, Alfred laughed. “I wouldn’t be surprised. You always liked colder temperatures. It reminded you of England. I think you always liked it when fall and winter came around… you were never a fan of summer. Too hot. It made you miss the rain.”

Giving Alfred a sidelong glance, Arthur wondered, “Did I miss England, as well?”

“I don’t know,” Alfred smiled as he turned to give Arthur a glance over the rim of his glasses. “Did you?”

Arthur looked down at his mitten-clad hands in disappointment. Did he miss England? It was a question that was far out of reach. With his English accent still intact over the years and staining every word he said, it would be safe to assume he did miss England. Or, it could be said that he simply didn’t want to disregard his heritage and the way he learned to speak. But… it was only the temperature that he missed, wasn’t it? Or was it?

Looking up to the gray, unhappy sky, Arthur frowned. “I don’t know.”

Clicking his tongue, Alfred gave Arthur a strong pat on the back. The movement caused Arthur to stumble forward a few steps and his hat fell forward, covering his eyes. Alfred laughed again. “Don’t think so hard about it, it’s not that —” Alfred paused to cough, “— that big of a deal.”
Arthur pushed his knitted hat back up and gave his husband a wary glance. “Getting sick?”

Shrugging loosely, Alfred sniffled and licked his lips. “Nah. Just a cough.”

Humming skeptically, Arthur stopped at the crosswalk and waited for the light to turn. Alfred pressed the crossing button half a dozen times, and Arthur smirked as he shook his head. Alfred was childish…and yet, he was a very considerate man. He was warm and kind, welcoming and compassionate… Alfred was a good man.

Then again, Arthur hadn’t forgotten his contemplation from the morning; Alfred was struggling with the change in Arthur’s memory. He and Arthur were stuck in a constant balance between what Arthur knew and what he wished he knew.

With that thought in mind, Arthur decided to take a new prospective on his daily interactions with Alfred. It was time that Arthur stopped indulging in Alfred’s kindness and started repaying the favor. In comparison to Alfred, Arthur was a glorified lump on a log.

Trying to revive the conversation and steer it away from Arthur’s floundering memories, Arthur cleared his throat and smiled as he asked, “How was your presentation today? I know you said you had to show your work to the… uh…”

“Board of directors.” Alfred sniffled.

“Right, yes. The board of directors.” Arthur smiled and walked alongside Alfred as the crosswalk turned green. Alfred was staring straight ahead, his nose tucked into the turned-up collar of his jacket. He looked upset… was Arthur not supposed to ask about his work? Pushing his hands into his pockets, Arthur tried to act nonchalant. “Did it go well?”

“Yeah,” Alfred grunted, cleared his throat, and nodded. “It was okay.”

Arthur frowned at the lack of response. “Nothing to write home about?”

“That earned a shrug before Alfred muttered, “I guess not.”

Feeling slightly irritated, Arthur huffed and tucked his nose into his scarf. If Alfred was going to be unsociable, then so was he. When it came to Arthur, Alfred was more than happy to spill his guts with information and happenings, but when the topic came close to Alfred, he clammed up. Did he assume Arthur should know these things already, or was he simply being secretive? It made Arthur’s fingers itch to reach out and shake the poor man.

\*What?\* Arthur wanted to ask, \*What do I need to say? To do? What will make you happy again? Your smile is fake. Your laugh is flat. I want a real smile.* But Arthur kept his hands in his pockets. He kept his mouth shut. Alfred was silent. They walked.

They walked until the snow became thick and heavy to the point where Arthur’s shoulders felt weighed down by the precipitation. It could’ve been hours or minutes… silence had a strange way of warping time.

When Alfred shuffled to a halt in the middle of the pavement, Arthur stopped to look at him over his shoulder. Alfred’s collar wasn’t nearly enough to shield him from the cold, and his nose was bright red from the bitter sting of winter. He took off his glasses with shaky hands, wiping the wet drops of snow from the lenses before pushing them back onto his nose. He sniffled sadly.
“Hey, um,” Alfred mumbled lowly. Arthur had to take a step closer to hear him. There was just a hint of hoarseness in Alfred’s voice, and it set Arthur on edge. When Alfred gave him a tired smile, troubled emotions stuck in Arthur’s chest. Something was not right. “I’m not feelin’ too hot. Can we head home?”

Ah, there it was. The explanation for his mood, his quietness, his cough… Alfred was coming down with something. And all Arthur did was think of himself. But, this was Arthur’s chance to take care of Alfred for a change. It was an easy opportunity to show Alfred that he was willing and able to help Alfred in return.

Rushing forward to wrap his arm around Alfred’s, Arthur turned them around tugged him forward. “Of course we can go home! You daft twit… if you were feeling sick you should have said something.”

Alfred coughed a laugh. “That’s my Arthur.”

After marching forward a few steps, Arthur noticed that they were several blocks from home. If Alfred were to stay out in the bitter cold any longer, his sickness would get worse. It was common for people to get colds in early winter. Arthur had been suffering from a cold only a two weeks earlier. But Arthur had no idea how immune Alfred was to colds, nor how to properly locate medicine for him.

Without thinking, Arthur unwound his scarf from around his neck and turned around to wrap it around Alfred’s. For a moment, Alfred blinked at the grey scarf in confusion, not really reacting when Arthur tucked it into the collar of his coat and safely covered his mouth and nose. But after a beat of thought, Alfred seemed to realize that Arthur was now without a scarf.

“Hey,” he tried to speak into the scarf as he tried to unwind it. His voice was muffled by the fabric, and it was nearly humorous, but Arthur was worried about the sleepy glaze that covered Alfred’s eyes. Alfred tugged the scarf away from his mouth. “You need this.”

“Not right now,” Arthur tutted, taking Alfred’s hands from the scarf and holding him in his own. He glanced at the street around them, noting that there were only a few shops and cafes open. It was getting late. With the dark, came even more cold. Pursing his lips, Arthur stepped toward the curb and reached up a hand to wave down a cab.

“Woah,” Alfred said quickly, taking Arthur’s raised hand and pulling it back down. “We don’t need to get a taxi. I can walk.”

“You’re sick,” Arthur pressed, lifting his arm again.

Alfred sighed and shook his head, muttering, “That doesn’t mean I can’t walk,” before letting out a feeble cough. Arthur marked that as a point in his favor as a cab pulled over. Swiftly giving the cabbie their address, Arthur tucked Alfred into the cab and buckled their seatbelts.

Slouching in his seat, Alfred glared at the window as the cabbie pulled into traffic. He coughed into his scarf once, then grumbled, “This is a waste of money. Home is only seven blocks away.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Arthur said with a nod of his head. Alfred was quiet after that.

Arthur looked out the window, seeing the warped view of streetlights through the watery pane of glass. It almost looked like the lights were melting. Perhaps they were crying, letting out little shards of their light in dewy drops of snow. When the cab stopped at a traffic light, Arthur
watched the red and green lights flickering through the thick snow.

The streets were nearly empty aside from the few cabs that rolled through the city in search of cold civilians. Arthur was happy this one came along when it did. He was uneasy with the idea of Alfred being sick. He was always so invincible… now he was huddled against the side of a cab that smelled like cigarettes and popcorn. His blue eyes were closed to the world, but it didn’t look like he was happy to be dozing. His eyebrows were drawn together, making him look angry as he sniffled sleepily.

When Alfred cracked open an eye to see Arthur staring, Arthur didn’t turn away. He simply smiled at Alfred’s disgruntled expression.


“I’m worried about you.”

Alfred smiled at that, and closed his eyes again. “I’m fine, Arthur. Just a little cough.”

As Alfred started to breathe deeper and slower, Arthur turned to look out his own window, quietly counting the houses they passed on the streets.

Before long, the cab pulled to a stop in front of their home, and Arthur was digging in his pockets for money. The fair was a less than ten dollars, and Arthur knew he had change from the spending money Alfred gave him long ago. So he handed that over and shook Alfred’s shoulder.

“Alfred,” he tried, shaking Alfred a little harder. From past experience, it seemed Alfred was a bit of a heavy sleeper. Arthur leaned closer and shook his arm again. “Alfred, we’re home. Time to get out of the cab.”

“What?” Alfred groaned as he sat up blurrily. The cabbie handed Arthur his change while Alfred fumbled with his seatbelt, and Arthur watched as Alfred slowly slid out of the car. Alfred shuffled up the steps with Arthur close behind, listening as Alfred muttered, “Coulda just walked home. Waste of money if I ever saw one…”

Rolling his eyes, Arthur pat Alfred’s pat softly and nodded. “Yes, yes. I’ve wasted my money. Shame on me.” He helped Alfred out of his jacket and slowly lifted the scarf over Alfred’s head, careful of his glasses. “But money is the least of your worries at the moment. You should get some sleep.”

“I’m fine,” Alfred croaked, then coughed into his arm. Arthur gave him a skeptical look and steered him toward the stairs.

But wait… Alfred normally slept on the sofa, didn’t he? If Alfred slept on the bed, then Arthur would have to sleep on the sofa. Greed clawed at Arthur’s stomach, but he shook his head and continued to tow Alfred to the stairs. To get well, he needed to sleep well. If that included sacrificing his place in their comfortable, king-sized bed, it was a sacrifice Arthur would have to make.

“I sleep… I sleep on the couch,” Alfred said in confusion as he walked up the stairs. Arthur gave a minute hum of interest, and Alfred sniffled. “You really don’t have to do this, Arthur. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re sick.” Arthur pushed him through the bedroom doorway and sat Alfred down on the bed, instructing him to wait there until further orders. With that, Arthur went to the dresser and pulled out what seemed to be Alfred’s pajamas. Flannel was warmer than others, so
Arthur assumed they were the best for his sick spouse. Handing the clothing to Alfred, Arthur said, “Change into these.”

Alfred gave the clothes a half interested look before glancing back up at Arthur. “I have some work I need to finish up.”

“You can do it another day.”

A cough from Alfred, then he said, “But I have to work tomorrow.”

Arthur dropped the pajamas onto Alfred’s lap and stated, “You’ll call in sick tomorrow.”

“You don’t know that,” Alfred smiled. Arthur arched an eyebrow as Alfred coughed several times, each one sounding more rattling than the next. When he was finished, Alfred’s cheeks were red with exertion, and he frowned up at Arthur. “I could feel like a million bucks in the morning,” he started to push the pajamas aside as he said, “I’ll just finish my report on the vaccine and then –”

“Alfred,” Arthur interrupted, holding the pajamas on his lap as he knelt down in front of Alfred. “You’ve done so much for me. You’ve taken such good care of me… let me return the favor.”

Alfred’s expression softened into a warm smile. “You don’t have to do that. I can take care of myself.”

“I know I don’t have to,” Arthur said stubbornly. “I want to. Now,” he patted the flannel pajamas, “Change into these. You need to sleep.”

Sitting down on the bed, Arthur watched as Alfred dramatically rolled his eyes and went into the bathroom to change. Taking advantage of the privacy, Arthur quickly slipped into a pair of pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, tucking his snow-speckled trousers and old jumper into the hamper while Alfred’s coughing echoed loudly in the bathroom.

When the coughs started to sound grating, Arthur found himself wincing in sympathy as he waited for Alfred to come out of the bathroom. Did they have some sort of lozenges? Cough syrup? Arthur would have to check when Alfred was done.

When he opened the door, Alfred’s face was flushed and his eyes were foggy. Arthur gave him a sad smile when Alfred muttered, “Seriously, Arthur. I’m not tired.”

“Yes, you are,” Arthur nodded as he pointed Alfred to the bed. “Get in.”

Alfred groaned, coughed a few times, then sniffled as he obediently tucked himself under the thick blankets. Arthur slipped into the bathroom, opening the cabinet where he assumed medicine would be hidden. There were simple medicines like Tylenol, ibuprofen, and stomach medicine… but nothing for Alfred’s horrendous coughing.

“Alfred, do we have cough medicine?” He called hopefully, peeking out of the bathroom doorway to see Alfred’s red face barely poking out of the covers.

“I ‘unno,” Alfred sighed as he rolled onto his side and coughed miserably. “Maybe we used it all.”

Feeling a tad irritated, Arthur drummed his fingers against the doorframe. “Well, where would I go buy more?”
“Drugstore,” Alfred grunted.

Frowning, Arthur walked back into the bedroom and tugged open the dresser drawers again. If he had to go out and buy Alfred medicine, he’d do it. Alfred had bought obscene amounts of Indian food for him before, so dropping by the chemist wasn’t a terrible thing to do in return. Before he could pull out a fresh pair of trousers, Alfred rolled over and motioned for him to stop.

“Arthur, seriously, I’m fine,” he croaked, his voice hoarser after his recent coughing fit. “It’s just a little cough. I’ll be fine in the morning, I promise.”

Eyeing Alfred’s red face, Arthur stepped away from the dresser to press the back of his hand to Alfred’s forehead. “You might have a fever,” he worried, pressing his cold fingers to Alfred’s hot forehead and cheeks. “You should take something for that at least.”

Retreating to the bathroom, Arthur plucked the large bottle of ibuprofen from the shelf and read the instructions. In the bedroom, Alfred coughed a few more times.

“Ya know, there’s something going around at work,” Alfred said quietly. “A bug or somethin’.”

Arthur shook two tablets into his palm and set the bottle back on the shelf, eagerly looking around for a cup that Alfred could use. “Is that so?” He asked kindly, stepping back into the bedroom and looking around for any glasses that may have been left around the room.

Alfred cleared his throat and said, “Yeah. Someone said Franny was out today. They said he caught it. I bet it’s just a virus. I’ll be okay.”

Arthur stepped around the bed to look at Alfred’s nightstand. No cups. “Franny… is that a friend of yours?”

“Y-yeah,” Alfred coughed and tugged the blankets closer. “We went to school with him. He works in the art department of the university.”

“Sounds like a fine chap,” Arthur smiled as he set the medicine on Alfred’s nightstand. He placed a hand on Alfred’s shoulder and waited until Alfred’s blue eyes slid over to give him a lazy look. “I’ll be right back with some water.”

Before Arthur could leave the room, Alfred called, “Can you bring me my report file from downstairs?”

Arthur glanced over his shoulder and said, “No.”

“Ugh… you’re mean.” Alfred whined as he rolled onto his side again. Arthur smiled at the sight, and went downstairs.

Alfred was always like this when he was sick. He would try to brush it off, say it wasn’t a big deal, then collapse into a puddle of incoherent mush when his fever went too high. Arthur paused on the last step to blink in confusion; how did he remember that? Maybe Alfred being sick was just so prominent and memorable, it bubbled to the surface the first chance it got. Arthur tried to be satisfied with this explanation as he poured a glass of water and brought it back to Alfred.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.” Arthur said as he handed Alfred the pills. Alfred swallowed
them one at a time, his hand slightly shaking as he held the plastic cup of water.

“You should,” Alfred said quietly as he set the water aside and lay back. Arthur pulled the blankets back up and tucked him in as Alfred said, “He’s such a funny guy.”


“We don’t see him much anymore,” Alfred yawned as Arthur took off his glasses and put them on the nightstand.

“Why is that?”

“He got married to this girl, Angelique or somethin’… she’s a sweet gal.” Alfred blinked up at the ceiling slowly without even a hint of a smile on his lips. Arthur sensed there was a reason they didn’t talk about Francis and his new wife, but Alfred didn’t say anything about them. He simply stared up at the ceiling as Arthur pat his shoulder.

“Well… I’ll let you sleep, then.” Arthur said as he went to the door and reached for the light switch. Before he turned off the light, Alfred spoke quietly.

“We used to be really good friends.”

Arthur lingered by the doorway, waiting for more information, but Alfred was quiet. Leaning against the doorframe, Arthur asked, “Is there a reason we aren’t good friends with him anymore?”

“I dunno,” Alfred murmured to the ceiling before he coughed once. “We used to hang out all the time. You, me, Franny, and Angie. We were all buds. And then… one day, I guess we just… stopped.”

Frowning a bit, Arthur wrapped his arms around himself and sighed. “That’s… sad, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Alfred said softly. “It’s weird how friends just drift apart. One day you’re really close to someone and the next –” Alfred coughed, “– you’re barely talking to them.”

Arthur felt something in his heart twinge at the statement. “Almost like your friend became a stranger.”

For a moment, Alfred was silent, looking up at the ceiling without any real conviction. Perhaps he was tired. He probably wanted to rest. Arthur reached for the light switch again, and Alfred said, “It’s sad.”

“Maybe we’ll have to plan something with them,” Arthur offered seeing a faint smile on Alfred’s lips. “Friendship can take work, sometimes. It’s not all easy.”

“Yeah,” Alfred whispered, shifting on the bed to get comfortable. “I can’t remember the last time we talked about Francis… It’s been forever.”

“All the more reason to extend an invite for an evening together,” Arthur said evenly. “We can talk about it when you’re feeling a little better.”

“I feel fine,” Alfred insisted before he had a coughing fit. Arthur waited for Alfred to stop, and listened carefully when Alfred said, “I’m always fine. It’s just a cough. I’m fine.”
“Of course you are.” Nodding, Arthur flicked off the light switch and bathed the room in a soothing kind of darkness. One that wiped away the harsh light and let his mind relax for a bit. Arthur could still see the outline of the bed, but Alfred was lost in a sea of dark blankets, drowning in the swells and folds of fabric.

Arthur took a step back, and shut the bedroom door.

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Waking from a dreamless night on the sofa, Arthur felt the muscles in his neck pinch and pull as he sat up tiredly and ran a hand through his hair. Alfred had slept on this sofa for weeks and had been seemingly unaffected, yet there Arthur was, suffering from agitating muscle aches.

Glancing at the clock, Arthur noted that it was well past eight in the morning. Alfred was normally at work at this time of day, but when Arthur slid off of the sofa, he noted that the coffee pot was undisturbed and there were no used dishes in the sink. Alfred was still asleep, then.

Stealing up the stairs, Arthur cracked open the door and peeked inside. The interior was dark, given that Arthur had pulled the drapes and left them closed a few days ago. Through the dim light, Arthur could see a large lump in the blankets. A smile came to Arthur’s face; Alfred must’ve burrowed himself in the blankets sometime throughout the night, creating a warm, comfortable nest.

Slipping inside, Arthur tiptoed to the bed and knelt down beside Alfred, carefully placing the back of his hand against Alfred’s forehead. It was hot. Much hotter than he was yesterday evening.

“Your hands are cold,” Alfred said lowly, his face scrunching up unhappily.

Letting out an undignified squeak of alarm, Arthur fell back onto the floor, more than a little bit surprised by Alfred’s voice. Opening his eyes to squint at Arthur, Alfred smiled at his reaction.

“Sorry,” he whispered, “I’ve been awake for a while. Called in to work… then tried to go back to sleep. I heard you open the door, but I didn’t wanna wake up.” His eyes shut again, and he hugged his pillow closer. “I guess I woke up anyway.”

Creeping closer to the bedside, Arthur pulled the covers up over Alfred’s shoulders from where they had slipped down. “How do you feel?”

“Kinda… blurry.” He reached out blindly around his nightstand for a moment, then opened his eyes to squint at Arthur again. “Where are my glasses?”

Plucking Alfred’s glasses from the nightstand, Arthur handed them over and watched with slight bemusement as Alfred fumbled and tried to focus on his glasses. With a small smile, Arthur felt familiarity tickle at the back of his mind. Something warm rose up in his chest at the thought of Alfred looking at him with hazy, tired eyes. Arthur could almost imagine running his fingers through Alfred’s messy, thick blond locks and whispering something sweet in his ear. Maybe Arthur had done something like that in the past when Alfred was sick. Had it soothed Alfred? Made him feel any better?

Arthur didn’t remember. So he sat quietly, watching Alfred rub his eyes and adjust his glasses a few times before he looked back at Arthur.
“What time is it?” Alfred murmured.

“Half past eight.” Arthur winced when Alfred loud out several bone-rattling coughs, and snuck off to the bathroom to retrieve more medicine. When he returned to the bedroom, Alfred was slowly but surely pushing himself up into a sitting position. Arthur handed Alfred two of the ibuprofen and helped Alfred hold his water glass steady when Alfred took his medicine. When the glass was set aside, Arthur eyed Alfred’s sleepy blue eyes. “All right?”

Alfred smiled up at him tiredly. “Kinda lonely.”

Arthur shifted where he stood awkwardly. Lonely? What was Arthur supposed to do about that? He was as close as he should have been. Should he hug Alfred? There was a possibility that Arthur would catch whatever it was Alfred was suffering from. Being sick again so soon was not Arthur’s idea of fun. So he forced a smile to his face and tried to look sympathetic.

“Am I not enough company for you?”

Scratching the back of his head, Alfred looked around the room slowly. “When I’m sick, you’re normally right in bed next to me.”

Arthur wrinkled his nose in distaste. “That sounds… uncomfortable. For both of us.”

“I’m a sick snuggler,” Alfred laughed, then coughed, and laughed again. “When I’m sick, snuggling helps me sleep.”

“W-well,” Arthur thumbed the edge of his nightshirt. Though he was comfortably falling in love with Alfred, he wasn’t so sure about cuddling with him when he was sick. Something still felt odd about that idea.

Seeming to sense the discomfort, Alfred held up his hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m not telling you to crawl into bed and give me a hug or somethin’. I was just thinking,” he yawned and leaned back against the pillows before smiling and saying, “Can I write my report for my vaccine, now?”

“I don’t think you should be writing an important document like that when you have a fever,” Arthur said solidly, ignoring the way Alfred stuck out his bottom lip and pouted. Grabbing a change of clothes from the dresser, Arthur paused at the door to give Alfred a look. “You should eat something. Do we have soup?”

Pushing back his blankets, Alfred nodded. “It’s in the cabinet. I can –”

“No, I’ll make it. You’re sick.” Arthur waved for Alfred to lay back and watched as Alfred begrudgingly pulled the blankets back over his legs.

The house was an uncomfortable kind of quiet as Arthur moved around the kitchen in search of Alfred’s food. Outside, more snow fell from sleepy gray clouds. The large flakes were too cold to melt today, and they covered the pavement in thick, cottony white. Twin black trails marked the roads where cars had driven and disturbed the peaceful, white snow.

For a moment, Arthur simply watched the snow fall, enjoying the slight peace that came with it. He could perfectly recall the evening before when he walked with Alfred. He remembered the snowflakes that stuck to his eyelashes and stung at his cheeks. It was peaceful walking with Alfred, but at the same time, it was almost lonely.

They were close but extremely far apart in terms of memories and thoughts. Alfred knew
everything about their past. All the good and all the bad… Alfred had access to it all with just one thought. Arthur, on the other hand, was still fumbling with a few puddles of random, scattered memories. He wanted more. He wanted to be able to walk alongside Alfred with confidence, recalling their past winters with ease.

But that was still out of reach. Just like so many things for Arthur. He was alone this way. Wishing Alfred were lost with him, fighting to reclaim their memories together.

Was this how Alfred felt when Arthur was in the hospital? Did he wander about the house listlessly like Arthur was? Did he absorb the silence and wish Arthur was there to fill it up? It was a lonely kind of quiet. The kind that made Arthur’s lungs burn for fresh air. But it was too cold outside to breathe deep. So Arthur brought Alfred his soup instead, hoping the steam would somehow melt away his discomfort as he sat on the edge of the bed and watched Alfred slowly eat his soup.

“I haven’t gotten sick for a long time,” Alfred sniffled as he looked down at his soup. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at that, and waited patiently as Alfred thought to himself for a moment. “I made it… almost a year without being sick. But it looks like this winter got us,” he smiled up at Arthur and huffed. “This winter sucks.”

“It does indeed,” Arthur agreed quietly as Alfred stirred his soup.

Coughing once, Alfred sniffled and smiled down at his soup. That smile was familiar. That pitiful, tired smile that stained Alfred’s blue eyes a darker shade… Arthur knew it, but he couldn’t pinpoint where he’d first seen it.

Folding his hands together, Arthur took a deep breath and murmured, “I’m sorry, Alfred. You’re working so hard to help me, and all you get in return is a cold.”

Laughing just once, Alfred lowered his bowl and gave Arthur a brighter smile. “Hey now… you make it sound like I’m dying,” he narrowed his eyes slyly. “Don’t go writing me off just yet. It’s just a cough.”

Giving Alfred a weak smile in return, Arthur took his empty bowl of soup and left his ailing husband to sleep. Back to the dreary first floor of their house. Back to the silence. The uncomfortable, deafening silence.

After pacing the living room restlessly, Arthur turned on the telly and flicked through several channels in hope of entertainment. One of Alfred’s superhero movies was on, and Arthur let that play quietly in the background of his hazy thoughts.

Writing Alfred off, eh? Is that what Alfred thought he was doing? Assuming the worst? Arthur was an exceptional pessimist. It wouldn’t be out of character to write off his own husband when he caught a cold. But really, Arthur was far more upset that he couldn’t do more for Alfred. He should’ve gone to get the medicine. He could still go, but something in his stomach clenched at the idea of going outside without company.

If he went on his own, something terrible could happen. Alfred would be none the wiser. Arthur would be out, alone, with hardly any memories of the world around him. He could go to Sara’s café and ask for her help, but there was no guarantee that she would be there. Arthur didn’t like that option.

He wanted to know why he was so afraid of going out on his own. What was scaring him so much? What made him so uncomfortable about going out alone? Falling sideways against the
side of the sofa, Arthur frowned at the main character of the film he was watching. It didn’t distract him from his discomforting thoughts. Something just felt… wrong.

That feeling didn’t dissipate as Arthur let his eyes flutter shut, and he fell into a restless sleep.

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Arthur frowned at the dim screen of his mobile, glaring at the instructions that a bartender had messily typed into a text message:

**Ur bro is drunk. Plz come get him.**

Walking down a rain-slicked street at midnight wasn’t exactly what Arthur would call his ideal Wednesday night out. In a perfect world, Arthur would be curled up on the sofa with Alfred, reading a book while Alfred argued with one of his video games. Alas, Alfred was at work and Arthur was stomping toward an address that was texted to him.

He couldn’t keep doing this. It was enabling Alistair. For his brother’s sake, it was up to Arthur to put his foot down and demand he put a stop to his unhealthy drinking habits. It was the responsible thing to do. The most loving decision. Alistair was Arthur’s oldest brother. Arthur had looked up to him for years, wishing he could be as strong, as kind, and as fun as him.

And then Marie died.

Somehow, Alistair died with her. At least, the version of Alistair that Arthur knew and loved. He was shut-off from the world. Isolating himself from emotions so he could mourn in peace. For such a long time, Arthur had put up with it. He’d *understood* it. If Alfred had died, Arthur would be a wreck. He wouldn’t want to go on. So he let Alistair shut himself away in the house he’d shared with Marie. He and the rest of the family let Alistair skip dinner on Christmas, Easter, and everyone’s birthdays. They were being considerate of a mourning man.

But, as Arthur was woken up in the middle of the night time and again, told to come scrape his brother off of the floor of a bar, his understanding stance started to waver. It was one thing to miss his deceased wife, but it was another matter entirely when Alistair decided to bathe his liver in bourbon.

Tugging open the door of a bar, Arthur’s nose was hit with the unmistakable scent of beer. Several people were talking loudly at old, wooden tables, clinking glasses and pointing at the American football game that was playing on multiple telly screens. Behind the bar, the barkeeper was pointedly keeping his eye on the man who was draped over a table in the back of the bar. Arthur narrowed his eyes at the mound of mussed, red hair on the drunk’s head. There was no doubt it was Alistair.

Trudging to Alistair’s table, Arthur shot the bartender an apologetic look. The man seemed unmoved by the expression, and rolled his eyes, focusing instead on paying customers. It was one thing to miss his deceased wife, but it was another matter entirely when Alistair decided to bathe his liver in bourbon.

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Trudging to Alistair’s table, Arthur shoot the bartender an apologetic look. The man seemed unmoved by the expression, and rolled his eyes, focusing instead on paying customers. Arthur turned to his brother, stopping at his side and giving him a sad onceover.

His hair was a mess; had he showered in the past few days? Probably not. Alistair had been neglecting personal hygiene for quite some time. His shirt was obvious several days old with the stains and spots all over his sleeves and collar. Arthur sighed and shook Alistair’s shoulder.

“Come on then,” Arthur grumbled, shaking Alistair a little harder when he wouldn’t respond. There was a low, growling sound from his brother, but Arthur wasn’t fazed by it. He
grasped Alistair’s arm and gave it a solid tug. “You’ve had enough.”

Seemingly awake, Alistair pulled his arm from Arthur’s grip and stood up shakily, wobbling at the edge of his table and squinting unhappily at his younger brother. “That’s not… not none of your business,” Alistair slurried messily. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at the spittle that ran down his brother’s chin, but didn’t say anything as Alistair pointed an accusing finger at him. “I’m done… when I say so.”

“Alistair, this is getting out of hand,” Arthur frowned, reaching for his brother. Alistair stumbled away from him, falling back into a chair. Arthur gestured to his bumbling movements as an example. “Look at you! You can’t even walk straight.”

“I ca-can walk straight. Straighter than… straighter than you!” Alistair giggled at the statement for a moment, falling against the side of a table and disturbing the other bar patrons.

Shaking his head, Arthur felt his patience withering. He was tired of this. Tired of trying so hard to help Alistair and seeing him plunge back into the safety of alcohol once again. He was tired of waking up in the middle of the night to retrieve him. Tired of making excuses for why he hadn’t seen his brother sober in weeks, months, years… It was too much. And Alistair didn’t want to change.

“Alistair, stand up. I’m taking you home,” said Arthur solidly, grasping his brother’s arm and pulling him away from the young couple that was trying to enjoy their night together. Alistair flailed in his grip, swatting at Arthur in an attempt to break free.

“Alistair grabbed Arthur’s arm and pulled him close. Arthur’s eyes went wide. Alistair had never done that before. It forced him to look into Alistair’s cloudy, unfocused eyes and smell his gin-scented breath. Arthur winced at assaultment to his senses, but couldn’t pull back. Alistair was bigger and stronger than him. And he knew it.

“Let go of me you barmy slag,” he hissed angrily. Arthur winced at the insult. No one had ever said anything like that to him before. Mum had always discouraged that kind of talk. But Alistair showed no sign of taking it back as he loomed close and said, “Unless you want a row, you best be shovin’ off.”

Arthur grit his teeth and tightened his grip. “The bartender texted me from your mobile, you git. He told me to come get you. You are disturbing the other customers.”

“You’re the disturbin’ the customers!” Alistair shouted as he gave Arthur a hard shove. Arthur stumbled back, tripping over his own feet and falling back against the hardwood floor of the bar. His head hit the floor at an odd angle, and he bit his tongue to avoid cursing. Alistair came to stand over him, grinning like a fool. “Best be running home then, ay?”

Holding a hand to the back of his head, Arthur grimaced as he sat up. “Not without you, I’m not.”

Unhappy with this response, Alistair went to the bar and tried to ask for another drink.
The bartender hesitated. That only made Alistair’s temper worse. He started to shout, and Arthur was scrambling to his feet, trying to repair what damage Alistair had already done.

“Alistair! Alistair, that’s enough! Let’s go.”

“Stop tellin’ me that I’ve had enough,” Alistair shrugged away Arthur’s hands, trying to reach over the bar for the server. “I just want one more. I can have another!”

Shaking his head fervently, Arthur managed to pull Alistair a few paces away from the bar, towing him to the door. “No, it’s time to go. Enough is enough! You can’t keep doing this.”

Growling, Alistair grasped the collar of Arthur’s coat and gave him a violent shake. “Piss off. I don’t need my baby brother tellin’ me what I can and can’t do.”

Arthur’s hands shook as he looked at the dark glint in Alistair’s eyes. This wasn’t his brother. His brother was fun and warm. Too busy being kind to think of hurting anyone. Something sinister wormed its way into Alistair’s brain long ago, and now that the changes were set, Arthur was sure there wasn’t any part of the real Alistair left behind.

Before Arthur could say anything, Alistair pushed him away and shouldered his way out of the bar, slamming the door as he went. Shivering from the aftershocks of his brother’s temper, Arthur held a hand over his heart and felt the heavy, racing thrum of his heartbeat. The bar was quiet. All eyes were on Arthur. They were waiting for something. Some sort of reaction. Arthur blinked up at the other bar patrons, unsure of how he was supposed to respond.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” he breathed, not quite sure if he was apologizing for Alistair or apologizing for how badly he handled the situation. Arthur blinked. Alistair. He’d left on his own. If he tried to drive in his state, he would surely cause an accident.

Rushing out of the bar, Arthur looked to and fro frantically, trying to catch sight of his brother. Down the street to his right, Alistair was stumbling and bickering with strangers he passed on the pavement. He gestured wildly at the strangers even though they had done nothing to provoke them. Arthur raced to catch up with him.

“Alistair, give me your keys,” he gasped as he stumbled to a stop next Alistair. Alistair fumbled with the keys in his pocket, glaring at his large, black pickup truck. Nasty thing. A gas guzzler if Arthur ever saw one. But Alistair was still trying to retrieve his keys ignoring Arthur completely. Holding out his hand, Arthur tried to convey his urgency. “Alistair, please. You can’t drive like this. Give me your keys.”

“Shut up,” Alistair grumbled as he swayed and pulled his keys from his pocket. Arthur quickly grabbed them and took a step away from the truck.

“No. You aren’t driving. Let me take you home, Alistair.”

For a moment, Alistair looked at his empty hand where his keys had once resided. Then he looked at Arthur. When he seemed to register the fact that Arthur now had his keys, his temper took a sharp turn and he lunged for Arthur.

“Stop trying to tell me I’m pissed. Give me my keys!”

Stumbling away from Alistair’s clumsy advance, Arthur took a quick step to the side and watched as his brother tip and sway ungracefully as he turned to face him. Arthur held the key in his hand, frowning at the drunken man before him. Where had his brother gone? Had he really just disappeared along with Marie? Did she take all of the good in Alistair with her when she left?
Shaking his head sadly, Arthur turned his back on Alistair to unlock the passenger side door. That way, Alistair could get in, sit comfortably, and be quiet while Arthur drove. At least, he would be quiet in a perfect world. Alistair didn’t like following plans.

Without warning, Arthur felt a hand on the back of his head. It gripped his hair tight and pulled his head back ruthlessly. For a fraction of a second, Arthur knew that he was in trouble. Why hadn’t he brought someone with him? Why had he gone to retrieve Alistair alone? He usually brought Alfred with him. But now, as his hair was gripped tightly, Arthur regretted going alone.

Arthur wasn’t given a chance to scream before his face was smashed messily against the door of the truck.

Pain erupted across the left side of Arthur’s face, and heat surged to forehead as his body quickly reacted. Vertigo hit him like a brick wall, and Arthur crumbled to the ground. He was dizzy. Sounds were melting together. Where was Alistair? Arthur held a hand to his forehead, feeling hot blood ooze and flow over his fingers. Had the window of the car door broken? Was the cut deep? Arthur didn’t know.

“Alistair?” He tried to ask, looking up in a vain attempt to find his brother. The city lights swam in Arthur’s vision, and he barely saw the outline of Alistair’s body as he took he keys from the door and stumbled around to the driver’s side. Adrenaline surged through Arthur’s blood, and his heart kicked into overdrive. Alistair was going to drive. If he did that, he’d get himself killed. Pulling himself up, Arthur felt his blood-covered left hand slip against the door handle as he pried open the passenger door and sputtered, “You crazy son of a bitch! I’m bleeding!”

With his vision blurring and a terrible headache surging in his brain, Arthur thought he saw Alistair trying to put the key into the ignition. He barely understood Alistair as he slurred, “You broke my car window with your thick head.”

Crawling up into the passenger seat, Arthur made sure to buckle his seatbelt. Safety first. Especially when he was going to bleed to death from the ridiculous gash on his forehead. Trying to reach for the wheel, Arthur heard the tires squeal against the wet road when Alistair pulled out into traffic. The passenger door slammed shut with the speed, and Arthur squinted angrily at his brother.

“Alistair, you need to pull over,” he tried to grab the wheel, but Alistair swatted his hands away. “Let me drive, Alistair, please!”

Alistair snorted. “Look at your face,” he turned away from the road long enough to give Arthur heart palpitations, then lazily looked forward. “I ain’t letting you drive.”

Arthur frowned and grabbed the steering wheel with one hand anyway, squinting at the windshield awkwardly. Blood was dripping into his left eye, and he was quick to cover it with his empty hand. There was a stoplight up ahead. Alistair didn’t slow down. Tugging the wheel, Arthur prayed that the light would turn green just in time.

“Slow down,” Arthur ordered. “It’s a red light.”

Alistair didn’t slow down. There were several large trucks speeding down through the cross traffic. If the light didn’t change, they’d be crushed. Arthur pulled the wheel again, nearly knocking the truck into the parked cars on the side of the road.

Arthur tried again. “Alistair, it’s a red light. Slow down. Alistair.”
They were less than ten meters from the traffic light. Arthur felt sick to his stomach. Alistair wasn’t going to stop. Arthur doubted he had the processing power to remember how to stop.

“Alistair!” He shook the wheel frantically, seeing Alistair’s wide eyes and pale face. Alistair was confused. He wasn’t sure what to do. It was like he’d forgotten how his truck worked. Arthur gripped the wheel and shouted, “Hit the brakes! The brakes, Alistair! You’re going to get us killed!”

Seconds away from the stoplight, Alistair slammed his foot down on the gas, sending them rocketing through the intersection at highly illegal speeds. For just a moment, Arthur had time to look to their left. A semi was coming through cross traffic. They were going to get hit. Was Alistair wearing his seat belt? Arthur didn’t remember checking. Knowing what was about to happen, Arthur squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself for the impact.

But it never came.

Cracking his eyes open, Arthur blinked at his sideways view of the coffee table. His head still stung from the impact in his memory, and he brushed his fingertips against his bandage. Dry. No fresh blood or new, aching bruises. No hot blood dripped into his eyes. Everything was still intact.

Still lying on the sofa, Arthur sighed softly. The telly was playing some sort of superhero marathon, and a new movie was playing. Arthur sat up slowly and looked around. He was home. Safe and sound. No accident, no trucks, no bars. No Alistair, either. That thought was bittersweet as Arthur switched off the television and sat in silence for a moment.

That evening… he should’ve brought Alfred with him. Alfred would’ve helped him with Alistair. But, wasn’t Alfred’s work important, too? Arthur couldn’t just expect Alfred to drop everything he was working on so he could help Arthur and his family troubles. No, there needed to be compromises. Arthur had to give as well as receive.

Pursing his lips, Arthur nodded at that idea. He had to give. He’d selfish for so long. Taking and taking… and Alfred was simply too kind to ask for his turn. So Arthur pushed himself up onto unsteady feet, walked to the doorway, and put on his shoes. Poking at his phone for a moment, Arthur looked up the address of the nearest chemist. It wasn’t farther than two blocks away. Alfred’s wallet sat on the small table by the entryway, and Arthur took that with him as he opened the door and stepped outside.

This time, he wouldn’t regret going alone.

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Squinting at the label on the purple box that held Alfred’s new medicine, Arthur broke the aluminum casing and dropped two pills into his palm. He wasn’t quite sure if this would cure all of Alfred’s ailments, but when he had gone to the chemist, he’d earned the trustworthy opinion of a college student.

“Mr. K?” A voice had called to him in the store, and glanced up from a shelf of cough and cold medicines to see Sara waving at him from the haircare shelf. She was wearing a light blue hijab today, and it complimented her black coat nicely. He had waved back happily, glad to see a familiar face. Sara quickly bounced to his side, eyeing the medicine in his hands. “How’re you? Feeling better since last time? Caught a cold?”
Arthur had looked down at the two very similar medications in his hands. “Yes, I’m feeling much better. Alfred, on the other hand, has caught a rather nasty cold.” Sara made a face at that, and Arthur had nodded in agreement. “I’ve come to get something for his cough.”

“Oh, then you don’t want that one,” said Sara as she plucked the blue package from Arthur’s hand and set it back on the shelf. She pointed to the purple box definitively and nodded once. “This is the one you want. Trust me. It works wonders.”

At least, that’s what she had said. But the other box had said ‘extra strength’ on the front. Did that mean Alfred was going to be taking mediocre medicine? Arthur could be sure. He simply took a new bowl of soup with him as he carried Alfred’s medicine up the stairs and into the bedroom.

When Arthur opened the door, he felt fatigue weigh him down. It was as if Alfred’s drowsiness was contagious and it was staining the air a sleepy shady of purple. Setting the soup on Alfred’s nightstand, Arthur smiled down at Alfred’s sleeping face.

His eyes were closed, and his lips were parted around every hushed, gentle breath. If things had been different, Arthur would’ve leaned down to kiss those lips. But there was still a gap between them, and Arthur didn’t want to alarm his sickly husband. So he simply settled for shaking Alfred’s shoulder gently.

“Alfred,” he murmured softly as Alfred groaned and sniffled sadly. “I brought you some medicine from the chemist. It’s supposed to help your cough.”

Opening his eyes just a bit, Alfred smiled up at Arthur. “Yeah?” He coughed a few times, and Arthur nodded.

“Take these two, and it’ll get to work.” Arthur handed Alfred the pills, and watched carefully as Alfred swallowed them slowly. He sputtered a bit when he needed to cough as he was swallowing, but Arthur was there to wipe water from his chin. After that, Alfred ate a few bites of soup.

“Not really hungry,” he muttered as he stirred the chicken soup slowly. “Just... really tired.”

“That makes sense,” Arthur said as he got onto the bed and scooted over to his side. Alfred gave him a confused look, but Arthur merely propped a pillow behind himself and leaned back. “You’re sick. Your body is working hard to fight the infection.”

“Y-yeah.” Alfred coughed, then set his bowl of soup on his nightstand. He gave Arthur another perplexed look. “Whatcha doin’ over there?”

“I’m sitting.”

Alfred rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know that but... why?”

Holding out his arms, Arthur said, “I want you to feel better. You said you were lonely.”

Alfred baulked and coughed a few times. “You don’t –” he paused to cough a few more times, and Arthur winced when Alfred gasped for air. He took a breath on continued, “– you don’t have to do that, Arthur. I’m fine.”

“It’ll help you sleep,” Arthur said calmly. He wasn’t unsure about this. Alfred was his husband. Arthur wanted to comfort him. “You said so yourself.”
Fidgeting with the blankets on his lap, Alfred pursed his lips. “I don’t wanna make you uncomfortable.”


Slowly, Alfred lowered himself down into Arthur’s arms, placing his ear atop Arthur’s chest and laying stiffly for several minutes. When he was sure that Arthur wasn’t going to move away, he curled a little closer until he completely relaxed against Arthur, his arm wrapped protectively around him and his eyes closed happily.

Not quite sure what to do with himself, Arthur ran his fingers through Alfred’s soft, golden locks. He could feel the warm weight of each sunlight strand falling through his fingers as he combed through them. Alfred sighed peacefully, and Arthur smiled.

It felt like they were almost normal. For just a few seconds, Arthur wasn’t suffering from amnesia. Alfred wasn’t his forgotten, unsure husband. They were simply a married couple lying in bed quietly. One of them sick, the other one comforting them. It was a warm feeling. One that washed away all of the discomfort from his memory of Alistair and made him feel cozy again.

“Hey,” Alfred whispered quietly, “You know what would make me feel better?”

Arthur raised an eyebrow at the question, but took the bait. “What?”

“Say ‘aluminum’ for me.”

Feeling his lips twitch with a smile, Arthur correctly pronounced, “Aluminum,” and listened to Alfred’s laugh until it dissolved into a fit of coughing. Though it sounded painful, Alfred seemed to have the time of his life hearing Arthur correctly pronounce words.

Rolling over just a bit, Alfred’s cheek was pressed to Arthur’s chest as he smiled and said, “Say ‘advertisement.’”

Complying, Arthur crisply said, “Advertisement,” in the clearest British accent he could manage. Alfred, of course, rolled back over and laughed against Arthur’s stomach until he was coughing into the thick fabric of Arthur’s sweater. Arthur smiled and pat his back sympathetically. “Doesn’t it hurt to cough?”

Sniffling happily, Alfred cleared his throat and croaked, “Yeah.”

“Then, why do you want to laugh so much?” Arthur asked, leaning forward to get a look at Alfred’s hazy eye. “I’ve no doubt that it must hurt that much more.”

Smiling lazily, Alfred waved his hand at the statement before he sighed and cuddled closer to Arthur. “They say laughter is the best medicine.”

“I think they meant laughter is the best medicine for sadness,” Arthur corrected as he sidled down into a reclined position. Alfred settled against him easily, rubbing his cheek against Arthur’s chest tiredly. Arthur pet Alfred’s hair for a moment before asking, “You aren’t sad, are you?”

“I was, a little bit.” Alfred yawned. Then he coughed and sniffled sadly, mumbling, “But now you’re here, and I feel better.”

Arthur blinked up at the ceiling slowly. “I help you feel better?”
“A lot better,” Alfred sniffled. “I don’t even feel cold anymore.”

“Neither do I,” Arthur mumbled as he pat Alfred’s back.

They were together. Stuck together with memories Arthur didn’t have and the feelings that wouldn’t disappear. Arthur adored those feelings. The kind that made his heart flutter when Alfred walked into a room. The feelings that made him feel comfortable when Alfred was close. The ones that sparked when Alfred held his hand. When Alfred smiled. When he laughed. Arthur let his eyes close as he let out a dream-colored sigh.

“I don’t feel cold anymore, either.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you! See you next chapter.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arthur had nearly forgotten the cool, bewildering structure of normal dreams since he had come home from the hospital. Memories had littered his thoughts and dreams for weeks, and now… now, Arthur wasn’t quite sure what was lingering in his brain.

It felt like he was stuck. Suspended in a large jar of liquid worry and discourse. What he remembered, what he’d forgotten… it was all jumbled together in the jar alongside Arthur. It forced him to face all of the things he’d seen and done. Hopes and memories collided in a never-ending spiral of belligerent wonderment.

And so, he dreamt of everything and nothing colliding together in a muddled, unorganized mess. Though it was nice to be trapped in a haze of unrecognized feelings and thoughts, Arthur nearly wished for some kind of tactile environment. But there was no such thing to grasp. No matter how much Arthur struggled to grasp at the foundations of his and Alfred’s relationship, it crumbled away in his hands before he could lift it up and see what secrets were hidden underneath.

With nothing better to do, Arthur slept. With a strange, gnawing feeling at his chest and thoughts fluttering in his head. He slept. With Alfred safely encircled by his arms and the warmth of Alfred’s fever bleeding into the chilled landscape of Arthur’s dreams. He slept. Voices murmuring sweet things, cruel things, ignorant things. He slept and held Alfred’s ailing head to his chest. He tried to pull those memories from Alfred’s head and into his heart by sheer force of will. He slept and slept… but didn’t remember anything new.

When he woke, he would look down at Alfred, see his golden hair mussed and pressed to Arthur’s chest, and Arthur would close his eyes and fall back into a restless sleep. It was a lazy cycle, but it repeated so many times, Arthur was no longer sure if he was awake or asleep when he opened his eyes.

The room was always dark, and Arthur didn’t have the heart to move Alfred so he could roll over and see the clock to check the time. With no other way to know, Arthur simply assumed that nighttime and stretched out into daylight hours, staining the bright afternoons a cozy, dark gray.

Unsure if he was really awake or not, Arthur combed his fingers through Alfred’s hair and watched the ceiling carefully. Nothing warped. Nothing changed. Perhaps he was awake. Arthur continued the soothing, repetitive movements of stroking Alfred’s hair. It was better than lying back and holding still. If he did, then his thoughts would surely pounce on his motionless form. He’d drown in thoughts of Delilah, Seamus, his parents, and Alistair… his brother. His brother that was dead. Arthur squeezed his eyes shut and tried to stop thinking. It only made his heart ache.

When Alfred groaned a bit, Arthur glanced down to where his husband was desperately clinging to his torso. Those captivating blue eyes were shut to the world, and Arthur could only imagine how hazy they would be if Alfred had indeed deigned to open them. No such thing occurred. Alfred simply rubbed his cheek against Arthur’s stomach a few times, shifted to get comfortable, and finally fell quiet once more.
That left Arthur alone again. Alone with his thoughts, alone with his restless body. They had surely been sleeping for over twelve hours. Alfred was bound to get hungry eventually. The soup on the nightstand had gone cold long ago. Arthur would have to leave the bed to get him something. But leaving meant being even lonelier. Arthur didn’t want that.

So he was caught between Alfred and a hard place. To stay and be selfish, or leave and be selfless… which would it be?

“God, you’re indecisive,” A voice said from the window sharply.

Arthur immediately turned to see Alistair leaning against the wall next to the window. Arthur’s eyes widened. Was he hallucinating? He had to be. Arthur blinked hard and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them, Alistair was still there, one hand in the pocket of his trousers and the other holding up a faintly glowing cigarette. But… that was impossible. Alistair was dead.

Alistair, on the other hand, didn’t seem to care about the limits of life and death, and calmly took a drag of his cigarette before lazily blowing the smoke out of the open window.

“You get it from Dad, you know? He couldn’t make a decision to save his life,” Alistair grinned cheekily. Arthur lowered his hands from his eyes, placing them shakily atop Alfred’s shoulders. He was still asleep. Arthur swallowed anxiously, and Alistair tapped his cigarette tiredly. Ash fell onto the carpet, though Arthur wasn’t sure if he was upset or not. He was confused. Alistair spoke again, “Relax, mate. I’m not gonna jump you.”

Arthur kneaded Alfred’s shoulders anxiously before he spoke. “I’m dreaming.”

“Just figure that out, did we?” Alistair took a long drag, and blew the smoke out of the window again. “Mum is right. You’re damn brilliant, you are.”

“Bugger off,” Arthur snapped, then glanced down to see if he’d woken Alfred. Alistair laughed at that.

“You know you’re dreamin’, Arthur. If you don’t want him to wake up, he won’t.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Arthur gave his deceased brother an unimpressed look. “What if I want him to wake up and throw you out of my house?”

Alistair opened his arms in a sign of vulnerability. “Have at it.” His eyes shone in the dark room when he said, “Your dream, your rules.”

Pushing Alfred off of him, Arthur got out of bed and walked around the room for a bit. It was quiet. It was simple. But even so, everything felt so vast. If he imagined, the room could stretch out for infinity. But that would be pointless. Turning to look at his brother, Arthur was greeted with a warm smile.

“You’re smiling,” Arthur noted quietly.

Pausing, Alistair’s smile drooped and he held one hand to his face. “Oh, dear me!” His voice pitched up at least three octaves, and Arthur stood by crossly as Alistair dramatically said, “What a horrid state of affairs! Whatever will we do?”

“Piss off,” Arthur grumbled. “I just meant… I haven’t seen to smile in a long time. Not since before…” he trailed off uncomfortably, not wanting to ruin the happy-go-lucky vision of his brother. Alistair didn’t seem to mind.
“Before Marie.” Alistair nodded, his smile refreshed. “Yeah, I was having a rough time of it.”

Arthur gave him a hard look. “But… you’re better now?”

“Oh, yeah,” Alistair laughed as he sat down on the bed. Next to him, Alfred was still soundly sleeping. At least, he was still asleep in Arthur’s dream. Alistair tapped ashes onto the carpet again. “I’m feelin’ loads better. It’s like a weight’s been lifted.”

Arthur pointed at the ash on the carpet and said, “First of all, don’t do that. Secondly,” he crossed his arms over his chest, “Is this real? Or am I making this up in my head to make myself feel better?”

Pursing his lips for a moment, Alistair mulled over the question before he shrugged. “Can’t say. What do you think?”

Arthur tapped his foot on the floor tiredly before admitting, “I think I feel responsible for your death.”

“Well then,” Alistair smiled. “Aren’t you happy I’m here to tell you that it wasn’t your fault?”

“No, I’m not,” said Arthur crossly. “You’re only saying that because it’s what I want to hear. I’m making this up so I feel better. It’s not real, it’s just…” Arthur held a hand over his eyes as he sighed, “Selfish.”

There it was. His thoughts had gone in a circle. He’d selfishly stayed with Alfred to comfort himself… now he was inventing a forgiving image of his brother to forgive him. On the bed, Alistair sighed and shook his head.

“And we’re back to the selfish business… You really are a piece of work.” He leaned forward to brace his elbows on his knees as he gave Arthur a hard look. “Open your eyes, Arthur. I don’t blame you.”

Shuffling toward the bed, Arthur muttered, “I know,” before he sat down. Alistair gave him a hearty slap on the back, and Arthur winced at the force.

“You’re all right, mate,” Alistair smiled.

Arthur felt tears come to his eyes. Alistair had said that to him before. When he was in primary school. In high school. In university. Alistair had his own strange way of showing affection. And it burned in Arthur’s chest as he remembered it. A bittersweet way to remember his brother.

Alistair threw his cigarette onto the floor and stomped on it, much to Arthur’s chagrin, but when he lifted his foot, the crushed remains were nowhere to be found. Arthur turned to see his brother giving him a wide smile. Alistair sighed tiredly, and Arthur blubbered, “I’ve missed you for so long.”

He couldn’t quite see through his tears, but Arthur felt Alistair’s strong arms wrap around him and pull him in for a hug. It was different than a hug from Alfred. It was a stinging, forlorn
embrace. Arthur returned it wholeheartedly as Alistair whispered, “I miss you, too.”

Letting his eyes open slowly, Arthur lifted a hand from Alfred’s hair to wipe the fresh tears from his eyes. The room was still, and Alistair was nowhere to be found. Alfred was fast asleep with his arms still securely wrapped around Arthur’s middle. Safe and warm, just as he always had been.

Lowering his hand, Arthur stroked Alfred’s hair slowly as he thought to himself. Alistair had been a wonderful brother. Forgiving and kind. And now he was gone. Arthur took in a shuddering breath, letting it out slowly as he leaned his head back against the headboard of the bed.

“Hey,” Alfred whispered coarsely. Arthur jumped at the sudden sound, but quickly relaxed when Alfred sniffled and curled closer to him. Alfred coughed a few times before he could say, “Are you okay?”

“Just fine,” Arthur lied. Seeing Alistair had shaken him, but he wasn’t sure if he was glad to be comforted by the vision of his brother or sad that he had conjured up such a selfish vision. He gave Alfred’s head another fond pat. “Why do you ask?”

Alfred coughed. “I heard you do that sigh thing.”

“Oh?” Arthur squinted. What was a ‘sigh thing,’ and what did it mean? Did he sigh like that often? Did it always mean something was wrong? Couldn’t someone just sigh because they were tired? Alfred was quick to answer.

“You only sigh like that when you’re thinkin’ about something really hard,” he coughed a few times, then sniffled and settled down against Arthur again. “So I figured you were upset about something.”

“I just had a dream,” Arthur murmured down to Alfred. Alfred sniffled again.

“A good dream?”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. Was it a good dream? He had been able to see his brother. He’d seen Alistair smile for the first time in what seemed like forever. Arthur blinked. He couldn’t even remember seeing Alistair smiling as an adult. The only memory he had of Alistair smiling was from when they were children.

Smiling a bit, Arthur shimmied down on the bed until he was lying on his side, face to face with Alfred. Those blue eyes were still hazy with a fever, and Arthur pushed a few stray hairs from Alfred’s forehead as he smiled. Alfred sniffled softly, and Arthur gave his flushed cheeks a considering glance. He was sick. Tired. He needed to sleep. Arthur smiled; he could tell Alfred about his dream another day.

“It was a very good dream,” Arthur murmured to Alfred, watching as Alfred blinked slowly. A smile came to Alfred’s pale lips, and Arthur watched as he rubbed his eyes tiredly.

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“I had a dream… where I was…” he yawned, and closed his eyes as he mumbled, “I was back at school… but I forgot… my pants? It was weird. There was a… um… a duck in the corner, and…” Arthur quirked an eyebrow as Alfred’s face scrunched up in confusion. “I feel hot.”

“You have a fever,” Arthur said softly. “Would you like me to get a cool cloth for your forehead?”

“No,” said Alfred quickly. His blue eyes opened immediately, as if he just had to make
sure that Arthur was still there. “No, I’m okay… wanna sleep.”

“Right, then…” Arthur brushed Alfred’s hair back, tucking some of the longer strands behind his ear.

Alfred visibly struggled to keep his eyes open, and Arthur kept running his fingers through Alfred’s hair. Had he done this before? It felt so familiar… perhaps it was merely soothing. When Alfred’s eyes finally closed and didn’t open again, Arthur took his hand away and tucked it against his own chest, marveling at the heat that lingered in his fingertips. He closed his own eyes and tried to envelope himself in the secure memory of his smiling brother, but it was out of reach.

Instead, he cracked open his eyes and drank in the sight of Alfred peacefully sleeping right next to him. When he’d come home from the hospital, he’d never imagined sleeping in the same bed with this man… back then, they’d been strangers. And yet, he wanted to be here. He wanted to be here for Alfred. He wanted to comfort him and love him… though saying such things out loud was a tall order.

Smiling to himself, Arthur closed his eyes and attempted to sleep, but his heart was too big to fit in his chest. It felt like it was spilling out of his body with every breath, washing over Alfred and bathing him in the glowing spectacle of a fool in love. It was too exciting… falling in love was a strange thing. More than that, Arthur was falling in love all over again. People could only dream of having a first love two times, but there it was.

And Arthur… Arthur was more than happy to feel this way.

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“You know how, like, you have a fever… and your brain is all fuzzy?” Alfred said hollowly as he laid back against the living room sofa. In the kitchen, Arthur shook his head with a hint of disinterest as Alfred coughed loudly, took a shuddering breath, and said, “It feels like I’ve gotten cotton in my head.”

Stirring a metal spoon around a large pot of soup on the stove, Arthur felt his lips twitch with the promise of a smile. “I’m sure your head isn’t filled with cotton,” he murmured as he took a ladle from the countertop and filled a bowl for Alfred.

He’d managed to burn the toast after he’d forgotten how the toaster worked, but the instructions for the soup were on the side of the can. He couldn’t have gotten that wrong. So, he triumphantly walked into the living room and handed Alfred a warm bowl of soup with a smile.

“I’m sure this’ll have you feeling right as rain in no time.”

Sitting up on the sofa slowly, Alfred gave the bowl of soup a conspicuous look before glancing up at Arthur. “What is this?”

“Wh-what?” Arthur baulked with a hint of offense, “It’s soup! You should always have soup when you’re sick.”

Alfred leaned forward to give the soup a small sniff. He made a face at the scent. “Yeah…” A cough, and then, “But you hate cooking.”

Arthur looked down at the bowl, seeing the noodles floating happily in circles. Even if he hated cooking, that didn’t mean the soup was going to be bad… did it? Arthur pursed his lips and held the bowl closer to Alfred’s face.
“It doesn’t matter if I hate cooking; eat the soup.”

Alfred wiped his nose on the back of his hand – much to Arthur’s chagrin – and squinted at the soup. “You sure you didn’t do anything weird to it?” He took the soup and stirred the spoon around the bowl slowly, searching for anything mysterious in the broth. “You didn’t put like… mayonnaise in here, did you?”

“You have no faith in me,” Arthur deadpanned as he sat down in his armchair. “Just eat. You’ll feel better.”

Alfred mumbled something about the soup “making him feel worse,” but Arthur paid it no heed. He simply sat back with an old copy of an unpublished manuscript and read while Alfred blew on his soup and slurped loudly.

For what seemed like ages, they sat in the living room in domestic silence. A strange sort of peace settled over them, and every movement felt second-nature and smooth. Alfred would cough, and Arthur would bring him some water. Alfred sneezed, and Arthur was at his side with a tissue. It was almost like Arthur had done this for years, and the knowledge was embedded in his brain.

When the pages of the manuscript started to blend together with Arthur’s disinterest, Arthur glanced over the top of the pages to check on Alfred. The bowl of soup was empty and sitting on the coffee table, long forgotten. Alfred had curled himself up in his soft blanket and burrowed into the corner of the sofa with his neck uncomfortably tilted to rest on the arm of the sofa. Arthur smiled at the sight.

There, all tucked into himself with his glasses crooked and his mouth parted around every slow breath, Alfred almost seemed like a child. It was like he’d run around all day long, and the exhaustion had hit him all at once… Arthur felt a twinge of guilt at that. Alfred really had been running. Trying to please Arthur, trying to help him… and now, it was no wonder Alfred had come down with a cold.

Pushing himself out of his armchair, Arthur rearranged the pillows so that Alfred’s neck wasn’t nearly so strained. It was the least he could do after all that Alfred had done for him. Smiling a bit, Arthur tucked Alfred’s blanket close, swaddling him in a cocoon of warmth. When that was finished, Arthur took Alfred’s empty soup bowl and brought it to the kitchen. Arthur frowned at the lackluster chicken soup he’d presented to Alfred for two days in a row… he needed to feed him something else.

Glancing around the kitchen, Arthur saw several menus for takeaway restaurants stacked in a neat pile on the counter. One of them was bound to have a more nutritious soup, Arthur was sure. So he plucked his mobile from the table and struggled to navigate his way through the phone.

When he found where to type in the number of a promising Thai restaurant, Arthur felt a bolt of curiosity wiggle through his mind. His contacts list. He hadn’t really bothered to look at that before. It hadn’t seemed interesting at the time. But now… Arthur swiped through his contacts list without batting an eyelash.

It was relatively short. He suspected that he didn’t often call others. Did that mean that his friends and family would call him, instead? Was he some sort of telephone recluse? Before he could worry about his former lack of social skills, Arthur paused at the sight of one name.

Francis Bonnefoy 206-XXX-XXXX
Arthur hesitated. He looked up at the number for the restaurant, then back down to the screen of his phone. Alfred had been talking about this Francis person just the other day… he’d seemed so upset that things had faded away. What had happened? Was something said? Was something forgotten? Arthur was currently a master at forgetting things. That aside, he was still curious. With his thumb hovering over the ‘Call’ button, Arthur assured himself that Francis would have answers.

And, with any luck, talking to him might spark a memory.

Without thinking, Arthur held the phone to his ear and listened to it ring. This was silly. Another ring. What was he supposed to say when Francis answered? Another ring. Why, yes, hello. Remember me? Unfortunately, I don’t remember you. I just felt like talking to my former-friend. Another ring. Arthur nearly hung up, but there was a click on the line, and someone answered.

“Allô?” Arthur felt a frown come to his face. The speaker was French. Very French. Just the way he answered the phone was enough to make Arthur feel irritated. He’d always been envious of the French. With their smooth, sweet accents and romantic language… “Hello? Anyone there?”

Tripping over his tongue, Arthur nodded and said, “Y-yes, I’m here. Is… is this Francis?”

A pause. Arthur couldn’t even hear breathing over the line until the speaker took a deep breath and whispered, “Arthur? Arthur Kirkland?”

Something in Arthur’s chest felt tight. Anxiety? Excitement? They were too close to tell. But he couldn’t stop the smile that came to his face. “Yes, that’s me.”

“I… I can’t believe you’re calling me,” Francis laughed, a friendly attitude ringing in his words. “It’s been so long!” Another laugh, but Arthur could tell it was strained this time. Arthur narrowed his eyes at the sound, but Francis was quick to cover the laughter while a calm and cool, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Arthur drummed his fingers against the kitchen counter; why had he called Francis? Closure? Some sort of answer to satisfy his curiosity? Something was itching at the back of his brain… something that said Francis was someone very important. But no matter how hard Arthur tried to grasp the concept and put it into words, his mind was a day late and a dollar short, leaving him tongue-tied and feeling ridiculous.

Francis adjusted the phone, causing the reception to crackle as he said, “Arthur? Don’t tease me, rosbif. If this is a joke, please hang up.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows at that. Rosbif? What in heaven’s name was that? Some sort of endearment? Scratching the old bandage on his forehead, Arthur tried to think of a proper response.

“I’m… I’m not sure I understand. I thought we were friends?” Francis paused. Francis didn’t respond. He tried again. “At least, Alfred told me we were friends. I… I found your number and…” And what? This was the moment of truth. What exactly did he want?

“Alfred told you that we were friends?” Francis leaned, causing Arthur’s confusion to worsen. He sounded… offended, for some reason. Had they fought in the past, and Alfred was left out? Francis was quick to continue. “You… you really don’t consider us friends anymore, do you?”
Arthur blinked slowly. “I’m not sure I understand. Let me explain; almost two months ago, I –”

“You don’t have to make something up to make me feel better, Arthur,” Francis interrupted, sounding quite putout. Arthur frowned at the tone, but didn’t respond. “You obviously did not want me in your life. Was Alfred asking questions? Is that why you called?”

Arthur felt his chest ache awkwardly. “N-no, I was calling because –”

“Arthur, I’m married.” Francis said solidly. Arthur nodded to himself. Alfred told him Francis was married to a girl… Angelica? Angelique? Something like that. Francis went on, “I’m happy. We don’t have to dig up past arguments and ruin what was a good friendship.”

“Excuse me,” Arthur said crisply. “But I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Francis sighed. A long, stressful sigh that perfectly preceded the words, “Of course you do, cher. I know you do.”

Rolling his eyes, Arthur placed his empty hand on his hip and shook his head. “No, I really don’t. I was in a car accident, Francis. I’m suffering from amnesia.”

There was a groan from Francis before he said, “Arthur, that is not funny. Stop trying to make jokes.”

His patience was wearing thin, and Arthur thinned his lips when he took a deep, calming breath. “My brother is dead. He was driving while intoxicated. I tried… to stop him, but,” Arthur felt his throat get tight. Damn it. That wasn’t what he wanted. He just wanted to know why this Francis person was being such a pain in the arse. Arthur cleared his throat and finished, “But I couldn’t. I suffered severe trauma. I am suffering from amnesia.”

For a long time, Francis was quiet. This gave Arthur a chance to level out his breathing and furiously wipe away the tears that had formed in his eyes. He knew that he didn’t like crying, but he seemed to cry far too often. Since the accident, he’d really become something of a crybaby.

After letting out a soft sigh, Francis said, “I can’t believe no one told me…” Arthur bit the inside of his cheek to avoid asking why no one told him, and instead waited patiently as Francis sorted his thoughts. “When… when did this happen?”

“Nearly two months ago,” Arthur said softly as he brushed his fingertips against his bandage again. It didn’t hurt to touch anymore. It was almost like the cut wasn’t there. Arthur closed his eyes and lowered his hand. “It’s… it’s been difficult.”

A heavy sigh. “Arthur… Arthur, I’m so sorry. If I’d known, I…” he trailed off uncomfortably. Arthur was sure that Francis didn’t know what he wanted to say. However, the condolences were comforting. Before Arthur could thank his old friend, Francis spoke up. “So you… you’ve forgotten… everything? How is…” a pregnant pause, “How is Alfred taking this?”

Without meaning to, Arthur felt a twinge of offense. Francis made it sound like he was inconveniencing Alfred. As if Arthur being in a tragic accident and surviving was somehow damaging Alfred more that it was Arthur. Tightening his grip on his mobile, Arthur couldn’t smother the sparking flame that burned in his chest when he spoke.

“Alfred is taking this just fine, thank you very much,” his voice was sharp. He hoped
Francis was flinching at the sound. “We’ve been getting on just fine. Everything is fine.”

“Really?” Francis sounded more amused than concerned.

That didn’t do anything for Arthur’s temper. He leaned his empty hand on the counter and pushed his weight against it as he spoke through clenched teeth. “Yes. Really. It’s fine.”

“Well…” Francis chuckled into the phone. “As long as everything is, as you say, ‘fine,’ I suppose I don’t need to worry, oui? The two of you are getting along well?”

Arthur narrowed his eyes at the question. “Yes, of course… why wouldn’t we be?”

Francis laughed, his voice a tad shaky through the static of their reception. “Ah la la, you are always so suspicious. I am simply asking a question. I haven’t spoken to you in months, cher.”

Arthur’s skin itched uncomfortably at the unwelcome nickname, and he cuffed a hand through his hair in an attempt to shake it off.

“Don’t call me that. And I’m not being suspicious, I just…” Arthur kicked his foot to and fro for a moment while he thought. “I just don’t remember anything. Pieces of my memory are coming back, but it’s taking so long. And now Alfred is sick, and I –”

“Stop right there,” Francis interrupted quite rudely. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at the appalled tone from the Frenchman, but kept quiet. “Alfred is sick?”

“Yes,” Arthur rolled his eyes, “I just said that. And I’m trying to –”

“Are you cooking for him?”

Arthur huffed. “Do you always interrupt me like this? Because it’s rude. And yes, I’m cooking for him, but what does that –”

Francis clicked his tongue in disapproval. “No need to say any more, cher. I will be over immediately.” Arthur opened his mouth to disagree, but Francis was quick to say, “Everyone knows you hate cooking. You’ve probably been feeding him something out of a can, non?”

Bitterly, Arthur glanced over his shoulder to see the empty can of chicken soup on the counter. It wasn’t the most creative meal, but it was a meal nonetheless. This Francis fellow wasn’t really one to go sticking his nose into their home when he wasn’t invited. Arthur was keen to tell him that. At least, he would have if Francis hadn’t bid him farewell and hung up the phone before Arthur could coherently decipher the perfect words to get rid of Francis.

And now he was coming to their house. Arthur set his phone on the counter slowly. Was it all right for Francis to come? Should he have spoken to Alfred before talking to Francis? Arthur’s stomach churned anxiously as he shuffled to the living room and knelt down in front of Alfred.

Alfred’s eyelids were stained a light, sleepy lavender while his cheeks were still flushed with an unhappy fever. He was exhausted. Francis would surely wear him out… but even still, Arthur hesitated to call him back. With the way he spoke, it sounded like Francis was going to come over and cook Alfred a decent meal. From the looks of it, the chicken soup wasn’t doing much for Alfred’s cold. Maybe a real meal would make a difference?

The doorbell rang before Arthur could work up the nerve to call Francis back, and he winced when Alfred flinched and opened his eyes. The poor man looked lost in his own home, as if he couldn’t quite tell which way was up. Arthur gave him a comforting pat on his shoulder and
stood up to get the door.

It couldn’t have been Francis. They had hung up only moments ago. Even if Francis lived in Seattle, it would take a considerable amount of time to venture all the way over to their house… wouldn’t it? Arthur tried to reassure himself as he unlocked the door and slowly pulled it open. He didn’t even have a chance to say “hello,” before the stranger was rushing through the door and stomping their feet on the welcome mat.

“Ah, it is too cold! I should have gone back to Paris for the winter…”

Arthur nearly had a heart attack. This man was Francis. The accent was a dead giveaway. But it was hardly five minutes since they’d hung up on the phone. To get to the house so soon, Francis would have had to be standing only a few doors down while they spoke. They weren’t neighbors… were they? No, Alfred would’ve said something. Was Francis stalking them? Was that why they weren’t friends? Because he was lingering around corners at any given chance? Had Arthur just invited a stalker into his home?

Francis glanced up from his navy blue coat to give Arthur a conspicuous look. “What is it? You look frightened… is there something on my face?”

Carefully, Arthur stepped back as he closed the door. “No. You just got here so quickly…” he gave Francis’ khakis a considering look before glancing back up to his face. “I wasn’t sure what to think.”

“I was out shopping for Angelique,” said Francis with a smile. His blue eyes glittered with excitement. Arthur felt his heart warm at the sight. He’d only mentioned his wife’s name, and already he was beaming with pride. Francis brushed melting snowflakes from his shoulders and hair. Blond locks as far as Arthur could see, tied back in a ponytail that was tucked into Francis’ coat. Francis laughed at Arthur’s look of scrutiny. “Remember me yet? Or do I need to speak in French for you to remember?”

Arthur pursed his lips at the suggestion, and shook his head. “No. I don’t remember. And that won’t be necessary, thank you.”

“Hey,” Alfred’s voice called from the living room hoarsely, but Arthur could still hear the smile in his tone. “Is that a French bastard I hear?”

Though Arthur felt a wave of worry wash over him, Francis chuckled at the statement and sauntered into the living room. “Oui, you American tart. I have come to save the day.”

Arthur leaned in the living room doorway quietly, watching as Alfred sat up to give Francis a hug and a slap on the back. They smiled, they laugh, they exchanged insults… it really was a friendly reunion. However, Arthur couldn’t help but feel just a bit left out. He wanted to be happy to see Francis. He wanted to join in with the greetings and accolades. There was just too much distance. He couldn’t reach out and pull the memories of Francis from his brain if he tried.

So Arthur sat back, leaning against the entryway with idle content as Alfred smiled and spoke with his long-lost friend.

“What’re you doing here?” Alfred smiled, congestion making his words sound a bit muffled. “Don’t you work in the afternoon?”

Francis shrugged. “This afternoon is my day off; I was out looking for a certain cream Angelique wants to use in her desserts. Then, Arthur called me out of the blue.” He looked over at
Arthur, his blue eyes sharper than Arthur expected. Arthur looked at the ground. Francis continued talking. “He told me that he’d been in an accident and that you were sick. Naturally, I couldn’t let you go eating that horrible slop from a can!” Francis made a horrified face while Alfred coughed a laugh. “So here I am.”

“That’s mighty kind of ya’. But hey, how’s the restaurant doing?” Alfred asked, coughed, then sniffled. “We haven’t been there in a long time. I hear you’re gettin’ pretty famous around here.”

Francis sat down on the sofa next to Alfred, seemingly unworried about however contagious Alfred might be. He looked at Alfred warmly, with those blue eyes that were just a shade too bright to be Alfred’s irises. Arthur watched that gaze carefully, but it never strayed from Alfred’s face.

“Ah, I’ve had critics coming from all over America,” Francis admitted, his accent making the word ‘America’ drip with foreign charm. Arthur fought an eye roll when Francis shook a hand through his hair, fluffing it up and bringing out its natural wave. Francis sighed. “Angelique is getting nervous. She thinks we need to expand the restaurant.”

Alfred sniffed and pulled his blanket closer. “Will you? That’s a pretty big step.”

Francis shrugged. “We might have to, but it is all very, how you say,” he wiggled his fingers as he searched through his English vocabulary. “It is all very complicated. Just like things are complicated with you and Arthur.”

Arthur twitched at that statement, but Alfred leaned back against the sofa with a smile. “Yeah, I guess. But we’re getting through it,” he paused, looked over his shoulder at Arthur, and his smile softened. “We’re getting through it just fine.”

With a warm wave of emotion rolling over him, Arthur couldn’t stop the smile that came to his lips, nor did he brush away the tears that welled in his eyes. Though, when Arthur looked over to Francis, the guest was studiously admiring the coffee table with an intensity that bordered on unhealthy. Attempting to rid himself of the tightness in his chest, Arthur leaned away from the doorway and cleared his throat.

“Francis, you run a restaurant?”

Sitting up and looking away from the magazines on the table, Francis gave Arthur a perplexed look. “Of… course I run a restaurant. We were at the same university together, don’t you…” he paused, shook his head, and sighed. “Ah, pardon… I’ve forgotten again. The accident…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Arthur said flatly. “I’m forgetting things left and right, these days.”

Though Francis quirked an eyebrow at that, Alfred immediately started to laugh at the quip. When he started coughing heavily, Alfred leaned forward on the sofa, struggling to get out a laugh in between every other cough. Francis gave him a few pats on the back. Arthur wrapped his arms around himself and held tight.

“Ah la la… you are very sick, aren’t you?” Francis said with a warm smile. “I will make you something good to eat. A meal cooked from the home is good for the soul, yes?”

Alfred sniffled. “Aw, you don’t have to do that.”
“It’s the reason I came over in such a hurry!” Francis exclaimed as he stood and slapped his hands together. “Now, Arthur, you will be my assistant. And you,” he pointed to Alfred, “Stay in this spot. Rest. We will have your meal ready soon.”

Without having much room to argue, Arthur obediently followed Francis into the kitchen, frowning when he put his winter coat on the table and fluttered his hands over the kitchen counter. There was a short moment where he stopped to look at the empty can of soup that Arthur had made earlier. He gave it a look of utter distain, and tossed the empty tin into the sink. Arthur rolled his eyes at that.

“I doubt you have your own broth, so bouillon will have to do,” Francis said with a slight frown. He looked over his shoulder at Arthur. “You have bouillon, oui?”

Arthur shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“If you did, where would it be?” Francis pressed, impatience clear in his voice.

Another shrug. “I really don’t know. I don’t go digging through the kitchen often.”

Slapping his hand over his eyes dramatically, Francis muttered something in French before he was off and flying through the kitchen, sweeping through the cupboards and pantry. He opened every door and drawer, plucking a pot from here and a large, wooden spoon from there. He filled the pot with water and set it on the stove. Arthur fiddled with the hem of his sweater. Francis said that he was an assistant… what did an assistant of a chef do?

“Is… is there something I should do?” Arthur asked shakily as Francis pulled several different ingredients from the shelves. Francis muttered to himself, but didn’t answer him. Arthur tried again. “I’d like to help, if I can. Alfred deserves a better meal.”

“Hmm?” Francis turned to look at Arthur, then smiled softly. “Watch the water for me. Tell me when it boils?”

And so, Arthur diligently watched the pot on the stove while Francis dug through the refrigerator and pulled out celery, carrots, and onions. Arthur gave the vegetables a strange look. When had Alfred bought those? Surely, if Francis was using them, they had to be good… still, Arthur didn’t remember seeing Alfred bring them into the house.

While Francis chopped next to him, Arthur gave the Frenchman a sidelong glance. He was handsome. Tall, blond, fair skin… he was the perfect specimen for modeling. And yet, he was a cook. His accent was like music to Arthur’s ears. His idle humming was heartwarming. Arthur quickly looked away. Francis was indeed a charming man. Had Arthur… always felt that way? If he thought Francis was a catch – no matter how irritating that was – why was he with Alfred?

“Francis,” Arthur started, hearing Francis paused his humming to give him a look. “What happened between you, Alfred, and I? Alfred said we haven’t seen each other in ages, but it looks like you two missed each other.” Arthur bit his lip as he stared down the pot on the stove. “Did I do something wrong, some time ago? Did I say something or… or do something that caused you to dislike me?”

Francis seemed flabbergasted as he struggled to interrupt, “Non, Arthur, that’s not –”

“On the phone, you asked if I really considered us friends,” Arthur turned to give Francis a hard look. “What did that mean? You don’t just ask something like that without a reason.”

Shifting his weight between his feet, Francis pursed his lips and looked away. “No, I
Arthur frowned. “So, out with it. What happened? What did I do?” Francis didn’t respond, and Arthur grew irritated. Alfred had probably fallen asleep again, and he didn’t want to wake him, so Arthur kept his voice low as he said, “Alfred and I have been struggling to hold ourselves together after this accident, and I want him to be happy. If spending time with an old friend can make him happy, I’m more than willing to have you over from time to time. But for that to work, I want to know why I didn’t know about you sooner,” he paused, and Francis finally lifted his eyes to give Arthur a sad look. “Now, I want you to tell me what happened.”

Sighing heavily, Francis shook his head with a smile. Before he spoke, he tossed bouillon cubes into the bubbling water, along with the vegetables. He stirred it all together, like an angry, fuming mess that would somehow work itself out. Arthur watch the bouillon cubes dissolve. Their substance fading to nothing as Francis took a deep breath in, and exhaled slowly.

“It wasn’t you,” Francis began slowly as he took a bag of tortellini and carefully poured the noodles into the pot. “It was something I did. Something very stupid.”

There was a twinge in Arthur’s chest, but he couldn’t quite pinpoint the reason for it. He shifted uncomfortably where he stood, waiting for the rest of Francis’ explanation. As the seconds melted into minutes, Arthur looked up from the boiling soup to give Francis an appraising look. His blue eyes were dim and his lips were set in a hard line. He looked angry… but why was that? Whatever he’d done… it was long ago. Surely, Arthur and Alfred would’ve forgiven him by now.

“You… you don’t remember your wedding night, do you?” Francis asked, his voice just a tad hopeful. Arthur shook his head slowly, and Francis sighed. “I thought so. If you did, you wouldn’t be asking me what happened.”

Arthur’s eyes went wide. “Did we… did we sleep together?”

Francis jumped away from the stove as if he’d touched fire. “Non! I would never!” His eyes were wide with shock, and if Arthur hadn’t been paying attention, he would’ve assumed Francis had been struck by lightning.

The soup started to boil over, and Arthur tried to fidget with the stove, but Francis came to his rescue, returning to his place by the pot and stirring diligently. For a moment, they were quiet. Watching the soup bubble and froth as Francis kept track of how long the noodles had been cooking. It was a companionable silence, but Arthur’s curiosity was still itching for answers.

Something happened between he and Francis on his wedding night. Or, perhaps, something happened between Alfred and Francis. That idea made Arthur’s lungs burn with indignation. No, that couldn’t be right. Alfred was far too faithful to do something questionable with Francis. Furthermore, no matter how charming and slipper Francis seemed to be, he didn’t look like the type of man who would commit adultery.

As if Francis could read Arthur’s mind, he huffed and said, “I did not sleep with you or Alfred. That wasn’t it.”

Arthur leaned forward. “Then what –”

“I love you,” Francis murmured down to the soup.

Arthur nearly leapt out of his skin at the statement. Love? For Arthur? Surely, he’d misheard. Why would anyone love him? He wasn’t attractive or fun… Alfred would be the ideal
man to love, if anything. That would make more sense out of anything that had occurred today. Hoping that Francis would laugh and say, “Just kidding!” Arthur held his breath and waited.

But Francis didn’t laugh.

He was solemn as he turned down the burner on the stove and continued to stir. “I fell in love with you during our second year of university,” he said gently as he tucked a long piece of hair behind his ear. “But you were with Alfred and I... I was too late.” Francis chuckled at the thought, as if lost love were nothing but a joke played by life. “So, I was quiet. I was your friend. And Alfred’s, of course. I did not want to hurt either of you... but I loved you.”

Arthur fumbled for words. “I... Francis, I’m sorry, I—”

Francis shook his head with a small smile. “It isn’t your fault. I was simply stuck. You invited me to your wedding. I was so happy for you,” Francis looked up from the stove, staring at a memory from years ago, smiling at the thought. “I caught you a moment alone, and I told you. I needed to say it. Just once. I said ‘I love you,’ and you said ‘what?’”

Francis laughed at that, but Arthur felt a bitter sting in his chest. Almost like guilt was stabbing at him beyond the fabric of his lost memories. Francis didn’t mind it, and put his focus back on the soup as he said, “But you were already married, and I knew I could not compete. I said that we could be friend, but... even if I said that, I knew I needed to move on.”

Arthur bit the inside of his cheek. “So you stopped spending time with us.”

“It was for my own good,” Francis nodded. “I went back to Paris with Angelique. We were married. I was finally happy.”

“But... but the wedding was three years ago!” Arthur sputtered, “Why didn’t you try to reach out after that? So much time passed!”

Francis gave Arthur speculative look. “Why didn’t you reach out? I told you I love you, Arthur. It was your turn to start the next conversation,” he raised his eyebrows. “And you didn’t. So I stayed away.”

Frowning, Arthur huffed and said, “A friendship isn’t a game of chess, Francis. Not all people start and stop conversations as if they’re taking turns moving the pawns.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Francis smiled as he tasted the soup carefully. He threw a pinch of salt into the pot and stirred. “But I am certain of one thing.”

Arthur quirked an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“I am happy you called me today,” Francis said warmly. “It is good to see you and Alfred again.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Arthur muttered as Francis went searching through the kitchen for bowls.

Somehow, it almost felt like Arthur had repaired something. Mended something. Pulled it together just with an ounce of curiosity, and watched Francis restart their friendship all over again, as if nothing had gone wrong in the first place. There was a certain kind of peace that was settling throughout the house. A personable kind of warmth that soothed Arthur’s nerves. Even if he didn’t remember Francis, it was clear that he was still Arthur’s friend.
“It’s good to see you, too,” said Arthur. Francis glanced up from the silverware drawer to give him a considering look, and Arthur gave him a hesitant smile. “I’m glad I got to meet you again.”

“Is that so?” Francis laughed. “I am, too.”

With that, Francis poured Alfred a bowl of soup and pranced off to the living room. As soon as he was shaken awake, Alfred was hoarsely cheering for his homemade meal. Arthur shuffled into the living room short after, watching Alfred shakily slurp his soup and laugh at Francis’ disdainful expression. Francis had taken Arthur’s normal seat next to Alfred, but he didn’t mind. He would sit in the armchair. That would give the old friends time to catch up.

So, feeling slightly lonely, Arthur sat by and listened to the two men reminisce about ‘the good old days’ of university. There were several memories about Arthur, but none of them that Arthur knew. So he was quiet. He smiled when Alfred looked in his direction and laughed when Francis told a joke. He was polite. He was personable.

And yet, no matter how happy Arthur was that Alfred was having a wonderful time, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d done something wrong by fraternizing with Francis in the kitchen. Francis hadn’t come on to him or attempted to woo him in some way… he simply told Arthur the truth.

Francis, in all his French glory, did not seem to be a clandestine man. And Arthur trusted that he’d told the truth. So why did Arthur feel so guilty? Something about Francis’ confession had left Arthur feeling a little raw. It was almost like Francis’ words were sandpaper and they scratched away the warm, fuzzy emotions that Alfred usually gave to Arthur.

Now he sat quietly. Processing, reviewing, analyzing… trying to understand exactly what was happening with his emotions. He would look up and see Alfred smiling and animatedly telling a story between coughs. Francis was always eagerly listening. Arthur’s chest ached.

Why hadn’t Alfred simply said “I love you,” rather than Francis? If that was the case, Arthur could accept it and not feel out of place in his own body. But it wasn’t just Alfred anymore. Francis was somehow thrown into the equation. And equation that Arthur couldn’t quite solve.

Arthur shifted in his chair to become more comfortable, listening as Alfred told a story about their final exams. Love, love, love… it made everything complicated. But Francis was married now… didn’t that make a difference? He said they could just be friends. That’s exactly what Arthur wanted. Friendship. But it still felt odd. He just hadn’t expected anyone other than Alfred to love him, nor did he want anyone else.

Arthur took a deep breath and let it out slowly, passing his hand through his hair. He wanted Alfred to love him. He wanted that bold statement that Francis had given. He wanted it in words, in writing, in feelings. Arthur closed his eyes. Alfred’s tired voice was stuck on repeat, going on and on about a past that Arthur didn’t know existed. He wanted Alfred love him. He wanted to remember how love felt. But he was stuck. Just as he’d always been.

Alfred spoke. Arthur listened. The world melted away, just like the snow that fell outside. And soon, without Arthur noticing, Alfred’s voice was gone, lost beneath the early winter snow.

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Arthur clicked his pen idly as Alfred closed his eyes and sighed. A clean canvas was
available for him. He could do anything he wanted. Arthur clicked his pen again, smoothing his hands over the warm, living, breathing slate beneath his fingertips. He’d already covered Alfred’s chest and stomach with several different writings and musings, most of which blurred together after Arthur lost his wit one too many times. Now Alfred was laying on their mattress on his stomach, complacently tapping his fingers against the hardwood floors rhythmically.

“Are you gonna draw something else, or can I fall asleep?” Alfred asked tiredly, drumming his fingers against their mattress. Arthur clicked his pen.

“I’ll do something,” Arthur said as he scratched a hand through his hair. He was happily sitting astride the back of Alfred’s hips as he debated what he wanted to draw or write across the bare skin presented to him. “You just need to hold still.”

“When you said you needed to relieve stress, I thought you wanted to, like… have sex.” Alfred started to kick his feet back and forth, jostling Arthur with his heel with every other kick. “Also, people normally use paint when they do this stuff.”

“I’m doing this because the counselor is worried about my state of mind,” said Arthur with a frown. He sleepily rubbed his eyes with one hand as he twirled his pen with the other. “Finals are tearing me apart. It’s either this, or I go back to studying in the middle of the night.”

Alfred immediately went rigid beneath Arthur, grasping the sheets tightly. “Oh god, no. Please, no. Not that. You keep me up with all your weird… literature moaning.”


Alfred yawned. “Call it whatever you want, baby. It’s weird. Normal people don’t get mad at books,” he stretched his arms out and Arthur marveled at how his shoulders flexed. Alfred let out a long exhale. “Normal people just do their homework with a normal amount of bitching.”

Arthur sat back against Alfred’s butt and poked the small of his back with the tip of his pen with irritation. Why was he dating such an ignoramus? It was ridiculous. “I don’t bitch about my assignments.”

Alfred snorted. “Okay, babe.”


“You’ve gotta admit,” Alfred grinned. “I’m one fine lookin’ ass.”

“You are,” Arthur smiled, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to Alfred’s shoulder blade. Alfred let out a happy sigh. A sweet, contentment-filled sigh. Arthur loved this man. This strong, sensitive, sarcastic, goofball of a man. Arthur clicked his pen, leaned forward, and started to scrawl his tired, lovesick thoughts on Alfred’s skin. When Alfred finally registered the feeling of the pen sliding across his shoulders, he started humming a song Arthur faintly recognized.


Arthur scoffed. “No, that’s not it.”
Alfred huffed. “What about, ‘This super-hot guy is dating another super-hot guy?’”

Clicking his pen, Arthur sat back with a smile and nodded. “Yes. That’s exactly what I wrote.”

When Alfred laughed, Arthur felt it. When something was truly funny, his entire body would shake with mirth. Arthur loved to see his expression when he laughed. Currently, he was missing it. Rolling off of his boyfriend’s back, Arthur laid next to Alfred and watched the way Alfred’s blue eyes scrunched closed while he giggled. Arthur smiled widely in response. He loved this. He loved Alfred.

“Okay,” Alfred finally managed to say through his giggles. “What… what did you really write?”

Arthur brushed his thumb over Alfred’s cheek softly. “Another poem.”

“Tell me,” Alfred whispered, though his voice was pitched toward a question. Arthur took a deep, sleepy breath and smiled.

“Here lies a beautiful man,
So sweet,
So warm,
Beneath my hands. A perfect canvas for what I have to declare.

I love you, I love you, I love you.
I will see this canvas
every morning and remind him,
I love you, I love you, I love you.”

For a moment, Alfred was quiet. Simply staring at Arthur with silent awe, he blinked slowly and reached out a hand to take Arthur’s. He held it tight. Arthur smiled at the grip.


Arthur’s eyes went wide. “No, you’re not.”

“Yeah. It’s happening. I’m gonna go do it tomorrow,” Alfred’s eyes glittered with excitement. “I’ll have them tattoo it right over your handwriting.”

Slapping Alfred’s arm, Arthur rolled his eyes. “We don’t have the money to go out and get tattoos willy nilly.”

While Alfred grumbled unhappily about his lack of tattoos, Arthur made sure to close his eyes and breathe easy. There was so much inspiration fluttering through his mind and only a few places to let it out. But Alfred was there, and Alfred loved him. He let Arthur write all over him
rather than stay up late and drive himself mad.

Now, there Alfred was, lying back and covered in messy declarations of love. When Alfred woke up in the morning, he would see the strange, unintelligent scribbles that ran from his collarbone to his ribcage. Surely, he would complain about the very flowery descriptions of his naked body that Arthur had lazily written across Alfred’s hip.

Love was written all over Alfred’s bare skin. Exposed just for Arthur. Open and ready for Arthur to delicately place all of his love across each stretch of skin. And Arthur sighed happily at the thought. Alfred was now a verified work of art. Arthur should get him notarized. Then Alfred would be legally documented. The law system would acknowledge that Alfred was truly, explicitly, and wonderfully loved by none other than Arthur Kirkland.

“Arthur,” Alfred whispered softly in front of him. “Arthur you need to go to bed.”

Arthur frowned at the statement. They were already in bed. He’d been writing poetry on Alfred’s back only moments ago. Forcing his eyes open, Arthur was greeted with a sideways view of the living room. Alfred was kneeling on front of him, looking up at him with tired, blue eyes.

“Hey, sleepy head,” Alfred murmured hoarsely before he turned his head away and coughed into his arm.

Arthur gave him a sympathetic look. It was a shame that even the grand, homemade soup of Francis wasn’t enough to cure Alfred’s cold. Arthur blinked. Francis. He was in their home. Arthur sat up immediately, feeling a muscle in his lower back tense up and pull painfully as he frantically looked around the room. He winced and held a hand to his back.

“Where is… where is Francis?” He asked quickly, seeing Alfred smile up at him. Arthur rubbed his eyes harshly, trying to remove all traces of sleep. Francis was nowhere to be seen. The living room was dim. Arthur blinked slowly. “I fell asleep.”

“Yeah, you really did,” Alfred smiled softly. His movements were sluggish as he reached up to adjust his glasses. “Francis left hours ago.”

Blinking slowly, Arthur gave the living room a tired look. Francis had been gone for hours, and Arthur had been fast asleep the entire time. What had they been talking about while Arthur was asleep? Had Francis said something about their wedding night? Did Alfred know about Francis confessing? There was nothing in Alfred’s sleepy expression that hinted he was upset. Nothing about the calm atmosphere said that Alfred was angry or upset.

Arthur let out a long exhale and uncurled himself from the armchair, looking at the clock on the mantle over the fireplace. It was too dark to read. “What time is it?”

“Almost nine. I think it’s time for be.”

Nodding diligently, Arthur pushed himself out of his chair and shuffled toward the stairs. The kitchen light was on, softly illuminating the stairway for Arthur as he padded along toward the bedroom. Halfway up the stairs, Arthur stopped and glanced back. Alfred wasn’t there. Something about that threw Arthur for a loop. He was so used to having Alfred in his arms as he slept. Two days of having Alfred in his arms was enough to have him hooked.

Something had been unlocked in Arthur’s muscle memory, and he couldn’t imagine going back to bed without Alfred at his side. Slowly descending the stairs again, Arthur peeked his head around the corner of the living room to see Alfred on the sofa, pulling a blanket over his legs.
When he looked up from the coffee table to see Arthur, he gave a weak smile.

“You okay?” He asked with a gravelly voice. Arthur winced in sympathy.

“I’m fine,” Arthur murmured in return, leaning against the wall heavily. After a moment of peaceable quiet, Arthur broke the silence with a soft question. “Come to bed?”

Alfred opened his mouth to say something, but there was something that flickered in his eyes and changed his mind. His eyes softened and he pushed himself off of the sofa slowly. He took Arthur’s hand when it was offered, slowly trudging along when they went toward the stairs. Arthur hit the light for the stairs on the way, turning off the kitchen light before he forgot.

“Francis still loves you, doesn’t he?” Alfred asked briskly.

Arthur stopped in his tracks, his hand still on the door of the bedroom. Something felt tight in his chest. There was something that burned in Arthur’s chest at the idea of Alfred knowing the truth. And yet, Alfred wasn’t upset. His grip on Arthur’s hand didn’t tighten unhappily, and he didn’t move to ask anything more. He was quiet. He waited. He knew that Arthur had the answer.

Pushing open the bedroom door, Arthur walked Alfred to the bed and sat him down.

“Yes,” Arthur murmured. “He still loves me. But I don’t think he loves me the way he used to…” He took the cough medicine from the nightstand and handed two pills to Alfred. Alfred gave the pills a sad, unimpressed look, and Arthur gave him a sympathetic smile. “I think it’s become much more platonic. He’s so happy with Angelique.”

“Yeah,” Alfred smiled at the thought, looking up at Arthur with fever-addled eyes. “Yeah, he really does.” He paused for a minute, looking somewhere past Arthur for a bit before his eyes refocused on Arthur. “So he just loves you like… like a friend, huh? When did that happen?”

“I don’t know.” Arthur shrugged and took Alfred’s water glass from the nightstand and handed it to him. “I think… maybe, when you find someone you love and who loves you back, that must help you heal.”

“That’s so poetic,” Alfred said dizzily, a hazy smile on his face. Arthur smiled in return, and he beamed when Alfred said, “I might just get it tattooed on my back.”

Arthur laughed as he gently pushed Alfred back onto the bed and pulled the blankets up to Alfred’s chin. When Alfred was laid back and happy, Arthur said, “I might just hold you to that.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you! See you next chapter.
Gentle hands cradled Arthur’s face as he pulled himself from sleep. His eyes met Alfred’s and he was caught in the deep, dark depths of black pupils. Alfred loomed over him, his warm hands lightly brushing over Arthur’s cheeks. Intimate, affectionate… Arthur sighed softly at the feeling. Awake, or asleep? He hoped it was the former.

When Alfred bent forward to kiss Arthur, a warm tingle of emotion sparked through Arthur’s chest and ricocheted throughout his body until his fingers and toes tingled. It was too real to be a dream. Too soft to be an aching wish. Arthur opened his eyes, seeing Alfred’s cheeky smile.

“I love you,” Alfred whispered, like it was a secret. Arthur smiled.

But he didn’t say anything.

Energy bristled in Arthur’s chest, a fervent desire to tell Alfred how much he loved him. The words never came. He simply laid back with the itching feeling of unrest, watching Alfred’s expression go from content, to concerned.

He needed to say something.

It was like all of his words were gone. Lost, as if he’d forgotten how to speak English. Arthur tried to order his mouth to open, his lips to move, his voice to break free, but nothing changed. Alfred sat back a bit. He looked disappointed. Sad. Forgotten. Arthur tried to move. He couldn’t.

He couldn’t even speak.

Closing his eyes, Arthur mentally berated himself for being an idiot. Alfred was there, baring his soul, and Arthur couldn’t even work up the effort to say it in return. It made his chest ache. It burned in his lungs. Say something, say something…

*Say something.*

Arthur opened his eyes. Instead of being surrounded by Alfred’s warmth, the blankets tucked around him like sheltering arms. As lovely as this comfort was, Alfred was nowhere to be found when Arthur pried open his eyes and sat up. The room was empty. Quiet. Lonely. Arthur yawned and stretched his arms in the air, disregarding the warmth of the blankets and slipping away from the bed to get dressed.

Downstairs, there were several voices and the definite sound of movement. Alfred was in the kitchen doing heaven knew what. Arthur frowned at the thought. Alfred had been much too sick the past few days to run about the kitchen making food, even if it was something small. Pulling a sweater over his head, Arthur stowed away down the stairs and stepped into the kitchen.

Alfred was alive and bright with color, dressed in his normal work attire, he flew around the kitchen with a cup of coffee in hand, stopping only to smile at Arthur in the doorway.

“Morning!” he chirped, tipping back his cup of coffee to take a long drink. Arthur smiled at the sight. Alfred was back to his normal self. No longer sluggish or hazy, Alfred was awake and
moving with the energy of a child on a full serving of sugar. And when he saw Arthur’s smile, Alfred’s enthusiasm increased tenfold. He spread his arms wide and proclaimed, “I’ve had four cups of coffee this morning!”

“It certainly shows,” Arthur nodded as he sat down at the table. “You’re practically shaking with all of that caffeine.” Alfred laughed in response, bouncing on his heels as he fanned through a folder full of papers on the counter. Arthur leaned his elbows on the table and gave Alfred a long look. “I see you’re feeling better. If you’re not, you’re certainly excellent at pretending.”

“I feel great! It’s all that sleep I got.”

Arthur nodded skeptically as he twiddled his thumbs. “I would’ve assumed it was the soup Francis made yesterday.”

“What?” Alfred squawked, far too dramatic to be sincere. “That might’ve helped my throat, but I think all the sleeping chased out my fever.” Alfred knocked back the rest of his coffee with vigor. “Besides, my throat is still kinda scratchy, so that soup didn’t cure everything.”

Feeling a twinge of guilt, Arthur started to stand from the table. “If you’re still not feeling good, you should take some of the medicine I bought you —”

“I will, I will. In a minute,” said Alfred as he flipped through the papers on the counter. Arthur huffed impatiently, and Alfred smiled in response. “I just wanna go through these first.”

Taking a deep breath, Arthur was fully prepared to demand that Alfred take the medicine, but he was cut off by the telephone ringing. Alfred sauntered over to the house phone, twirling it in his hand before he pushed one button and held it to his ear with a smile and a warm, “Hello!”

Arthur watched his expression carefully, trying to gauge who might be on the other line. Arthur’s parents? It would be odd for them to call out of the blue. They were still healing from the aftershocks of Alistair’s death. Delilah? No, she despised Alfred. That also ruled out Edith. Slowly taking his seat, Arthur watched Alfred’s smile change from one of slight amusement to a full, overjoyed grin.

“Franny, buddy! God, we went three years without talking and now you’re talking to me two days in a row? You’re smothering me, pal,” Alfred paused, then laughed at whatever Francis said in return. Arthur narrowed his eyes. How could these two men get along so swimmingly? Granted, Arthur understood that Francis’ infatuation had long since died out, but it seemed odd for him and Alfred to be so friendly despite the complicated past. Alfred leaned his hip against the counter, listening to Francis for a moment before he said, “What… tonight? I dunno. What time? Seven? Ah, I’ve got a meeting until seven…” he glanced up at Arthur and held a hand over the receiver of the phone. “How to you feel about having dinner at Franny’s restaurant tonight?”

Arthur blinked spastically. “T-tonight? Isn’t that a bit last-minute?”

“Yeah, I guess. But we haven’t eaten there in… two… three years?” Alfred counted on his fingers before nodding to himself. “Yeah, three years. Right after we got married.” Another bolt of guilt ran through Arthur’s chest, but Alfred didn’t seem to notice. “Francis said there was a cancellation, and since we haven’t hung out in a while, he thought it’d be nice to have us over!”

Arthur hesitated. Alfred seemed overjoyed at the fact Francis wanted them to eat at his restaurant, but there was still something that raised red flags in the back of Arthur’s brain. Alarms
were ringing, but Arthur couldn’t pinpoint the reason why. He wanted to say something like, *no, let’s stay in tonight, let’s watch a movie*, but Alfred looked so happy. He was seeing an old friend again after three long years of separation. He didn’t smile like that when Arthur spoke to him. He didn’t laugh that warmly when Arthur made a joke. He was so much happier being in the company of a man that remembered him… Arthur couldn’t take that away.

Forcing a smile to his face, Arthur nodded. “Dinner sounds lovely.”

Alfred took his hand off of the receiver and bounced around the kitchen, too full of energy to walk. “We’d love to come! Yeah, Arthur said he wants to. Maybe seeing Angelique will help him remember something… yeah, that sounds awesome.”

Arthur doubted seeing Francis’ wife would help anything, but Alfred was being optimistic. It was his natural state of being. Bright, warm, kind… Alfred was a wonderful man. Arthur wanted some of that warmth to sprinkle down and warm Arthur’s cold, lonely heart. Perhaps a few flakes of sunshine would be enough for Arthur to recall something happy. Or maybe he was being too hopeful. Arthur sighed and rested his chin in his palm tiredly as Alfred continued to blather on the phone.

“I’ve got a meeting until seven, so… oh. That’s the only reservation you’ve got, huh? Okay…” Alfred paused, looked at Arthur, and smiled. “Hey! Arthur can go at seven, take the table, and hold it until I get there. Cool? Yeah, it’ll be fine. I’ll be five minutes late, tops.” Arthur felt his heart leap into his throat at the idea of wandering around the city alone. It hadn’t worked out well the last time. He’d have to get directions first. Alfred didn’t notice his panicked expression as he checked the time on his mobile. “Hey, I have to get going to work… yep, we’ll see you at seven. Later, Franny!” He hung up, smiled at Arthur and exclaimed, “We’re gonna eat good tonight!”

“Hurray,” Arthur replied weakly, clasping his hands together anxiously while Alfred roved around the kitchen collecting his papers. While Alfred started humming a song Arthur didn’t recognize, Arthur shuffled his feet under the table nervously. He cleared his throat. “So… how far away is Francis’ restaurant? Will I have to call a cab?”

“Huh?” Alfred looked up from his folder to give Arthur a strange look. “You don’t have to. I’ll call one for you. I’ll give ‘em the address and everything. I don’t wanna stress you out,” he stopped, then smiled at Arthur’s mildly nervous expression. “Hey, I don’t want to make this any harder than it has to be. Tonight is supposed to be fun! We’re gonna see old friends, eat good food… and if you get tired, we’ll leave. Easy as pie.”

Arthur pursed his lips. “We would leave if I was tired? And you wouldn’t mind?”

“Not a bit, sweetheart,” Alfred smiled as he walked over to the table and gave Arthur a kiss on the forehead. He lingered for a moment, his warm lips remaining against Arthur’s skin, and then he was gone, picking up his folders and calling over his shoulder, “I’ll call you later with the details! See you tonight!”

Opening his mouth to reply, Arthur brushed his fingers over his forehead, feeling the heat of Alfred’s lips that were there only seconds ago. Come and gone before Arthur could react. It was like a smoky whisper of a kiss, dissipating into thin air before Arthur could grab it and hold onto it. The front door slammed shut. Alfred was gone. Arthur let out a breath he wasn’t aware he’d been holding.

“Have… have a good day,” he breathed to no one, his hand still held to his forehead. The house was quiet. The kitchen was still. Arthur’s heartbeat thudded in his ears. Quiet to a fault.
Arthur took a breath... and smiled.

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Bitter winter stung Arthur’s fingers as he stood outside of Francis’ self-proclaimed ‘Restaurant of Grand Cuisine,’ waiting for Alfred. His breath clouded in the air, manifesting his worries into physical shapes and littering the cold, cold wind with anxiety. With his phone clamped in one hand tightly and the other hand stuffed tightly between his arm and his middle, Arthur shivered and listened to Alfred apologize for the umpteenth time.

“Look, I’m sorry! I know you don’t wanna go in by yourself, but trust me; it’ll be fine,” Alfred assured him, sounding rather harried over the phone. Arthur stomped his numb feet tiredly.

“I can’t just go in by myself!” Arthur squeaked, curling in on himself as a woman walked past him and gave him a strange look. He stared at his brown loafers, lightly dusted with snow, to distract himself from the attention. “I’ll look pathetic if I sit at a table for two all alone.”

Alfred sighed into the phone. “Look, I’ll be there as soon as I can. But if someone sees our table empty, they’ll take it. You just have to go inside and sit down.” Somewhere in Alfred’s lab, someone called to him. “I’ll be there in a minute!” He barked in response before returning his attention to Arthur. “Okay. So, the new reps are gonna show us a new piece of lab equipment, and then I’ll be right over to the restaurant. I’ll be there in... five minutes. Ten minutes, tops.”

Arthur bit his bottom lip crossly. “This morning you said you’d be five minutes late at the most.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” Alfred whined, “I’ll be there before you know it. I promise.”

When another voice called to Alfred, more impatient this time, Arthur doubted Alfred’s promise. But there was nothing else Arthur could do at the moment. He had been driven to the restaurant. He was expected. He might as well go in. Sighing, Arthur stomped his right foot again, trying to induce warmth in his toes.


Letting out a relieved sigh, Alfred laughed a bit. “Okay. Okay! I can work with that. Ten minutes. Fifteen at the most. See you there!”

Arthur let out a frustrated growl. “Fifteen? But you just said –” the line clicked as Alfred hung up. Lowering his phone, Arthur glared at the dim screen. Whether or not he liked it, Alfred was right. Unless he wanted their table to be given away, he had to go inside. Though Arthur wouldn’t mind skipping the dinner, he knew Alfred wanted to see his friends. Swallowing his pride, Arthur put his phone into his pocket and shuffled inside the restaurant.

Warmth hit Arthur with a force as he stepped inside, and he could feel his cold skin thawing at the wonderful increase in temperature. Breathing in the scent of cooking meats and caramelized vegetables, Arthur glanced around the entrance. There was a polite maître d’ at a small desk, along with a young woman taking people’s coats as they went inside. Everything seemed to give off a subtle, golden glow amid the warm, velvety reds that seemed to encompass every wall.

Staggering forward, Arthur tried to wipe the awestruck expression from his face as he approached the desk. The young man gave Arthur a warm smile.

“Good evening,” he greeted, his brown eyes glittering in the sallow candlelight. Arthur gave him a stiff nod, and the boy pulled up a list on the tablet in front of him. “Do you have a
“Yes. Arthur Kirkland,” he started, only to bite his tongue. What name was the reservation under? Alfred’s? His? Did Francis keep the table under his own name? Arthur leaned forward as he said, “No, wait. Jones? I think? I’m not sure what name he put down.”

The young man gave him a skeptical look as he scrolled through the list. The more the swiped through names, the more Arthur felt uncomforted. He hadn’t been taken to the wrong restaurant, had he? No, the name on the sign out front was the same name Alfred had given him. Arthur’s palms started to sweat. He wished Alfred were here to help him not feel so anxious.

Looking away from the maître d’, Arthur gave the tables beyond him a speculative look. Every dish in front of the guests looked grand, and Arthur could only imagine how expensive the wine must’ve been. Francis really was a well to-do chef.

Just as the young man was about to tell Arthur his reservation didn’t exist, Francis stepped out of the kitchen and looked directly at Arthur. A smile spread across his face. Arthur fiddled with the zipper of his jacket and studied the floor as Francis swept over to the desk with enough pomp and circumstance to entice the curiosity of everyone in the restaurant.

“Arthur, mon frer, I’m glad you made it!” Francis grinned as he leaned over the young man’s tablet and tapped the screen a few times. He grumbled something in French to the boy before waving Arthur forward. “Follow me, cher. I’ll show you your table.”

Following obediently, Arthur peeked over a few shoulders to see a few of the dishes. Fresh salads, steaming soup, sparkling silverware and shimmering wine… Arthur felt intimidated just walking through the maze of tables. He should’ve remembered this place. The smells, the tastes… but nothing came back. Arthur simply felt like a lost puppy as he followed Francis back to a calmer corner of the dining room.

With a broad sweep of his arm, Francis pulled out Arthur’s chair and motioned for him to sit. A plush, brown seat waited for Arthur. He sat slowly, watching how the people around them gave Francis’ chef coat an interesting look.

Tucking his arms in tightly, Arthur tried to avoid the prying eyes of the public. Would someone recognize him from the television? The young girls in the bookstore had recognized him. Someone might ask for his autograph again. That didn’t end well the last time. Arthur shifted anxiously as Francis straightened the subtly flickering candle on the table.

“Did you drive?” Francis asked personably as he brushed lint from the crisp, red tablecloth.

Arthur glanced up from his water glass and blinked hard. “Sorry?”

“I asked if you drove here,” Francis chuckled as he stood up straight and put his hands behind his back. “I’d feel terrible if you walked all this way.”

“Alfred called me a cab,” Arthur answered stiffly, oddly aware of how many people were waiting to see why Francis was in the dining room. Clearing his throat, Arthur put his hands atop his knees and braced his arms. “He said he’ll be here as soon as he can.”

Francis waved a hand at that. “Oh, that is fine… we can begin without him, oui?” Arthur squirmed at the suggestion, but Francis pulled out a notepad from his apron nonetheless. “what will you have to drink, cher? Tea? Water? Wine?”
Arthur opened his mouth to demand a calming cup of tea, but a soothing woman’s voice cut in before he had the chance. “Francis, mon amor, of course he’ll have wine. He is our honored guest!”

Leaning to the left just a bit, Arthur saw a young woman with warm, bronze skin and bright, topaz eyes walking towards them. She cradled a bottle of red wine in her arms, and on her left hand shone a large, magnificent ring of diamonds and silver. Arthur narrowed his eyes at the woman. He knew her. The way she spoke to Francis, the smile on her face… welcoming, kind, and yet… forlorn when she looked at Arthur. Her smile said that she missed Arthur. Her eyes screamed that she was frightened by his presence. Arthur sat back in his chair quietly. This was Angelique.

When she set the bottle of wine on his table, Arthur made sure to smile appreciatively. Angelique smiled back, brushing a piece of long, dark brown hair behind her ear. The rest of it was pinned up in an intricate bun. Formal, yet youthful. Just like the woman herself.

“Arthur,” she breathed, reaching out a hand to touch his shoulder.

There was familiarity in the gesture, one that rattled Arthur’s heart and wracked his brain. He wanted to remember if he’d gotten along with Angelique. He wanted to know if she knew about Francis’ feelings for him. Was she peacefully ignorant, or painfully omnipotent? Arthur’s heart ached and his throat felt tight, but no answers were provided to him. Angelique simply smiled. That painful, tight-lipped smile that could mean she loved him or hated him. It was a fine, fine line that divided them. Arthur was afraid of what would happen if he slipped over to one side, but that didn’t stop him from smiling. This woman had been his friend, once.

Angelique let out a soft sigh, her eyes glistening sadly. “Arthur… it’s been so long.”


“Oh, come here,” Angelique demanded as she held out her arms.

Arthur stood and embraced her. Musky perfume lingered on her shoulders, and Arthur’s face was pressed to hairspray-stiffened curls that crunched against his cheek. Delicate hands clung to his back desperately. Was it a hope for a revived friendship, or a plea that Arthur would let Francis be hers? It could have been both. Arthur hugged her in return, breathing in the scent of a long forgotten cologne.

Warm summer nights were filled with laughter. Francis leaning back with Angelique tucked under his arm. Raucous singing and stereos blaring. Homework being tossed aside… his friendship with Francis was a merry one, no matter how much the Frenchman irritated him. But, no matter what Arthur could see fluttering through his mind, there was always the warmth of someone’s arm around his shoulders. Arthur doubted it was anyone other than Alfred.

Pulling back from Angelique’s arms, Arthur forced a smile back onto his face. Angelique cupped his cheeks and turned his face to and fro.

“You haven’t changed in three years! Lucky you,” She said brightly before she gave the bandage on Arthur’s head a hard look. “You poor thing. Francis told me about the accident. It must be hard not to remember things,” she paused for a moment and her eyes went wide as she took her hands from Arthur’s face and tucked them against her chest quickly. “Ah, you must not remember! I am Angelique. Francis’ wife.”
Arthur bit the inside of his cheek and nodded once. “Yes, I assumed that was the case.”

On the other side of the table, Francis grinned as he poured Arthur a cup of wine. Arthur nearly insisted that he didn’t need to drink. Alistair’s anger was still fresh in his mind. But, he was having dinner with his husband. A husband he didn’t completely remember. A glass of wine might help him relax. So, with Angelique’s hand on his shoulder, Arthur took his seat and raised his glass of wine to his lips.

The smell was so sweet. A tangy undertone threatened to bite Arthur, but he paid it no heed as he tipped the glass back and took a drink. Bitter, bitter wine met his tongue, fizzling down his throat and racing to his stomach in a flurry of sour, fiery liquid. Arthur fought the urge to grimace as he set the glass back down.

“Is it to your liking? We could always get you a white wine,” Francis smiled as he set the glass down on Arthur’s side of the table. Angelique gave Arthur’s shoulder a delicate squeeze of support as she stood by, silent.


“I have to get back to my deserts,” Angelique sighed unhappily before she leaned down to press a light kiss to Arthur’s cheek. “I will come back to say hello when Alfred arrives. I promise.” With a smile and a flick of her wrist, she was weaving through the tables in pursuit of the kitchen.

Close behind, Francis leaned over the table and said insistently, “Let any of the servers know when you are ready to order. You are our top priority, tonight.”

“I’ll wait until Alfred arrives,” Arthur said with his fake smile weighing down at the corners. “He’ll be here soon.”

Nearly two hours later, Arthur was still sitting at his table alone. His stomach had stopped growling half an hour ago. He was sure it was too full of wine to feel empty. He tipped his empty glass from side to side, watching the few drops of wine in the bottom slosh slowly.

For the umpteenth time, Arthur checked his phone. Alfred must have turned his off. No matter how many times Arthur called, it went straight to voicemail. It was beyond irritating. It was infuriating. This was supposed to be a night for the two of them, not a night for Arthur to sit alone at a table and drink himself into a stupor.

To be fair, Arthur hadn’t exactly planned to keep drinking the wine. But every time Francis would come out of the kitchen to check on him, Arthur felt inclined to take a drink from his glass. It would’ve been a fun game if he hadn’t disliked the taste so much. After his second glass, Arthur had begun to tolerate the taste that accompanied the pleasant tingle that buzzed through his brain.

Leaning back in his chair, Arthur sighed and watched the dining room tip and sway. Too much wine, it seemed. Nonetheless, he clumsily reached for the bottle and tried to pour himself another glass. Before he could properly fill his glass, Arthur noted that the bottle of wine went missing. Arthur gave his empty hands a hard look. Where was the bottle?

Looking up, Arthur squinted at Francis unhappily. The damn Frenchman was standing over him with an irritatingly pitying expression. Arthur didn’t need pity. He needed Alfred. He needed to feel important enough to warrant Alfred’s attention. He needed Alfred to be there and join him for dinner. Those selfish needs were making Arthur feel worse about himself. The wine
made those feelings dissipate for a while. He just needed another glass. One more glass, and
Alfred would walk through the door. One more glass, and Alfred would smile at him and tell
Arthur that he was the most important person in his life.

“I’m not finished with that,” Arthur mumbled softly as Francis set the bottle on the other
side of the table. When the bottle was kept out of his reach, Arthur leaned forward and tried to take
the bottle back. “I said I’m not finished.”

“I think you are, cher,” said Francis. He placed a hand on Arthur’s shoulder and pushed
him back in his chair. “There’s nothing left in the bottle.”

Arthur blinked slowly. Nothing left? That was preposterous. Arthur hadn’t been drinking
that much wine. Just a few glasses. Three? Four? He couldn’t quite remember. But the last time he
looked at the bottle, there had been plenty of wine left for him.

“No,” Arthur pouted, “There’s some left. Just let me have another glass and then I’ll be
done.”

Francis moved the bottle further away. “You should eat something, Arthur. You’re going
to make yourself sick.”

Goodness, this Francis fellow was a twit. He was getting in the way. Couldn’t he see
that? Arthur sat back and struggled to make his eyes focus on Francis’ expression. It was dark.
Possibly angry. Why was that? He hadn’t caused any trouble, and hadn’t bothered the especially
touchy-feely couple at the table next to his. Arthur was nothing but a delight.

“I can’t eat yet. I’m waiting for Alfred.”

“He should have been here hours ago,” Francis said with a roll of his eyes. “Obviously,
something has come up.”

Arthur shook his head. “No, no… Alfred would’ve told me. He would’ve…” Arthur
blinked a few times to regain his focus. “He would’ve called.”

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Francis wiped his hands on his apron before he motioned
for Arthur to stand. “Come with me, cher. I’ll take you upstairs so you can lay down.”

“Lay down?” Arthur echoed incredulously. Francis thought he was drunk. That was
ridiculous. He was just slightly buzzed. A touch tipsy, at most. Shaking his head, Arthur reached
for the bottle of wine again. “I don’t need to lay down. I just want another glass.”

Francis swatted his hand away roughly. Arthur whimpered at the abuse, but Francis
merely huffed. “The bottle is empty. I already told you that.”

Pouting, Arthur sat back in his chair heavily and crossed his arms over his chest. “Then
get me another bottle.”

Leaning his hand on the table heavily, Francis let out a long exhale and breathed, “Why
should I do that, cher? You’ve had enough.”

Clicking his tongue, Arthur shook his head, feeling a little giddy when the room spun.
There was a slightly reminiscent bell ringing in his head. Something that told him he was crossing
a line. Breaking a rule that he didn’t remember… but what was it? He remembered how angry
Alistair had been when Arthur tried to take him away from the bar. Was he acting like Alistair?
Closing his eyes tight, Arthur said, “No, I am no alcoholic!”

Francis leaned forward, quickly hissing, “Hush, Arthur! There’s no need to shout.”

Blinking slowly, Arthur gave Francis a strange look. Had he been shouting? He was just trying to clear up the wine situation. It was painfully obvious that Arthur wasn’t drunk. He was just… fuzzy. A little grainy, perhaps? What adjective would be correct at this moment? Dizzy, hazy… some other, equally silly description? Arthur shrugged off the thought. It was too hard to think.

The more he thought, the more aware he became of his predicament. Alfred had abandoned him at the restaurant. Having a no-show husband was definitely a blow to Arthur’s confidence. He wanted to know what Alfred thought of him. He wanted to know if the feelings they once shared were still there. He was going to ask… but Alfred never came.

When Francis gave Arthur’s shoulder a shake, Arthur looked up from the burgundy table cloth and watched Francis give him a pitying smile. “Come along. I will take you upstairs. You can lay down. I’ll send Angelique up with something to fill your stomach.” With another fond pat, Francis’ smile softened. “Sounds nice, no? A little nap will help.”

Pushing himself out of his chair, Arthur swayed and wobbled where he stood. Francis held his shoulders and steered him through the maze of tables slowly. “A nap would probably… probably be a good idea,” Arthur said slowly, watching where his feet went carefully. He glanced back at Francis. “I’m… it’s… everything’s a little fuzzy.”

Chuckling a bit under his breath, Francis nodded as he continued to guide Arthur through the restaurant. People at the tables leaned toward each other, whispering daintily behind their hands as they watched Arthur stumble past them. Nosy pricks. The whole lot of them. They were all gossiping about how pathetic he was. They were all talking about how his date had left him. They were all whispering the sad truths of Arthur’s existence. Arthur frowned.

As he and Francis slipped through the double doors of the kitchen, Arthur caught sight of Angelique carefully decorating some sort of pastry. Another one of the kitchen staff nudged her shoulder, and she looked up to see Arthur being tugged along by Francis. She set down her piping bag and approached them.

“Arthur,” she greeted before she looked up to Francis, “Qu’est ce que tu fais?”

Ah, French. Arthur adored French. It was so romantic. Though, Alfred’s wonderful southern drawl was the most sensual thing Arthur had ever heard. Arthur blinked in confusion. Southern drawl? Where did that come from? It must’ve been in the past. So, complacently swaying where he stood, Arthur quietly let Francis and Angelique speak in quick, anxious French.

When the conversation apparently drew to a close, Francis leaned forward to give Angelique a soft kiss on the cheek. Holding his shoulder for a moment, Angelique whispered, “Fais gaffe.”

With a gentle hum, Francis toted Arthur long the side of the kitchen, out of the way of his busy staff. Francis led him through the side of the kitchen and past a locked door, he was towed up a flight of stairs. Arthur squinted at the large, homey setting at the top of the stairs. Francis lived above his restaurant? That seemed inconvenient. Then again, Francis was a chef. He probably enjoyed having his large, gourmet kitchen at his disposal.
Letting Francis drag him to a sofa, Arthur fell down onto the cushions and sighed. “He’s not coming.”

Stopping in his tracks, Francis quirked an eyebrow at Arthur. “Quoi?” He paused, shook his head, and said, “Sorry, sorry. What?”

Arthur looked up at his friend sadly. “Alfred. He’s not coming, is he?”

Shifting his weight from foot to foot awkwardly, Francis made a garbled sound in the back of his throat before he walked to the other side of the apartment, behind Arthur. There was the sound of running water for a moment, followed by the light sound of glass clinking as Arthur swayed in his place on the sofa. Running water, babbling brooks, rushing waterfalls… the ideas all melded together to create one strange, mental setting. Arthur’s vision blurred, and he closed his eyes, imagining the gentle trickle of water over smooth, glittering stones.

“Here,” Francis’ voice was sharp and sudden. Arthur’s eyes snapped open to see Francis holding a glass of water for him. There was a smile on the Frenchman’s face, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Arthur squinted at his expression, but didn’t gain any other insights to his mood. Francis sighed. “Drink this. It might help settle your stomach.” He waited for Arthur to take the glass, then said, “Angelique will come up and stay with you. I need to help supervise the dinners for this evening.”

Arthur tipped the cup back and took a drink. The liquid texture was there, but Arthur was surprised by the lack of flavor. Where was the taste? He looked down at the cup while Francis wandered around his flat. The glass looked simple enough. Popping his index finger into his mouth, Arthur tasted the faint remnant of that evening’s wine still on his fingertips, along with a trace of salt. Arthur removed his finger and stared at it. Where was the salt from?

When Francis came back into the room, Arthur made sure hold out his saliva covered finger. “Why does it taste like salt?”

Francis paused, stared at Arthur’s hand, then let out a low laugh. “I cannot say. It could be… sweat? Something you ate earlier?” He walked past Arthur and started down the stairs, calling to Arthur, “I will keep calling Alfred for you. Angelique will bring something to eat.”

It seemed that Francis had everything well under control. Lowering his hand, Arthur pursed his lips and took another drink of water. It soothed the itch in his throat. Made him feel a little woozy. Running water, running water… like slipping into a bathtub filled with cold water. That prickling, biting sensation. It raced across his skin and made him feel numb. Arthur felt his eyes falling shut, and he fought to keep them open.

Alfred should have been there. Where was he? Was he caught in the numbing feeling, too? Buried somewhere under the snow? Melting away until he was nothing but a pair of glasses and some well-used shoes? Arthur’s eyes closed. He yawned. He wanted Alfred to be there, next to him. He wanted to lean against Alfred’s shoulder and sleep. Everything was tilting, tilting… off balance. Out of whack. Arthur wanted Alfred. He should have been there.

He should have been there.

But numbing feeling of the cold water Arthur drank was stretching out into his limbs. It pulled him down into sad thoughts of bewildering forgetfulness. Trapping him under thick ice that marked a boundary between him and Alfred. Alfred was above the ice, wasn’t he? Pounding against it. Trying to reach him. But Arthur was out of air. He was suffocating. He couldn’t reach.
By the time Arthur’s cup of water slipped from his hand and fell to the floor, Arthur was asleep, lying sideways on Francis’ sofa and already dreaming of the cold, cold water that froze in his veins.

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Arthur flinched when a bottle of champagne opened with a *pop*, though several other people whooped and hollered at the sound. Bubbles foamed over the lip of the bottle, and Arthur laughed when it spilled over the edge and onto his brother, Seamus’ trousers. More cheering. More excitement. Arthur was nearly intoxicated by the atmosphere.

The venue they used for the wedding reception was small, but it served its purpose quite fine. The small crowd of guests that attended the wedding fit in the ballroom with enough space to fit a few, small tables for dining. Arthur’s leg bounced under the table absently as he watched the crowds mingle and blur together in a messy display of dancing while some electronic, bouncing song blared through old, popping speakers.

Next to him, Alfred was nodding his head to the beat, thankfully shoving whatever food he could into his mouth before a guest would run up and congratulate them. They’d hardly had a chance to sit down for three consecutive minutes. Arthur had been keeping track, marveling at his parents’ inane ability to interrupt Arthur whenever he tried to speak to Alfred.

After two minutes and – Arthur glanced down at his watch – thirty-seven seconds, Alistair stumbled up to their table with a glass of whiskey in hand. Arthur arched an eyebrow, but didn’t stand to greet him. Alfred, on the other hand, stood from his chair to shake Alistair’s hand.

“Hey, buddy,” Alfred said loudly, trying to project over the music. Alistair grumbled something Arthur couldn’t hear. From the look on Alfred’s face, he didn’t hear it either. He leaned forward over the table, cupping a hand around his ear, saying, “What was that?”

Alistair grabbed Alfred’s lapel and pulled him forward to shout, “I said you’re makin’ a mistake!” Arthur winced at the statement, but Alistair wasn’t finished. His words were slurred as he released Alfred and took a swig of his whiskey. “Gettin’ married is the…” he stared down at the table. “The worst mistake you could ever… ever make.” With the hand that was holding his glass, Alistair pointed at Arthur and narrowed his eyes. “You should know better than to marry him.”

Before Alfred could launch himself over the table and punch Alistair in the face, Arthur forced a laugh out of his lungs. It was bitter sound, one that caught in his throat and struggled to get out, but he laughed nonetheless.

“Oh, Alistair,” Arthur smiled. “It’s funny how you think you can give me marriage advice when you’re half-pissed and widowed.” Standing up, Arthur took his new husband’s hand and dragged him away from the table, announcing. “I’d like a dance from you tonight.”

Feeling giddy when people stepped out of their way and made room for the newlyweds, Arthur tucked himself into Alfred’s arms and swayed with him in the center of the ballroom. The dj must’ve seen them step out because the music slowed down into a low, smooth-jazz number. Alfred pat his hand against Arthur’s lower back, shaking his head in disapproval.

“That was a mean thing to say,” Alfred grumbled into Arthur’s ear.

Arthur drummed his fingers against Alfred’s shoulder. “Maybe. But it was *very* satisfying,” he laid his cheek against Alfred’s shoulder and sighed. “Besides, he’s been taking the whole ‘drown my sorrows’ thing much too far. It’s driving me insane.”
Alfred made an awkward sound. “Well… he’s your brother. He’s having a rough time.”

“We’ve been scraping him off the floor of bars for months, Alfred. We have to do something,” he leaned back to look into Alfred’s blue eyes. “Someone has to put their foot down.”

“Okay,” Alfred smiled, ducking down to give Arthur a kiss. All around them, people laughed and clapped. Alfred sat back an inch to murmur, “We can worry about it some other time. This is our wedding night. Let’s have fun, all right?”

Feeling his lips turn up into a smile, Arthur sighed, “But I’m already having so much fun. How can this night get any better?”

With a swing of his arm, Alfred stepped away and spun Arthur in a circle. Arthur couldn’t help but laugh at the action. Their dance lessons with Francis had paid off. No one was stepping on toes anymore. It was all one fluid motion. Alfred’s hand in his, the downbeats of the music matching their footsteps… it was more romantic than Arthur could’ve imagined.

When Arthur was brought back into Alfred’s arms, he held onto his husband tightly. There was an electric kind of current that worked its way through his body, erasing all of the other worries and distractions of the evening. He was married. Married to the love of his life. Alfred Jones was Arthur’s husband and no one else’s. Arthur smiled at that, squeezing Alfred’s hand tightly.

Alfred pressed his cheek to Arthur’s hair and breathed, “Hey. Whatcha smilin’ about?”

“This is the best day of my life,” Arthur answered quickly. His heart was pounding. Anxiety? No. Elation. Arthur closed his eyes and sighed happily. “We’re married.”

Alfred laughed. “Yeah. You’ve got me chained down, baby. I’m not going anywhere.” He paused for a minute, patting the small of Arthur’s back. “You’re stuck with me.”

Feigning regret, Arthur huffed. “Good god, what have I done? I’m sick of you already.”

That only made Alfred laugh harder. Arthur loved that laugh. He wanted to catch it in a jar and preserve it for a sad, lonely day. It could light up any room. That contagious laughter… Arthur couldn’t help but love it. It lifted his heart and warmed his soul. This man… this was the man he married. Arthur had picked the perfect man to fall in love with. There was no doubt he had excellent taste in men.

Looking over Alfred’s shoulder, Arthur saw Francis lingering in the crowd. His smile was so warm. Emotion bubbled up in Arthur’s chest at the sight of it. Francis tended to lack tact, but when it came to Alfred and Arthur’s wedding, he had stepped up to the responsibility as their friend and helped them prepare. The dance lessons, the catering, the music… most of it was due to the sharp eye of a certain Frenchman.

After a moment of thought, Arthur frowned. Had he thanked Francis? There were plenty of times that Arthur would badger him playfully, and many more times they shared irritating banter, but Arthur couldn’t quite recall thanking Francis properly.

Taking a step back from Alfred’s arms, Arthur gave him a kiss and a promise of, “I’ll be back in a moment,” before slipping off into the crowd. With one backward glance, Arthur saw his husband quickly bombarded by the Kirkland family. The poor American looked lost in the sea of British and Irish accents. Turning away, Arthur found Francis leaning against a table quietly.

“Francis,” he smiled, walking up to his old friend. Francis jumped where he stood,
jostling the glass of champagne in his glass. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at that. Had he been lost in thought? “Didn’t mean to startle you. You all right?”

Francis made a confused expression, leaned forward, and cupped a hand over his ear. Arthur rolled his eyes. The guests on the dancefloor were getting too rowdy again. Taking Francis’ arm, Arthur dragged him away from the dancefloor and to the entrance just outside the ballroom. The closet that held everyone’s coats was wide open, waiting for anyone who needed to make a quick getaway. Arthur eyed it suspiciously before turning around to smile at Francis. Francis hesitantly returned the smile.

“This… this is the greatest night of my life,” Arthur repeated his earlier statement with a hint of pride. Francis nodded supportively, and Arthur let out a laugh. “I never thought… In all my years being in love with Alfred, I never thought I’d really marry him. I thought he’d see how boring I am and just… move on, you know?”

Francis looked up at Arthur through a fan of honey-colored eyelashes. “You are not boring.”

Arthur snorted at that and shook his head. “Of course I am. But… this wedding certainly isn’t boring. And I wanted to thank you for that.”

“Thank me… for what?” Francis asked, tilting his champagne glass to and fro. “I have… hardly done anything.”

“You taught Alfred and I to dance!” Arthur laughed, spreading his arms wide and gesturing to the ballroom. “You found this venue! You recommended the caterers! That’s hardly nothing. That’s incredible Francis,” he sighed and stepped forward to catch Francis’ downcast eyes. “So, thank you. Thank you for helping make my wedding a truly wonderful night.”

There was a hint of a smile on Francis’ lips as he looked at Arthur fondly. “You really like all of it? I did not... how you say... stick my nose where it does not belong?”

“No,” Arthur laughed as he put a hand on Francis’ shoulder. “No, I really love it. It’s wonderful. All of it.” While Francis shrugged and shuffled his feet, Arthur gave his shoulder a light pat. “So… thank you again. Enjoy the rest of the evening.”

On his way back to the ballroom, Arthur’s wrist was caught by Francis, effectively chaining him in place. Held still midstride, Arthur looked over his shoulder and quirked an eyebrow in speculation.

“What’s this?” Arthur said lowly. Francis used his free hand to scratch at his faintly growing beard anxiously. He only did that when he was nervous about something. Arthur turned to face him. “What is it? Do you want the number of a pretty bird? Maybe it’s a lad. You don’t discriminate.”

“That is not it,” Francis said slowly, picking and choosing his words carefully. Arthur rolled his eyes and shifted his weight onto his right foot.

“Well then, out with it,” Arthur snapped. “I’d like to get back to my husband.” There was a little flutter in Arthur’s chest when he called Alfred his husband, but it was smothered down by Francis’ drab expression. Arthur frowned and raised his eyebrows. “What do you want?”

“I love you,” Francis said quickly, his blue eyes crystal clear with sincerity.
Arthur’s blood ran cold. He expected immediate laughter. A pat on the back and a French-tainted ‘Just kidding, just kidding!’ But it never came. Arthur’s heart nearly stopped. What was this? Francis was his friend. Friends didn’t confess their love to a married person. Friends didn’t try to bring the greatest night of their companions crashing down. This wasn’t real.

Blinking hard, Arthur licked his lips and pointedly asked, “What?”

When Francis let out a long, relieved breath, Arthur’s expression crumbled into a frown. He waited until Francis was looking at him again to glare, but Francis didn’t mind it. He simply smiled sadly.

“I needed to say it,” he sighed. The words were stained with a melancholic air, but Arthur didn’t care. This wasn’t right. Francis was ruining everything. Francis spoke again, just as relieved as ever, “I just… needed to tell you.”

“Now?” Arthur asked. Holding out his left hand, Arthur pointed to the ring on his finger. “Francis, I just got married… The ceremony wasn’t even two hours ago!”

Francis nodded awkwardly. “I know, but –”

“No! No, just…” Arthur fluttered his hands in the air anxiously. What was he supposed to do? Francis loved him. What did that mean? What did he want? How could Francis love him? Had there been signs? Had Arthur missed them? Arthur’s heartbeat pounded in his ears as he thought of telling Alfred what happened. What would Alfred say? Would he be upset? Arthur held a hand to his forehead. “Christ… you couldn’t have brought this up at a worse time.”

“I did not mean to upset you,” Francis said slowly, his accent thick with stress. Arthur gave him a desperate expression, and Francis held up his hands in surrender. “It has been tearing at me, cher. I needed to tell you. When I saw you so happy, I… I thought I could –”

“What? You thought you could what, Francis?” Arthur cut in, poking a finger at Francis’ chest. “You thought you could just say something like that out of the blue? You thought it would be fantastic to ruin this night? My wedding night?”

Francis gritted his teeth. “Oh, mon dieu… I am not trying to ruin anything, Arthur.”

Throwing his hands in the air, Arthur started to pace. He must’ve looked like a madman when he shouted, “Well, you’re doing a bloody good job of it!”

“Is it so wrong to tell you how I feel?” Francis asked innocently. Arthur’s chest prickled anxiously. Was he having a panic attack? He couldn’t tell. Francis spoke up again. “I want to be honest with you… with myself, mon frer. Let me do that much. Please.”

Stopping in his tracks, Arthur turned to look at Francis. “You had to be honest with me… right this second? Couldn’t it have waited? A day? A week?”

Francis shook his head. “I wanted to say it for so long… but I could not find the right time. And, just now –”

“Just now was not the right time,” Arthur interrupted swiftly. He held up a hand when Francis opened his mouth, silencing him. “It wasn’t. And you know it.” Arthur looked away. His chest ached. He felt dirty talking about this without Alfred present. Francis was his friend… wasn’t he? He was… Arthur shook his head. “This wasn’t right, Francis.”

Francis took a step toward Arthur. “Arthur, let me –”
“Get out.” Arthur pointed to exit. He couldn’t do this. Not now. This was supposed to be the best night of his life. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Francis… Francis wasn’t supposed to do this. Not now. Not here. “I’d like you to leave, Francis.”

“L-leave?” Francis hesitated for a moment. Then tried once more. “Arthur, I… I do not want to hurt you. I just needed to tell you so that I could move forward.”

Arthur didn’t look at Francis when he said, “You can move forward somewhere else.”

For a moment, the two men stood in a mutual silence. Arthur’s heart still pounded. He felt terrible. He should’ve said something… something different. Something gentler. But he clench his jaw and didn’t speak as Francis went to the coat closet, took his jacket, and walked to the entrance. Arthur closed his eyes when he heard the door open with a creak, not wanting to see Francis forlorn face as he walked out.

Even with his eyes closed, Arthur could almost see the expression on Francis’ face when he muttered, “Congratulations, my friend,” and left. Arthur stood in the entrance quietly, feeling hollow. He should’ve just thanked Francis… he should’ve just said… he should’ve… But he hadn’t. And now he needed to live with what he said.

Taking a deep breath, Arthur marched back to the ballroom door and stepped inside. The music was loud, but Arthur couldn’t hear the words. People danced happily, but Arthur didn’t care. He looked for Alfred, finding him pinned against the far wall being interrogated by Arthur’s mother. Arthur made a beeline for them, only hearing the tail-end of their conversation as he approached.

“… and if you have children, that’ll be a big responsibility,” Arthur’s mother said confidently. “Adopting might make things a little more challenging for you two, but you should know that George and I will always be here to help.”

Alfred was smiling and nodding along with Marian Kirkland’s indecent advice. Kind and considerate. The complete opposite of Arthur. Arthur frowned at the thought as he stepped up and took Alfred’s hand.

“Hey,” Alfred greeted happily. He paused, looked at Arthur’s expression, and turned to Arthur’s mother to say, “Excuse us for a second.” Towing Arthur to the nearest table, Alfred sat him down and knelt in front of him and looked up at Arthur over the rim of his glasses. He waited for Arthur to look at him. When he did, Alfred asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I made Francis leave,” Arthur said softly. He thought Alfred wouldn’t hear him over the music, but when Alfred’s expression began to look hurt, Arthur knew he’d heard loud and clear. Arthur sighed. “I was… rude,” he stopped, shook his head and said, “I was cruel. He was just trying to tell me how he felt.”


Arthur’s heart leapt up to his throat. Alfred thought he knew… that meant Alfred had known all along. Without thinking, Arthur let out a disbeliefing laugh. This was a mess. The whole lot of them were a mess. Alfred, Arthur, and Francis… love and unrequited pining. It was all a sloppy mess. Had everyone known? Was Arthur the only clueless one of the bunch?

Before Arthur knew it, he was laughing so hard his eyes were watering. In front of him, Alfred tried to take his hand and console him, but Arthur couldn’t be comforted. He felt like an
idiot.

“I… didn’t know what to do!” Arthur laughed stupidly, wiping his eyes. “I thought… I thought it was coming from nowhere! It was so much all at once! I didn’t think…” he paused to catch his breath, then laughed again. “But you knew! You knew, and I didn’t!”

Alfred reached up for him, grasping at his hands, his shoulders, his face, hoping that he could somehow soothe away Arthur’s befuddled reaction. “I-I thought you knew,” Alfred stammered, pulling Arthur forward into a strange, uneven embrace. He breathed into Arthur’s hair, “I thought you knew. I didn’t… I just…”

Arthur’s laughter abruptly stopped as reality caught up with him. “I made him leave. I told him to move on… somewhere else.” Both men were quiet. Arthur broke first. “He’s not coming back.”

With all of his comforting used and every reassuring word lost, Alfred simply repeated himself, a hint of fear tainting his words.

“I thought you knew.”

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Arthur woke quickly, his shoulder being shaken. With a sharp inhale, Arthur sat up, seeing an unfamiliar, dim room spinning wildly. His head ached, his throat was parched. Arthur groaned as he held a hand to his head, squinting at a blurry vision of Francis kneeling next to him in front of the sofa.

“Francis…” Arthur whispered hoarsely. Was wine still blurring his thoughts… everything felt muddled together. But he’d only been tipsy, hadn’t he? Arthur blinked slowly, scratching his fingers through his hair as he struggled to focus on Francis. He looked funny. No, upset. Angry? Arthur sniffled and rubbed his eyes. “You look… what… what time is it?”

“Arthur, I know you are drunk, but I need you to listen,” Francis said solidly. Arthur opened his eyes, narrowed his eyes, and focused. His eyes burned, but he could see there was something akin to fear in Francis’ eyes.

Arthur lowered his hand from his eyes, trying to seem sober. “What’s got your knickers in a twist, old frog?”

Letting out a breath, Francis slowly said, “S’il vous plait. Please. Stay calm,” he paused, and Arthur felt his stomach twist awkwardly before Francis said, “There’s been an accident. At Alfred’s lab.”

There was a surreal sort of numbness that settled through Arthur’s limbs as he owlishly repeated, “Accident.”

Francis nodded slowly. “Alfred is in the hospital.”

Chapter End Notes

Qu’est ce que tu fais?: What’s going on?
Fais gaffe: Be careful.
Thank you for reading!
See you next chapter.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arthur didn’t remember the car ride to the hospital. It was blurred together in the fitful tangle of strange, fearful emotions that were knotted together in his chest. He felt like he was drowning… drowning in the taste of bitter, bitter wine. The smoky scent of burning candles. The subtle glow of candlelight. Full tables… and empty chair in front of Arthur.

Alfred’s chair.

The blurry thoughts in Arthur’s head narrowed down to one, simple thought: Accident. There had been an accident at Alfred’s laboratory. He could’ve been hurt. Burned, scarred, dying… It was America. There could have been a shooting. Alfred could be lying dead on a table for all Arthur knew. This drove Arthur’s wine-fizzled nerves into overdrive. He had to do something. He had to find Alfred. Hold him. Comfort him. Ask if he was all right. Tell him whatever he wanted to hear.

When the front doors of the hospital came into view, Arthur pulled the lock on Francis’ car door and heard Francis shout something in French when he tried to get out. Francis hit the brakes. The tires squealed. Arthur’s heart stopped for a moment. Blinding headlights, traffic, a red light… Alistair.

Not letting this stop him, Arthur clambered out of the car and raced for the door. He didn’t have time to worry about the crash. It had been long ago. PTSD be damned, Arthur needed to find his husband. With a fair bit of stumbling, Arthur found the front desk, leaning over it and narrowing his eyes at the alarmed nurse.

“I need to find my husband,” Arthur said quickly. The woman looked confused. What was wrong with her? Did she not speak English? Arthur slapped the desk and repeated, “I need. To find. My husband.”

Moving slowly, the woman pulled her rolling desk chair over to a computer and sat down. She clicked a few things, and Arthur drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently. Simpleton. Arthur could’ve done this by now. Alfred was hurt. Alfred was in an accident. Arthur needed to see him. Couldn’t she see that?

Finally looking up from the screen, the nurse smiled. “Who are you here to see?”

Arthur groaned and slapped his hand on the desk again. “My husband! Alfred Jones! Tall man, blond hair, blue eyes! He’s been in an accident and I need to find him!”

While the young woman at the computer ducked her head and began to peck at the keyboard, another nurse came through a doorway behind the desk and met Arthur halfway at the counter.

“Sir,” she said softly. “It’s late. We have patients that are trying to rest. Shouting does not help the healing process.” Arthur nearly laughed when the woman said, “Please, relax.”

“I can’t relax!” Arthur shouted back. “My husband is hurt! I don’t know where he is! I need to find him!”
The woman leaned away from Arthur with a pained expression. “Sir, are you drunk?”

Arthur hesitated. Was he? No, things were just a little blurry. “No,” Arthur finally answered. “Just slightly… tipsy.”

“The ER,” the nurse at the computer chirped with triumph. “Alfred Jones was checked into the ER just an hour ago.”

Arthur’s heart dropped into his stomach. An hour? It took this hospital an hour to find Arthur? Had they been busy trying to patch Alfred together? Was he in pain? Arthur felt sick at the thought of Alfred hurt. What if he was crying? What if he was looking for Arthur?

“Where’s the ER?” Arthur asked insistently, practically bouncing in place. The nurses gave each other a sidelong glance, and Arthur sighed. “I need to see him,” Arthur paused, blinked to refocus his tilting vision, and said, “I need to make sure he’s all right.”

The standing nurse pointed to a hallway on Arthur’s left, and he was immediately stalking down the hall like a man on a mission. He needed to find Alfred. To see if he was all right. To help. To care for him. Arthur stumbled to the side of a doctor, hearing a few people ask if he was all right, but he didn’t pay them any attention. He squinted at a sign on the wall, seeing a blurry arrow pointing to a new hall. Arthur followed it, hearing the sounds of a busy hospital emergency room.

Beds lined the walls, looking like little matchboxes that housed the damaged folks of Seattle. A few doctors milled about, standing by idly as nurses and interns sewed up a few injuries. Arthur looked around the room frantically. Where was Alfred? He couldn’t see that mop of blond hair. What shirt had he been wearing when he left the house? Everything felt off-balance. Arthur couldn’t remember. He nearly turned around to find his way back to the front desk when he heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, I need my phone!” The voice was muffled, but there was no doubt it was Alfred. There was a bit of coughing, accompanied by the hushed, calming voices of nurses, but Alfred spoke again. “Just give me my phone! I need to call my husband. He doesn’t know what happened. He doesn’t know where I am!”

“Mr. Jones, please calm down. Your husband has been contacted,” one of the male nurses said gently. “He’s on his way.”

Arthur staggered toward the voices, seeing a curtain pulled around one of the beds. Alfred must’ve been making a scene for them to pull the curtain. Arthur reached out for the curtain, missing the first few attempts, then pulling it back to reveal Alfred. His Alfred. His blond hair was mussed and his eyes looked so tired… there was an oxygen mask held over his mouth and nose. He was so pale. So, so pale. Was he suffocating? Where his lungs damaged? There was a discomforting, crushing feeling in Arthur’s heart as he stood by the curtain, frozen in place.

Behind the mask, Alfred smiled. “Arthur. Arthur, thank god. I’m so sorry.” He blinked sluggishly, taking a few deep breaths from the mask before saying, “I was on my way. I was. Then I got dizzy, and I just… fell down. It’s okay. I’m okay. Arthur, don’t cry. I’m fine, I promise.”

Arthur hadn’t noticed he was crying until Alfred pointed it out. That only made the tears feel heavier. They rolled down his cheeks and burned his skin. Shuffling over to the bed, Arthur fell forward onto Alfred, holding onto him for dear life.

Alfred was unbreakable. Invincible. He wasn’t allowed to be hurt. He wasn’t supposed
to be going to hospitals. He was made of steel. Alfred was too strong to collapse. Arthur closed his eyes as Alfred wrapped his arms around him, patting his back.

“I’m sorry,” Alfred said breathlessly. It took him several deep breaths to say, “I’m sorry, Arthur. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry.”

Arthur shook his head and sat up. “I th-thought you didn’t want to come to dinner,” Arthur sputtered pathetically as he reached up and ran a hand through Alfred’s messy hair. Alfred blinked spastically, but Arthur went on, “I thought you just… you didn’t…”

“There was a natural gas leak in the lab,” Alfred said through his mask, taking a moment before he said, “One of the valves was broken and it filled the room with gas. I passed out and…” he narrowed his eyes, “Arthur. Arthur, are you drunk?”

“No!” Arthur spat. Why was everyone asking him that? It was getting ridiculous. “I just… had a few glasses of wine while I was waiting for you.” One or two, Arthur was sure. Or was it three? Nonetheless, Alfred didn’t like the sound of that.


Sitting up slowly, Arthur turned to see Francis standing a few feet away with a slightly confused expression. Arthur looked back at Alfred. He looked upset. Why was that? Before Arthur could ask, Alfred was sitting up and pointing at Francis and shouting.

“You gave him wine? What the hell is wrong with you? You know he has a head injury, and you gave him wine?” Arthur’s eyes went wide as Alfred pulled off his oxygen mask and tried to get out of the hospital bed. With all of his fumbling, Arthur could nearly tell that Alfred was still dizzy. This didn’t stop Alfred from his anger-fueled rampage. “What were you trying to do, huh? You were trying to get him drunk!”

Francis held up his hands in surrender. “N-non, Alfred, you know I wouldn’t –”

“Like hell you wouldn’t!” Alfred shouted as he wobbled and leaned heavily against the side of the bed. Several nurses and doctors tried to intervene, telling Alfred to quiet down, but he wouldn’t have it. He swatted them away. “You’ve always been so smooth, Francis. You know you can have Arthur if you really wanted him!”

Arthur blinked hard. What was that supposed to mean? He stood from the bed. “Now, hold on a minute –”

Alfred cut him off with a wave of his hand at Francis. “What? Crashing our wedding night wasn’t enough for you, was it?” Francis winced at that, and Arthur felt his heart clench painfully. Alfred didn’t stop there, he pointed at Francis with fire in his eyes as he yelled, “You had alone time with my husband, and you had to get him drunk!”

Pushing past a nurse that tried to intervene, Francis crowded Alfred’s space and fought back. “Ferme la bouche! I did not ruin anything. I was being honest with Arthur, something you have yet to do.”

While Arthur gave Francis a disbelieving look, Alfred grit his teeth. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“It means you never told him what happened that night. Why is that?” Francis asked innocently, waiting for Alfred to give an excuse. None came. Francis nodded to himself triumphantly. “Ah, I see. Afraid, were you? Scared I was going to steal him away?”

Alfred’s face started to take on a new shade of purple as he grimaced at the question. “Shut up, you sack of –”

“Stop!” Arthur slurred as he stepped between the two men, a hand on each one’s chest. Francis took a step back, but Alfred continued to push forward. Patents and doctors alike murmured to each other on the side lines. Arthur cursed them for their indifference. But no matter. The argument was on hold. Arthur just had to diffuse it. Arthur frowned at that thought. That was easier said than done.

How was he supposed to shut down this fight? Both men were looking at the situation all wrong. Alfred was light-headed and ready to collapse. Francis was simply exhausted from working all day. They had no reason to fight. Arthur drank the wine. He drank it… he was the center of the fight. And his brain was too foggy to examine the circumstances any further.

So, leaning all of his weight onto the hand on Alfred’s chest, Arthur sighed. “This is… without a doubt, the stupidest fight I’ve ever heard.” He looked up at Alfred, seeing his oxygen-deprived, dizzy expression. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at that. “Do you really think Francis would try to liquor me up? Honestly?” Arthur gestured to the man in question. “Look at him. He’s a harmless cat. A little lazy. A little superficial. But not notorious, is he?”

Alfred looked a tad baffled when he sputtered, “N-no, but I wouldn’t put it past him to –”

“Oh, shush, shush…” Arthur held a finger to Alfred’s lips, and turned to Francis. “And what in the blazes is your problem? Egging him on like that.” Francis ducked his head shamefully, and Arthur gave him an unimpressed look. “You are in love with Angélique. You’ve clearly moved on. You don’t have to go around rousing suspicion just because you have the upper hand. Don’t make me regret standing up for you.”

“Oui. I won’t.” Francis sighed, sticking his hands into the pockets of his black trousers.

“Right. Then we can stop all this yelling,” Arthur summarized pointedly, holding a hand to his hazy head. “It’s giving me a headache.”

Alfred snorted as he slowly shuffled back to the hospital bed. “I think it’s all the booze that’s giving you the headache, babe.” The mask was place over Alfred’s face again, and he took deep, slow breaths. Arthur sat on the edge of the bed, watching the plastic of the oxygen mask fog with each exhale. Alfred gave Francis an apologetic glance. “Okay… I don’t think my brain can support a real freak-out right now.”

Francis clicked his tongue at that, standing a safe distance from the bed as he shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to reschedule this argument for a better time.”

Alfred laughed breathlessly, and Arthur smiled at the sound. Alfred reached for Arthur’s hand, pulling him close to the bed as he said, “We need to check the calendar and figure out the best time to throw out all this emotional baggage we’ve been dragging around.”

“I don’t even remember most of the baggage I’m carrying,” Arthur mumbled to himself. Francis came to the other side of the bed and nodded his head in agreement.

“That is something we’ll have to discuss,” Francis gave Alfred a smile. “Angélique has
emotions, too, you know.”

Alfred’s eyes sparkled at the statement. Arthur’s heart warmed. Nerves were slowly being soothed. Gaps were carefully being mended. Arthur sat down next to Alfred’s thigh and smiled when Alfred adjusted his oxygen mask and sighed.

“If we’ve all got to sit down and talk… we should probably do it at a table.”

“A dinner table,” Francis agreed. “In a nice restaurant and fine French cuisine.”


“I think we can make that happen,” Alfred said softly. “On one condition.”

Arthur gave Alfred a skeptical look before he asked, “And what’s the condition?”

“We really need to stop making visits to the hospital,” Alfred sighed. Francis chuckled quietly as he pulled out his mobile and started poking at the screen. Alfred leaned forward to whisper to Arthur, “These visits are really bumming me out.”

Brushing a few, messy hairs from Alfred’s eyes, Alfred smiled and said, “I agree.”

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Arthur laid back against the cushion of a less than comfortable chair, inhaling the scent of burnt coffee. Francis was holding a cup in front of Arthur’s nose, insisting that Arthur drink and sober up, but Arthur didn’t see the use. He wasn’t drunk. He just needed to sit a bit longer. Then he’d be fine.

Alfred had been hooked up to his oxygen mask for nearly three hours, now. The doctor’s routinely checked in, flashing a light over Alfred’s eyes and listening to his lungs, but Arthur wouldn’t be satisfied until Alfred left the hospital with a clean bill of health. He frowned, turning his cheek into the rough, blue fabric of the waiting room chair.

“This is a terrible chair,” Arthur muttered into the padding unhappily.

Francis scoffed and sat down in the chair next to Arthur. Arthur didn’t move when Angelique came to sit on his other side. She’d arrived after Francis had sent her a text, relaying the information of Alfred's condition. Arthur hadn’t been extremely surprised when she walked through the front door, harried and apologetic. She was a good woman.

Angelique handed Arthur a bottle of water. “Drink this, hmm? It’ll help.”

“The only thing that will help me is getting Alfred back home,” Arthur grumbled as he sat up in his chair and bounced his leg impatiently. He looked around the familiar, tacky walls of the hospital. “I’m tired.”

“I am not surprised,” Francis sighed as he took a sip of coffee, gagged, and set it aside. Arthur doubted he’d pick it up again.

Angelique flicked a lock of hair behind her ear before she pulled her phone out of her coat pocket, flicking through a few screens before quickly typing a long, convoluted message to persons’ unknown. This was hardly any of Arthur’s business. He huffed and tapped his hands atop his thighs.
How was Alfred? Did Alfred miss him? Was he lonely? Arthur was more than irritated that he’d been pulled out of the ER by Francis. Of course he wanted to let Alfred rest after breathing in an asphyxiant… but why did Arthur have to sit in a completely separate room? He wasn’t distracting.

Standing from his chair, Arthur wobbled a bit before he marched out of the waiting room. Francis was hot on his trail, immediately trying to intervene.

“Ah, Arthur? Where are you going?”

“To my husband,” Arthur mumbled crossly. Where else would he be heading? Francis hummed absently as Arthur walked through the doorway of the ER.

Before they could reach Alfred, Francis took Arthur’s wrist and halted him. “Arthur, don’t you think Alfred needs a little rest?” Arthur gave Francis an irritated look, but Francis merely smiled. “You are not in the right mind to be helpful. Just let him relax.”

Wrenching his hand away, Arthur wrinkled his nose and glared at Francis. “I can be quiet, Francis. I’m not a toddler. I’m just a little hazy.”

Turning his back on his old friend, Arthur didn’t stop when he heard Francis’ chuckling to himself. Arthur simply went to Alfred’s beside, pulled up a chair, and sat next to him. Alfred was lying still on the stiff cot, his eyes closed and the oxygen mask continuously pumping clean air into his lungs. When Arthur leaned forward to brush hair from his brow, those blue eyes fluttered open and slid over to see Arthur. A lazy smile came to Alfred’s face.

“Hey,” he breathed, reaching up to gently touch Arthur’s cheek. Softer than the brush of a butterfly’s wing. A whisper of love. A prayer. Arthur took Alfred’s hand and held it to his cheek, pressing that warm, hopeful whisper to his skin. Soaking it in. Alfred sighed happily. “Look who came back to see me.”

“I’ll be quiet,” Arthur promised. He gave Alfred’s chest a comforting pat. “The doctor said the commotion earlier exhausted you… and Francis took me to the waiting room. But I thought you might be lonely.”

“I was lonely,” Alfred sighed as his eyes closed again. The oxygen tank hissed and Alfred took a deep breath, tapping his thumb against Arthur’s cheek as he exhaled. “But now you’re here,” Alfred smiled once he pried his eyes open once more. His smiled widened, wrinkling his eyes at the corners. “I feel so much better now that you’re here.”

Arthur smiled in return, feeling an instinct bubble up in his chest that said he was supposed to kiss Alfred at this precise moment. Arthur blinked at the mask over Alfred’s mouth; he didn’t want to take it off. Alfred needed to breathe fresh air. The instinct in Arthur’s heart was slowly fading, and he felt silly sitting forward in his chair, watching his husband slowly fall asleep.

Leaning forward anyway, Arthur pressed a kiss to Alfred’s cheek. He was so warm. Warm like a soft blanket on a winter night. Warm like arms wrapped around him, even in the heat of summer. Warm like a soothing cup of tea. Arthur pulled back, looking at Alfred’s closed eyes and wide smile.

“Thanks,” Alfred laughed breathlessly into his mask. “You haven’t kissed me in forever.”

“It was just a little peck on the cheek,” Arthur said nonchalantly as he sat back. He took
Alfred’s empty hand and held it tight. Alfred smiled giddily.

“Still,” he said as he relaxed on the hospital bed. “A kiss from you is special. And you don’t just give them out willy-nilly.”

Arthur cocked his head to the side. “Don’t I?”

“Nope. You just give them to me. You’re a devoted guy,” Alfred smiled as he started to doze. “Just me, I guess.”

Patting Alfred’s hand, Arthur made sure to bite his tongue and hold in his questions. Alfred was falling asleep. Arthur could be quiet, no matter how fuzzy his brain was. It was easy to expect that Arthur was devoted to Alfred. He’d been in love for the majority of his young adult life. He couldn’t imagine kissing anyone else other than Alfred.

“Just you,” Arthur agreed with a smile. Alfred mumbled something inaudible in his sleep, and Arthur huffed a laugh. He loved his man. This smart, kind, ridiculous man. He gifted this man with a kiss, and he viewed it as a treasure. Arthur looked down at their joined hands and repeated, “Just you, Alfred.”

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“Stop staring at me,” Alfred laughed as he sat in the backseat of Francis’ car.

Arthur was next to him, holding onto Alfred’s arm and watching for any sign of dizziness or distress as per the doctor’s instructions. Apparently, the staring was becoming unnerving. Arthur slowly lowered his eyes as Francis and Angelique giggled in the front seats of the car.

Alfred pat the top of Arthur’s knee comfortingly. “I’m fine. Seriously. I’m breathing clean air. That’s all I need.”

Humming lowly, Arthur frowned out of the car window. *Tap, tap, tap.* Snowflakes hit the windows, melting down in little trails of forgotten coldness. Before they’d left the hospital, Alfred bragged that he’d felt the snow storm coming. Something about a tingle in his bones. Arthur shifted where he sat, leaning against Alfred’s side as the car pulled to a stop at an intersection.

Alfred rested his cheek atop Arthur’s head. Quiet companionship was becoming easier for the two of them. Arthur sniffled and closed his eyes. They’d be home soon. Things would be back to normal. No more hospitals. No more fearing for Alfred’s well-being. He was fine. Everything was fine. Arthur cracked his eyes open to stare at the traffic lights. His heart ached.

Everything was fine.

“You okay?” Alfred whispered gently. Arthur smiled at the concern in his voice. Francis and Angelique grumbled to each other in French, seemingly unaware of the conversation happening behind them. Arthur pressed his cheek against Alfred’s shoulder.

“What gave me away?”

“You sighed again,” Alfred said matter-of-factly. Arthur frowned. When had he sighed? He didn’t remember sighing. It must’ve been so second-nature, Arthur couldn’t compute it. Alfred kissed the top of Arthur’s hair, warming Arthur all the way to his cold toes. “Don’t think so hard.”

“I wasn’t,” Arthur assured him as the car rolled down a familiar street. Their street.
Home. Arthur smiled and sat up. “I’m just glad to be home.”

The car pulled to a stop, and Francis gave Arthur a look over his shoulder. There was a smile on his face that sparkled happily in his eyes. Arthur readily smiled back. Alfred was busy trying to untangle himself from the seat belt to join in.

"Hey, thanks for the ride, French Fries," Alfred winked when he opened the door and started to climb out of the car. Francis laughed and shook his head.

“Any time, mon gros,” he shot Arthur a glance before he could leave the car. “Keep him in line, hmm? We don’t want him fainting before the next dinner.”

“Heaven forbid,” Arthur breathed as Alfred opened his door for him. Taking Alfred’s hand when it was offered to him, Arthur clambered out of the car and into the thickly falling snow.

Tucked under Alfred’s arm, Arthur was safely escorted to the front door. With one backward glance, Arthur saw Angelique through the car window, a perfect vision of serenity. She looked at Arthur with idle kindness, raising her hand in a small wave. A friendship recovered, a heart mended. Arthur waved back, only turning away when Alfred shouldered his way into the house and held the door for him.

The inside of the house was just the same as it had been when Arthur had left yesterday evening. Lights were turned off. The kitchen was undisturbed. Empty, hollow, and lifeless. Arthur frowned at the house as he stomped snow off of his shoes. Alfred, on the other hand, was overjoyed to be back in his house. He dashed through the front hall, flicking on the lights and sliding over the hardwood floors in his socks.

“I’m back!” He brightly announced to the house as he sauntered into the living room and turned on the telly. He gave the newscasters a smile as they discussed politics, saying, “I missed you guys.”

As Arthur stepped into the living room and smiled at Alfred’s dancing around the room, there was a pop and a clunk as the lights promptly went out. For a moment, both men were still. That was, until Alfred cursed under his breath and started to shuffle around the living room. Arthur would’ve warned him to be careful, but Alfred ran into something before he could say it.

“Fuck!” Alfred spat angrily as his footsteps became heavy and offbeat. Arthur reached for the doorframe, calmly leaning against the wall as Alfred hobbled around the room. “Fuck this chair. This stupid-ass table with its fuckin’…”

Arthur arched an eyebrow. “You don’t swear often.”

“I do when I’m pissed off,” Alfred growled. There was the sound of a drawer opening on the far side of the room, and with a soft click, a beam of light cut through the darkness. At the root of the light, Alfred smiled. “Let there be light!”

“Smart,” Arthur said sarcastically with a nod. “We’ll just stalk around our house with a torch. We won’t look like robbers at all.”

Rolling his eyes, Alfred pointed at Arthur and ordered, “Don’t move. I’m gonna check the circuit breakers. It might just be the storm.”

Only listening to Alfred for a moment, Arthur waited until the light of the torch was turned in the opposite direction, quickly feeling along the wall for the front window. How would the power go out minutes after they’d gotten home? The storm wasn’t terribly bad. Arthur’s hand
caught the edge of the curtain, and he pulled it back to reveal a very, very white view of the street.

The heavy snow had only increased in size, and there were few cars rolling along the streets in the thick downfall. Arthur couldn’t even see across the street. It was just… white. Endless snow as far as Arthur dared to look. Leaning away from the cold window, Arthur heard several metallic clunks followed by Alfred’s frustrated grumbling.

“Good news,” Alfred growled as he came back into view. Arthur wrapped his arms around himself and squinted at the torch light. Alfred sighed. “Looks like it’s a power-outage.”

“I’m not surprised… it’s terrible outside. How did it come on so fast?”

Alfred shrugged. “Well, it has to do with the fact that we’re by the ocean. The currents and wind temperatures make it so snow can…”

Arthur stopped listening. He simply watched Alfred move around the living room with undying assuredness. He brought spare blankets from the closet and set them on the sofa. He kept talking as he went into the kitchen, found whatever food could be consumed without electronic preparation, and spread them across the countertop. Arthur was pleased to see that there was chocolate pudding included in the mix. After that, Alfred was still explaining weather patterns as he picked up his laptop, and a copy of a DVD before placing them in the middle of the blankets he’d piled on the sofa.

Arthur rubbed his hands over his arms, trying to warm them as Alfred gathered up his blankets and laptop and started for the stairs. Arthur followed him and the light, not wanting to be left on the bleak, dark first floor.

“What are you doing?” Arthur asked as Alfred dropped his loot onto the bed.

“I’m making us a little survival spot,” Alfred said as if it were obvious. He pat the blankets as proof. “I’ve got my laptop fully charged, a movie for us to watch this evening, and I’m gonna bring up some food. We’ll be fully prepared.”

Arthur arched an eyebrow. “We’re just going to eat all of that food in our bed?”

“Heat rises,” Alfred said plainly as he adjusted his glasses. “We’ll wanna be on the top floor of the house. Plus, the blankets on the bed are warmer than the stuff we’ve got downstairs.”

Before Alfred left, Arthur came close to see what DVD he’d brought. My Fair Lady was dimly illuminated until Alfred took the torch with him as he descended the stairs again. Arthur stayed at the top of the stairs, not trusting himself to make it down the stairs without light.

Staying upstairs with Alfred wouldn’t be a bad thing. Arthur needed to stay with him. He wanted to make sure Alfred was just as healthy as he claimed to be. Without diligence, Arthur’s paranoia threatened to imagine Alfred suffocating from the leftover natural gas in his lungs. So, with a firm hand, Arthur took Alfred’s arm when he came back up the stairs, accompanying him to the bed where they burrowed under the covers and set several bags of various snacks across the blankets.

“The cold is already starting to sneak in,” Alfred shivered as he wrapped one of the spare blankets around his and Arthur’s shoulders. He smiled at Arthur’s anxious expression. “We’ll be fine! The furnace should kick in before we know it. Until then, we just gotta stick under the covers.”

Nodding obediently, Arthur watched Alfred set up the movie on his laptop. He didn’t
react when the beginning credits flickered across the dim screen, though he did give Alfred a sidelong glance. He looked peaceful enough. A bit tired from all of the extra examinations the doctors put him through, no doubt… but other than that, he seemed to be perfectly fine.

Arthur narrowed his eyes nonetheless. Alfred had been very upset at the hospital. That, along with his inhalation of natural gas, made a sinister cocktail for a lightheaded, reckless man. Arthur pulled a blanket closer to his shoulders as he watched the movie reflect on lenses of Alfred’s glasses.

Where had all of his anger gone? It just seemed to dissipate after his outburst. Had Arthur said something to him and Francis? He couldn’t quite remember it all. He remembered stepping between them. He remembered holding Alfred’s hand. He remembered kissing Alfred’s cheek… but there was a little gap where the rest of the afternoon should’ve been.

“You’re staring at me again,” Alfred mumbled as he watched the movie. Arthur blinked a few times, trying to regain his focus as he looked at the computer screen.

“Sorry,” said Arthur as he knotted his fingers in the blanket over his legs. He bit his bottom lip and tried to sit comfortably as the movie continued. He couldn’t focus on the actors, though. Alfred’s previous anger still wavered in his thoughts.

Had Arthur done the wrong thing by bringing Francis back into their lives? Was it a mistake to reach out? If he hadn’t, he might still be in the dark about what happened on his wedding night. But, in exchange, Alfred might not have gotten natural gas poisoning. Or would he? Arthur wasn’t a master of causality.

Biting his bottom lip, Arthur’s brow furrowed as he snuggled down against the pillows. If he hadn’t brought Francis back into their lives, Alfred would not have gotten upset in the hospital. Arthur might have known about his hospitalization earlier. Arthur would have been sober. He would have been able to support Alfred and care for his every need, no matter how small. Arthur frowned at the thought.

In so many ways, it seemed that ignoring Francis would have been a better idea. But on the other hand, Alfred seemed so happy to know that they could all move forward and be friends again. It was just a matter of reestablishing trust. Though, Alfred trusting Francis and Francis trusting him in return… that was a tall order. They’d had trouble seeing eye-to-eye at the hospital. It was a wonder neither of them snapped at the other during the car ride home.

Alfred sighed as he leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes. Arthur gave him a considering look. His glasses were still on, sitting a bit lopsided on his face as he pressed his cheek against his pillow. Arthur smiled, removing his glasses and putting them on the bedside table. The movie still played, and Arthur turned down the volume as he snuggled down to lay face-to-face with Alfred.

“Alfred?” He breathed quietly. Alfred hummed questioningly in return, and Arthur tried not to get his hopes up too high as he asked, “Are you happy that Francis is in your life again?”

For a moment, Alfred was quiet. His brow furrowed, and he sniffled. “What? What’re you talking about?”

“Francis. I’m talking about Francis Bonnefoy,” Arthur said impatiently. “I… I’m the one who called him in the first place. I thought you’d be happy to see an old friend again. But I didn’t know what I was getting into.”
Alfred sighed. “Arthur –”

“Let me finish,” Arthur interrupted swiftly. He took a deep breath, and continued. “I didn’t know about our past… but, you never told me about what happened. So I had no way of truly weighing the good and bad outcomes.” He paused, looked at Alfred’s serene expression and calm, closed eyes, and went on, “I want to know if you’re happy that Francis is back in your life. I want to know if you’re upset that we… that I pulled him back into our lives.”

Smiling slightly, Alfred opened his eyes just a bit to squint at Arthur’s anxious expression. “Of course I’m happy. I just… I haven’t seen him in forever. He might have changed in that time. That’s what freaked me out in the hospital. I didn’t know what happened to you. I wasn’t there.” He closed his eyes and relaxed against the pillows again. “But… a while ago, he was one of our best friends. He was a good guy. I’m glad we got to see him again.”

“Really?” Arthur said hopefully as his heart lightened. Alfred smiled.

“Yeah, really. There’s a lot of history to work through, but… I think we all agreed that we can sit down and talk it over,” Alfred said softly. Arthur blinked in recognition. Dinner. They’d spoken about dinner, hadn’t they? He was almost sure of it. Alfred yawned before he said, “You don’t have to worry about whether I’m happy or not, ya know.”

For just a moment, Arthur’s heart stood still. What did Alfred mean by that? Not worry… at this point in Arthur’s life, he had nothing better to do than worry. He didn’t know if he was doing things right. He didn’t know if he made the right choices. He didn’t know if he even had a right to lie in bed with Alfred like this. He didn’t even have all of his memories… but, he knew that he wanted Alfred to be all right. He wanted Alfred to be happy.

“Of… of course I do,” Arthur sputtered in disbelief. Alfred was already asleep, his breathing relaxed and even as Arthur stared at him with wide eyes. How could he say such a thing? Alfred was Arthur’s entire world. How could Arthur not worry about his happiness? Reaching a hand out of the warm blankets, Arthur touched Alfred’s cheek softly, a sad smile lingering on his lips. “Of course I worry. I’m your husband.”

Closing his eyes, Arthur relaxed to the sound of a lighthearted song playing softly in the background. Alfred’s breath, the scent of coffee from earlier that day, was warm as it washed over Arthur’s cheeks. Again and again, Arthur found himself trying to fall asleep. He rolled over several times, curling closer to Alfred only to push himself away later in the night. There was no comfortable way to sleep.

Sitting up after an eternity passed, Arthur stared at the dark screen of Alfred’s laptop. Had the movie ended while he wasn’t looking? Perhaps he had fallen asleep. Closing the computer and pushing it further toward the edge of the bed, Arthur looked around the dim room. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness long ago. Now, everything just seemed like a shadowy whisper of what it once was.

Slipping out of bed, Arthur went to the bathroom and tried to turn on the lights. No luck. He flicked the light switch on and off several times, growing more irritated with every fruitless result. The house was too cold without the electricity. The bedroom held a dark, unwelcoming frost when he returned. Alfred was sitting up now, watching the bedroom door suspiciously.

Arthur looked to the door, trying to see what Alfred was looking at, but there was nothing there. The door was open, and the hallway was empty. Arthur turned back to Alfred, sitting down on the bed next to him and trying to catch his attention.

“Look at what you’ve done,” Arthur jumped when a voice echoed through the room. Alfred’s mouth hadn’t opened. His lips hadn’t moved. That voice wasn’t Alfred’s. The accent was all wrong. The voice was too familiar… just a pitch higher than Arthur had ever heard it. Arthur looked over his shoulder to stare at the speaker.

It was himself.

He stood in a green sweater vest and sharp, khaki trousers. His own face was given strange shadows by the poor lighting, but Arthur could still see the glare that shone in his eyes. Taking his hand from Alfred’s shoulder, Arthur tried not to flinch when the replication of himself ground his teeth and shook his head.

“I’m dreaming,” Arthur told himself softly. That was right. It was nothing but a dream. This angry, fired up version of himself couldn’t hurt him. Arthur swallowed thickly as the second Arthur raised a skeptical eyebrow. “I’m dreaming.”

“But look what you’ve done,” the second Arthur said sharply as he gestured to Alfred. Arthur looked at his husband, seeing how hollow and dreary Alfred was in his dream. Arthur’s replica turned sorrowful as he leaned forward and said, “Look what you’ve done in my place.”

Arthur fell back against the bed, trying to scramble away from his copy, but the fake Arthur wouldn’t have it. He grasped Arthur’s shirt collar and shook him harshly, shouting, “You were only supposed to hold my place! You were nothing but a means to an end, but look what you’ve done!”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Arthur tried to ignore the pounding of his heart. It was a dream. It was a dream. This wasn’t real. He was just frightening himself… that’s all. He was just... He was... Arthur couldn’t help but let out a pathetic whimper as the replica shook him again.

“He is my husband! I’m the one that married him! I’m the one that loved him! Not you!”

The screaming became more desperate as the second Arthur continued, and Arthur couldn’t help but look at those wild, green eyes as he listened. “You’ve ruined everything! Francis wasn’t supposed to be… he wasn’t supposed to be here! Not now. Things were going so well, and now you’ve ruined everything!”

“I-I was just,” Arthur sputtered, getting shaken before he could finish. He bit his tongue, but ignored the pain as he looked up at himself. His broken, angry self. Arthur shivered at the sight. “I-I’m –”

“You are not me!” The second Arthur wailed. Or… was he the first? The one with all of the memories. The one that truly belonged at Alfred’s side. Arthur’s head spun. The room was tilting. The second Arthur screamed again, “Look at him! Look what you’ve done to my Alfred! Look at what you’ve done!”

Arthur shook his head wildly. No, no… he hadn’t hurt Alfred. He hadn’t ruined anything… had he? Was this subliminal messaging? Was his conscious trying to tell him that he’d done something… or quite possibly, everything wrong? Arthur felt sick to his stomach. His lungs ached when he couldn’t get a deep enough breath. The second Arthur looked heartbroken when
Arthur didn’t defend himself.

“I am Arthur Kirkland! Arthur Cornelius Kirkland!” The second Arthur shouted, as if he could convince Arthur that this was true. “You’ve taken my place, but you weren’t supposed to do this. You weren’t supposed to do this! You’ve ruined everything we had! Everything we worked for!”

“W-with Edith?” Arthur gasped. When he’d spoken to her on the phone, she had seemed upset that he cut her off. Was that what he meant? His publishing contract was ruined? “I didn’t mean to lose my editor, I just –”

“What?” The second Arthur spat before he shook his head and pushed Arthur down onto the bed. His hands wrapped around Arthur’s neck and squeezed.

Arthur gasped for breath, but he couldn’t breathe. This wasn’t right. This couldn’t be happening. This was a dream. He had to wake up. The replica tightened his grip as he loomed over Arthur, shouting, “This isn’t about Edith! You know what it’s about!”

Arthur gagged. He was lightheaded. He tried to claw and scratch at his copy, but nothing happened. “This is about Alfred, and you know it! You were supposed to stay here until everything was back to the way it was, and then you destroyed everything!”

The vain attempts at fighting back were becoming weaker as Arthur slowly felt a numbness spread through his limbs. He couldn’t make a sound as his own voice rang in his ears. “Look at what you’ve done to my husband!”

Arthur’s eyes snapped open, and he sat up immediately, gasping for air like a drowning man. He looked back and forth, searching the room for the replica. There was nothing to be found. It really had been a dream. Arthur coughed a few times, holding a hand to his throat. The skin wasn’t sore. It wasn’t even tender. Arthur laid back down. It was a dream.

Looking at Alfred, Arthur saw that his husband was fast asleep. The laptop was still open on the bed, but the battery had drained hours ago. The screen was dark. Arthur sighed, looking up at the beige ceiling of his bedroom.

He was fine. Everything was… fine. Everything. That included Alfred, didn’t it? Or was that just wishful thinking? Arthur rolled onto his side, not daring to look at Alfred’s face. He felt so tired. Was it because he was tired of fighting himself, or because he knew that his dream told the truth?

Arthur really didn’t have a right to be by Alfred’s side. He didn’t have all of the special memories that the two of them had shared. He didn’t know all of Alfred’s deep, dark secrets. Arthur didn’t even know his own secrets. Arthur closed his eyes and tried to stop thinking, but he couldn’t. The dream was stuck on repeat. It only hurt because it was true.

“Hey.” Alfred breathed as he scooted across the bed and threw an arm over Arthur’s waist. “I need to tell you ‘bout the… project…”

Arthur’s eyebrows knit together. Project? What project? What on earth was he talking about? Looking over his shoulder, Arthur saw that Alfred’s eyes were closed. Arthur sighed. He was talking in his sleep again. Placing his head back on the pillow, Arthur sighed and tried to close his eyes.

He opened them again moments later, whispering, “Alfred? Are you awake?” No
answer. Arthur took a deep breath and quietly asked, “Have I done everything wrong? Did I make too many mistakes?” Alfred curled closer to Arthur, pressing their bodies together as close as possible. Arthur sighed. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what I should say… what I should do for you. I don’t even know if I should be allowed to do anything.”

Alfred murmured a garbled, unintelligible word against the nape of Arthur’s neck, and Arthur shivered. This wasn’t making him feel any better. The only reason Alfred was so comfortable was because he was asleep. If he was awake, he’d never hold Arthur like this. He wouldn’t want someone so damaged… he wouldn’t want a fake, empty husband. He wanted the real one. Tears welled up in Arthur’s eyes, and he bit his lip to keep a sad sob from escaping.

“I was right,” Arthur whispered to himself. His hands knotted in the blankets, and he pulled them close to his face to speak into them. “I… I’ve really ruined everything. I’ve made a mess of everything I t-touch…” he stopped, took a shaking breath, and let out one sad, hollow whimper. “I shouldn’t… shouldn’t have done a-anything,” Arthur gasped, smearing his tears against the blankets in his hands. “I… I c-can’t even r-remember how to… t-to love you the r-right way. And n-now… with Francis, I…”

Alfred groaned in his sleep, and Arthur froze, his quivering breath caught in his lungs. He couldn’t hold back the soft, gasping sounds that accompanied crying, however. That was enough to rouse Alfred from his slumber.

“Hey,” Alfred whispered sleepily. Arthur squeezed his eyes shut and bit his bottom lip, trying to hold in his tears. His body still shook with his uneven breaths. Alfred snuggled closer. “Did you say something?”

“N-no,” Arthur lied shakily. “I didn’t say a-anything.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Alfred said with a smile in his voice. He took Arthur’s hand in his own and held it atop the blankets, soothing Arthur’s frayed nerves. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“Of course I’m okay,” Arthur sniffled helplessly, trying to discretely wipe away his tears while Alfred’s thumb rubbed the back of his hand. “I’m a-always okay…”

“You’re crying.”

Arthur curled in on himself. “I am not.”

“Yeah, you are,” Alfred sighed. Both men were quiet. Alfred broke the silence first. “Are you gonna tell me why, or do I have to guess?”

“No.”

Alfred grunted unhappily. “Which question are you answering?”

“Both,” Arthur frowned.

He didn’t want to burden Alfred with anymore of his nonsense. He’d already gone so far to trouble him. His parents, his brother, Edith, and now Francis… it was too much. Each step they took forward, they always ended up taking seven steps back. Arthur was running up an escalator that was going down faster than he could follow. Alfred was waiting at the top, where he’d always been. Arthur couldn’t catch up. He’d couldn’t make it back to his original spot no matter how hard he tried.

“Arthur, it’s okay to cry,” Alfred whispered against the back of Arthur’s neck. Arthur
thinned his lips into a straight, serious line. It wasn’t all right. Nothing about the current situation was okay. It wasn’t fair to either of them. Arthur opened his eyes to look at their joined hands while Alfred spoke again, “Over the past two months… we’ve been through a lot. I know your family is trying really hard to let you relax and adjust to life again, but I know everything else is really stressful. If you need to cry, you need to cry. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Arthur said sadly. “It’s not okay to just… sit and feel sorry for my own lost memory. I’ve…” Arthur paused, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. “I’ve made so many mistakes. It’s not fair for me to be upset.”

“Mistakes?” Alfred repeated owlishly. “What’re you talking about?”

“I don’t… I want to remember everything, but I keep pushing myself further away from what I’m supposed to be,” Arthur mentally berated himself. He wasn’t supposed to weigh Alfred down with this nonsense. Why was he saying this? Arthur bit his tongue and pressed his face into his pillow, mumbling into the fabric, “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

Without saying a word, Alfred squeezed Arthur’s hand and held him closer. Arthur’s heart ached. This wasn’t for him. This was for the real Arthur. The one that came before the Arthur that didn’t remember who he was. It made him nauseous. He nearly pushed Alfred away, but Alfred spoke before he had a change.

“You’re already yourself,” Alfred said softly. Arthur’s heart swelled. His eyes stung with tears. Alfred chuckled into Arthur’s hair as he whispered, “Who else do you have to be?”

“You’ve told me something like that before,” Arthur breathed happily. He sniffled and wiped at his teary eyes, trying to sound as fine as possible. He smiled at the feeling of Alfred’s warm hand holding his. “It always makes me feel a little bit better.”

“Yeah?” Alfred said with a smile in his voice, holding Arthur a little closer.

Arthur nodded. Dreams be damned, he was too happy with Alfred to acknowledge his aggressive, hateful dream. Hating himself could wait until morning. He could hold off wishing for memories until another day. Alfred was here. Alfred was holding him. It settled the fears in Arthur’s stomach that said Alfred hated him. It soothed the itch under his skin that cried for physical contact.

“I feel a lot better knowing that you believe that,” Arthur smiled to himself. Alfred hummed thoughtfully, and Arthur felt the sound rumble in Alfred’s chest. Closing his eyes, Arthur relaxed back against Alfred. “At least one of us believes that I’m still myself.”

“Yup,” Alfred whispered before he pressed a soft kiss to the back of Arthur’s neck. The feeling sent pinpricks racing up and down Arthur’s spine, and Arthur’s toes curled unconsciously. He squeezed Alfred’s hand. Alfred squeezed back. “I’ll tell you that you’re still you as many times as you need,” Alfred breathed as he settled down to sleep. “I’ll tell you until you believe it, too.”

Chapter End Notes

*Ferme la bouche*: Shut your mouth
*Mon gros*: My fat one
Thank you for reading!
See you next chapter.
Arthur woke to the sound of a ringing telephone. It ripped him from his deep sleep, and he sat up in bed, confused and slightly off-balance. Next to him, Alfred was still fast asleep, not fazed by the phone as it continued to ring. Instead of sitting up, he blindly reached for Arthur and tried to pull him closer. Arthur shook his head and pulled a blanket over Alfred’s shoulders, rushing out of the room and down the stairs to find the phone.

It was on the coffee table of the living room, just where Arthur had left it days ago, flashing and ringing as the caller refused to give up. Snatching the phone from the table, Arthur held it to his ear and shivered in the cold living room as he answered.

“’Ello?”

“Arthur, love, is that you?” A woman’s voice asked.

Arthur squinted at the voice; was it his sister, Delilah? No, Delilah would sound more youthful. Was it his mother? He couldn’t quite remember the sound of his mother’s voice… it would be rude to assume it was his mother if it turned out to be an aunt or cousin. Arthur wasn’t too sure how big his family really was. Biting the inside of his cheek, Arthur hummed thoughtfully.

“Yes, this is Arthur,” he said evenly as he sat down on the sofa. He tucked his toes between the cushions, hoping to keep them warm. His empty hand rubbed the top of his thighs as he spoke. “Sorry, but who is this?”

A pause. Then, a gentle, almost knowing laugh. “It’s your mother, darling.”

Arthur’s heart nearly stopped as he clenched his teeth. His mother. They hadn’t spoken since the funeral. Guilt flooded Arthur’s veins as he curled in on himself on the sofa. He should have called and checked on his parents. They were dealing with the loss of their son, and Arthur… Arthur had only been thinking of himself and his worries. Fiddling with the cuff of his sleeve, Arthur glanced at the living room window, seeing nothing beyond a thick veil of falling snow. He sighed. “Yes, that’s true. Is it not snowing in England?”

“Arthur?” His mother’s voice rang in his ear, and Arthur blinked himself out of his stupor. “Are you still there?”


“It’s all right, love. I’m calling to check on you.” There was rustling in the background of his mother’s voice, and Arthur pressed the receiver to his ear to hear her clearly. “I was looking at the weather this evening, and the reports say that Seattle was hit by a snowstorm!”

Arthur glanced at the living room window, seeing nothing beyond a thick veil of falling snow. He sighed. “Yes, that’s true. Is it not snowing in England?”

His mother made a frustrated noise. “It is, but nothing as big as a storm,” she paused, then softly said, “Poor poppet… I hope you’re staying warm.”
Humming lowly, Arthur eyed the dim living room with minute interest. He was given an opportunity to speak with his mother… a chance to learn more about her, as well as himself. But the words were caught in his throat. Every thought was too jumbled. Questions didn’t seem appropriate. The timing felt all wrong. Arthur closed his eyes and sat back against the sofa cushion.

After a few seconds of silence, Arthur’s mother spoke. “Arthur… love, is something wrong?”

Arthur’s eyes snapped open, feeling his chest fill with warmth. His mother was still worried about him even after he’d neglected to reach out to her? She was still concerned, regardless of his memories? Arthur’s heart swelled as he smiled.

“I’m fine, Mum. Just… thinking about things.” He paused, then said, “I’m sorry I haven’t called.”

With a twittering noise, Arthur’s mother laughed off the apology. “I know you’re busy trying to get better, dear. You get overwhelmed so easily… I wouldn’t want to bother you and push you away. You must be so confused.”

With a heavy heart, Arthur lowered his phone from his ear and switched it to the other side. His mother was right. She knew him better than he did. After all, she had all of the memories that they should have shared together. Pulling a blanket from the back of the sofa over his legs, Arthur got comfortable for the oncoming conversation. He had a lot to catch-up on regarding his mother.

“Mum,” he started softly, listening to the idle sounds of daily life in the background of his mother’s phone. There was a telly murmuring somewhere in her home. Was his father watching it? Most likely. He could imagine his father sitting back in an old chair, happy and laughing at a ridiculous program. Arthur smiled. “Where do you live in England?”

“We’ve lived in London for a few years, now.” She paused, and Arthur could hear the unmistakable sound of clinking dishware before she spoke again. “Before we went across the pond to America, we lived in Northern England. Just in a little town in the middle of the country.”

This sparked Arthur’s interest. They moved to America as a family, and then after all of their children had moved out, they simply went back to England? Why had they come to America in the first place? And why in heaven’s name would they come all the way to the state of Washington?

Leaning forward in his seat, Arthur eagerly dug for information. “Why did you hop across the pond in the first place? Why not just move to a different city in London?”

Marian sighed. “Oh, why indeed.” She thought for a moment, then said, “You know your brother, Seamus? When he was fourteen, he knew he wanted to be a lawyer. Alistair wanted to work in medicine… there are only so many universities in England.”

Arthur blinked in recognition. “You came here so we could go to better schools?”

His mother hummed thoughtfully. “We chose Washington because your father needed a stable place to work. He’s an accountant, you know. And, the weather in Washington is so similar to England’s… you’ve always been so sensitive to the heat.”

With a wince, Arthur laughed awkwardly. Sensitive? How pathetic was he that his
parents needed to narrow their choices of living places for him? While Arthur made an unhappy face, Arthur’s mother laughed through the phone.

“Are you sitting and fretting, love? You always do that. Always sitting and dwelling, making yourself feel sad. Just like your father.”

Arthur felt a smile come to his lips before he could smother it. “Is that right?”

“Oh, yes,” she continued with a smile in her voice. “You and your father… you’re always worrying about something or other. You sit and dwell and it makes you so sad.” Arthur made another face, and his mother was quick to say, “But… I suppose that happened much more when we were in England. When we went over the pond and you met Alfred, I suppose you were just too busy having fun to sit and dwell.”

Arthur’s heart warmed. So, Alfred had really helped Arthur get through his young years. From before the age of ten, Arthur had been a pessimist. When Alfred had waltzed into Arthur’s life, his entire mood must’ve improved. And Alfred… hopefully Arthur’s presence had made a positive difference in his life, too. The warmth in Arthur’s heart melted down into a hollow ache, and he wanted to go back to bed and curl up in Alfred’s arms. That way, he’d know Alfred was safe and comfortable.

As if she could read minds, Arthur’s mother sighed and said, “Well, I just wanted to make sure you were safe in the storm. I hear it’s freezing over there. I have to call Delilah after this… even if they’re on the other side of the city, I need to check on my little loves. Each one.”

Arthur laughed at that. “Will you call Seamus, too?”

Marian hummed to herself before she answered. “Oh, he’s all the way on the other side of the country, in Virginia.” She paused, then said, “But I might call him anyway. We haven’t spoken all week. That’s a record for us family! We all talk at least once a week.”

Shivering a bit, Arthur cuddled down under the blanket on his legs. “I’ll let you call Delilah, then. You have quite a few phone calls to make.”

“All right, all right. Stay warm, love.” There was some inaudible shouting in the background of his parents’ home, and Arthur’s mother said, “Your father says that you should stay inside.”

“Thank you,” Arthur nodded to himself. There was still something aching in his chest when he stood from the sofa and set his blanket aside. “Mum… thank you for calling. Really.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble, love.”

Arthur hesitated, then murmured, “I miss you.”

“And we miss you, darling,” Marian said softly. “We’ll talk again soon.”

“Very soon,” Arthur promised before they hung up.

And just like that, a spare piece of his heart that had rattled around in Arthur’s chest for the past two months stuck itself back into place. Where there was a gap of information that Arthur had missed, now it was filling itself up. For all Arthur knew, regular conversations with his mother might help revive his memories. But that was something to think about another time. For the moment, Arthur was freezing where he stood in front of the sofa. So, dropping the cordless phone back onto the table, Arthur tucked his fingers under his arms and skittered up the stairs and back
into the bedroom.

Alfred was still under the covers where Arthur had left him, hugging Arthur’s abandoned pillow like his life depended on it. Arthur had to pause in the doorway to admire the sight. Alfred, in all his sleepy glory, was still a warm beacon of hope for Arthur. With Alfred spread across the mattress, there was hardly any room for Arthur to lie down. Even so, he’d never seen a more welcoming sight.

Lifting Alfred’s arm from the pillow, Arthur slipped under the blankets and back into the warm pocket that Alfred had preserved for him. Within moments of being in the bed, Arthur was immediately enveloped by Alfred’s embrace, and it dragged him back down into the hazy, comfortable state of mind that accompanied sleep.

“Who was on the phone?” Alfred breathed into Arthur’s hair. Arthur slipped his arm around Alfred’s waist and cuddled closer.

“My mum. She was worried about the storm.”

Alfred let out a long exhale, and then yawned. “She’s a good lady.”

“You’re good, too,” Arthur smiled. Alfred hummed, and the sound rumbled happily in his chest. “You’re a good man, Alfred.”

“Yeah,” Alfred whispered. “I’ll keep you safe from the storm.”

“Of course you will,” Arthur giggled with a shake of his head. He gave Alfred’s forearm a few solid pats, and settled down in the arms of his husband. The wind outside howled, Alfred’s breathing was deep, and Arthur’s eyes fluttered shut. Everything was warm. The blankets, Alfred’s arms, and Arthur’s chest… warm, through and through. Arthur smiled. “Of course you will.”

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Arthur flinched when he heard the sound of the doorbell, curling close to Alfred and hiding from the sound. It was a dream, surely. No one would be out and about during a snowstorm that filled the air with freezing water. That would be preposterous. Nonetheless, the doorbell rang several more times. Alfred groaned in response, slipping away from Arthur’s arms and over the edge of the bed.

“My turn. You got the phone, I’ll get the door.”

In Alfred’s absence, Arthur pulled the blankets closer, trying to replace Alfred’s solid, reassuring presence with a mound of blankets. It didn’t work, but it kept him warm while Alfred staggered down the stairs, grumbling about how tired he was.

Nearly settling back down into the blankets, Arthur closed his eyes when he heard the front door open. He couldn’t tell what was being said, but he heard Alfred’s voice. Deep, warm, and kind. Arthur adored that calm tone he always used. But, Arthur’s comfort was short-lived when a new voice broke through the quietness of the house. A woman’s voice. Then another man’s voice. Arthur sat up. Was it Francis and Angelique? No, that wouldn’t make sense. Why would they come across the city in the storm?

Sliding out of bed, Arthur felt his curiosity peak when he stood at the top of the stairs. The voices still echoed, but he could pick out what they were saying, now.

The woman spoke first. “Shouldn’t you be at work, playing with your diseases or
something?” A British accent. Was it his sister, Delilah? That would be preposterous. Why would she be wandering about Seattle in the middle of the blizzard? There was rustling. Plastic bags? Feet stomped on the welcome mat inside the front door. Arthur leaned forward to hear better.

“The campus is closed today,” Alfred said lowly. He sounded irritated. It was that kind of tone that made Arthur anxious. He didn’t intervene, though. Not yet. He wanted to know who these guests were. Alfred sighed and said, “When campus is closed, I don’t go to the lab.”

The woman laughed at that. Arthur wrinkled his nose at the sound. “So, what? Have you been sleeping the day away? How productive of you.”

“I’ll take all the sleep I can get, thanks,” Alfred said tersely. There was an edge in his voice, one that felt like the sharp blade of a knife. This woman was walking on thin ice. Alfred spoke again. “What’re you even doing in this neck of the woods? Isn’t there anyone else in Seattle you can badger about their day-to-day decisions?”

“At least I care enough to badger,” the woman snipped haughtily. There was the sound of movement as someone walked down the hallway a bit. Arthur took a step away from the top of the stairs. Who was it? Alfred, or the two strangers at the door?

“Let’s not get carried away, guys,” the strange man advised. “We don’t need to start a fight.”

Arthur nodded in agreement. With the way the woman and Alfred spoke to each other, Arthur was beginning to believe it really was his sister, Delilah. Alfred admitted they never got along. But why? What went wrong with the two of them that, to this day, they couldn’t communicate peacefully? The question left a cold, hard feeling in Arthur’s stomach. He didn’t like not knowing his own life. Secrets, secrets, secrets… Alfred never liked talking about emotional things. Was that why?

“Arthur!” The woman hollered from the front door. Arthur jumped at the sound of his name, stumbling away from the stairs and back toward the bedroom door as the woman called again. “Arthur, it’s me, Delilah! Come down here and give your sister a hug!”

Arthur nearly rolled his eyes. So, it was his sister. Tiptoeing back into the bedroom, Arthur took a jumper from his dresser and pulled it over his head. His brown pajama bottoms would have to do. He didn’t feel like changing just for his sister and the mystery man at the door. So, after pushing his hand through his sleep-mussed hair, Arthur trudged down the stairs.

At the front door was Delilah and her mystery man. Her husband? Arthur didn’t bother to ask. He simply smiled at his sister when she turned to look at him. The warm knitted hat on her head hid her gold hair, but Arthur could see that it was pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes glittered excitedly as she smiled at him, and Arthur wasn’t given a moment to greet her as she rushed past Alfred and crushed Arthur with a hug.

“Oh, look at you! Not bruised anymore,” she squeaked in his ear. Arthur made a point to hold in his complaints as she gave him a squeeze. Her face was being pressed against Arthur’s healing stitches. He winced, but she didn’t notice. She pulled back to get a good look at his face. “Much better, I’d say. You looked bloody awful at the funeral.”

Arthur gave her a flabbergasted look. What in heaven’s name was wrong with this woman? How could his mother, wonderful and kind as she was, raise a girl to be so irrationally blunt? Arthur gave Alfred a sidelong glance, and his husband gave him an apologetic shrug. Delilah stole his attention with a laugh, and Arthur reverted his gaze to her rosy cheeks.
“You’ve still got that little bandage on your head,” she pointed at his forehead, then glanced over her shoulder at her escort. “Sam, look! He’s still got the bandage!”

Still comfortably leaning against the front door, Danny smiled and feigned amazement at the sight of Arthur’s bandage. “Yeah, he sure does,” he said with a calm, clear, American accent. More than anything, Arthur could tell he was unamused.

Waving dismissively at Sam, Delilah made sure to give Arthur’s shoulders a squeeze. “That’s all right. You’ll be able to take that thing off soon enough.” She pat Arthur’s cheek before turning around, taking up the plastic bags she brought inside, and heading for the kitchen. “You sit tight; I’ll make you a real meal.”

Arthur felt confusion bubble in his chest as he watched his sister saunter through his house with more confidence than he ever had. Alfred stood aside as she made herself at home in the kitchen, giving Arthur a tired look. Sam stood in the doorway awkwardly, pushing his hands into his pockets while Arthur tried to grasp onto his surroundings.

“What…” Arthur paused, licked his lips, and stepped closer to Alfred when he whispered, “What is happening? Why is she here?”

Sam spoke up from the doorway, rocking back on his heels as he sighed, “Your mom called. She said you were fine. Delilah didn’t believe her.” He smiled at Alfred and pointed to the living room doorway, asking, “TV?”

Alfred shrugged. “Remote is on the table. Help yourself, man.”

While Sam went to lounge on the sofa, Arthur stepped ever closer to Alfred. There were too many people in his house. Too many people he hadn’t expected. When his parents had come, he’d had enough time to adjust to the idea of their arrival. This… this was something else entirely. Something felt uneasy in his stomach when Delilah spoke to him. But, was it just his discomfort with her way of speaking, or was it something his brain remembered from long ago?

He took hold of Alfred’s hand before he glanced through the kitchen doorway. “I think I need a little more information before I can be comfortable with these people in my house.”

“Well, you already know Delilah,” Alfred nodded to the kitchen. Then, he pointed to the living room. “That guy is her husband, Sam.”

Arthur nodded slowly, flexing his hold on Alfred’s warm hand while thought. “And… and do I get along with Sam? Is there anything I should know?”

Alfred pursed his lips. “Mmm… not that I can think of. Sam is a good guy. Real nice. Doesn’t really stand out much… he’s pretty plain. Altogether, he reminds me of the color beige.”

Standing back, Arthur gave his husband a disapproving look. To which Alfred merely grinned in response. Perhaps people were right when they said “opposites attract,” especially when it came to Arthur’s sister. His sister was outright and audacious whereas her husband was, as Alfred put it, very plain.

Before Arthur could question his interfamily relations further, there was a slam from the kitchen. Alfred was tearing through the doorway faster than Arthur could follow, leaving Arthur’s hand empty as Alfred attempted to reign in Delilah.

“What did you do?” Alfred asked, his voice high-pitched and irritated as there was more residual crashing. There was a slap before Alfred yelped. “Hey! Don’t slap my hands, you crazy
woman!"

“I was just trying to get a bowl! Stop getting in my way,” Delilah snapped in response. More scrambling echoed through the kitchen as Arthur lingered quietly in the hallway. “Oh, get out, you tosser. Everyone knows Arthur likes my cooking best.”

Alfred sputtered for a moment. “What? This… this is my kitchen! This is my house!”

Arthur shook his head as their argument continued. Meanwhile, the telly was humming lowly in the living room, no doubt entertaining Delilah’s husband. Giving the kitchen one last look, Arthur shuffled off to the living room. Perhaps talking to Sam would help Arthur remember something about his sister. Anything he knew about Sam might not be interesting enough to remember.

Sam was leaning back on the sofa with his feet on the coffee table when Arthur walked into the room. There was an American football game on the television screen, and Sam was idly immersed while Arthur leaned against the arm of the sofa quietly. What would he say to this man? What was he supposed to say? Was there a question he was supposed to ask, or would that be overreaching? Arthur’s curiosity reared its head at the opening… he could ask Sam anything. Arthur shifted his weight onto his right foot and tried to act nonchalant.

“Hi, Sam,” Arthur greeted softly. Sam glanced over at him, nodded once, then turned back to the telly. Arthur frowned. “May I sit?”

“Sure, man,” Sam shrugged and twirled the remote in his hand. “It’s your house.”

“Right,” Arthur mumbled to himself.

Sam was so… distant. How was he supposed to comfortably ask about his own past when he wasn’t sure he wanted to even speak to this man? Arthur twiddled his thumbs as Sam grumbled at the coach on the screen. Arthur needed to be polite. He needed an ice-breaker. Something that could help him be frank and ask his questions.

Trying to soothe his frayed nerves, Arthur braced his hands atop his knees and exhaled slowly. This man was his brother-in-law. Talking to him wasn’t supposed to be difficult. Arthur nodded to himself as Sam rocked his feet on the coffee table back and forth.

Clearing his throat, Arthur looked at Sam and spoke lowly, “Sam, can I ask you a few questions?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam turned down the volume on the telly and turned to look at Arthur. Finally; eye contact. Setting the remote aside, Sam folded his arms over his chest and gave Arthur an attentive look. “What’s up?”

“Right. Well, I… I was in an accident,” Arthur started slowly, raising his hand to touch the bandage on his forehead. He’d be able to remove it soon. But the pain was still there. He blinked and refocused on Sam. “And I’ve –”

“You’ve got amnesia,” Sam nodded, his dark eyes lingering on Arthur’s forehead. “I know.”

Arthur struggled not to roll his eyes. Of course Sam knew; he was married to Delilah. They were – for all intents and purposes – family. Arthur tried to regain his composure while Sam cuffed a hand through his short, black hair.
“You want me to fill in some blanks?” Sam asked politely. Arthur looked at him with wide eyes, and Sam gave Arthur a small smile. “I think I can help you. What do you wanna know?”

Arthur’s hands trembled. He could ask anything he wanted. He could know about Delilah and Alfred’s disagreements. He could know about anything unsavory that may have happened in his marriage. He could know about all of his family. His brothers, his parents… there was so much ground to cover, and Arthur had no idea how long Sam and Delilah would be staying. Arthur gave a shaky smile before pushing his hand through his hair.

“I… I’ve got so many questions,” Arthur laughed to himself, more disbelieving than amused. “I’m… not quite sure where to start.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully, looking back at the television while Arthur grappled for words. He flipped the remote over and over in his hand while he said, “I’ve been married to Delilah for five years. You’ve been married to Alfred for… almost three. You and Alfred met as kids, and I met Delilah in school,” he scratched his chin before he asked, “Any of this helpful?”

Nodding fervently, Arthur turned his body to face Sam. This was a valuable opportunity. He would make the most of it.

“It’s very helpful. I know a bit about my relationship with Alfred, but I still have some questions about Alfred and Delilah,” Arthur paused when he saw Sam smile and shake his head, but continued nonetheless. “Why do they hate each other so much?”

Sam shrugged loosely as he set the television remote aside. “I wouldn’t call it ‘hate’ really. It’s just… Delilah doesn’t like Alfred. She doesn’t like how you give him all your attention.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. “This is beginning to sound unhealthy.” Sam laughed at that, giving Arthur a fond look.

“Nah, she’s just your big sister. And you’re her baby brother. That’s how she’ll always see you. You’ll always be her baby brother.”

“And?” Arthur pressed. “What does that have to do with her disliking Alfred?”

Sam sighed and gave Arthur a tired smile. “Well, you’re the baby of your family. Delilah loved to take care of you. It was her thing when you guys were kids. But when you guys moved to America and you met Alfred,” Sam spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “You didn’t really need her to take care of you anymore.”

Arthur frowned at that. In the few memories he’d regained of his siblings, it seemed that Alistair had been the one to look after him when he was small. If Delilah had made such an impact on him in his young life, why didn’t he remember any of it? Why wasn’t that something that he thought of when he remembered spending time with his siblings? What was keeping those memories locked up?

“I don’t remember anything like that,” Arthur muttered lowly. “I don’t remember anything about Delilah taking care of me.”

Sam shrugged. “Well, that was a while ago. But she still babies you. A little too much, sometimes. It gets her on your bad side more often than not.”

Arthur tried to smile at the thought, but he still felt like something was missing in the
story of his relationship with his sister. Delilah would get on his bad side? What was that supposed to mean? How often would he be upset with her? She seemed simply overjoyed to take over when it came to his care. If he was angry with her, did she even care? Would she stop doing whatever it was that was bothering him? Arthur blinked in realization. She had offered to get him out of his own wedding. Didn’t she realize how her words affected him? Couldn’t she see that he was a grown man capable of making his own choices?

Pursing his lips, Arthur sat back against the sofa. “When she got on my bad side, would she stop fussing over me?”

“No, not really,” Sam sighed, then paused, and sat forward with a stern expression. “Well, she stopped when you came over and yelled at her a few years ago.”

Ah, now that sounded interesting. Arthur leaned toward Sam and raised his eyebrows. “What happened? Why was I so upset with her?”

Sam scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “I don’t really know, man. It was probably some big misunderstanding. She doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“But you know something, don’t you?” Arthur insisted, “You know why I was upset?”

“Well, yeah. She thought Alfred was having an affair or something,” Sam said calmly. Arthur’s heart froze. He felt sick. Alfred? Having an affair? No, no, no… it was a misunderstanding, just like Sam said earlier. It was a mistake. He didn’t really have an affair. He couldn’t have. Sam shrugged again before he said, “See, it was two years ago. Not long after you guys got married. Delilah was running errands and happened to see Alfred with some lady having lunch or something.” He casually juggled the remote in his hand before he finished. “It was probably just a coincidence.”

Arthur’s head was reeling as he sat back, giving the floor a hard, worried look. Affairs, mistakes… who was this mystery woman? Why was Alfred with her? What were the chances that Delilah had seen them? Arthur felt sick as he stood from the sofa and wandered about the living room, chewing his bottom lip.

Alfred loved him, didn’t he? They’d been so happy when they were married. If he’d met with his mystery woman soon after their marriage, he obviously wasn’t satisfied. But, Arthur frowned, if that was the case, why did he go and yell at Delilah? If he was angry with her, obviously she’d been lying. Or, at the very least, mistaken.

Sam must’ve noticed Arthur’s expression because he gave a lighthearted laugh. “Really, man. If he was cheating, you’d totally know. Your family loves to talk about drama. And no one spoke about this.”

“No one spoke about this. Not talked,” Arthur corrected absently as the continued to pace. “And you’re sure…” he walked back to the sofa to discretely ask, “You’re sure it was a misunderstanding?”

“Pretty sure,” Sam admitted awkwardly. “Delilah hates to admit she was wrong. And she doesn’t talk about it. Ever. So…” he shrugged. “That’s pretty solid.”

‘Pretty solid’ wasn’t good enough for Arthur. He needed hard, cold facts. He needed evidence that stated Alfred was faithful. And if he wasn’t, he wanted to know what caused him to break his wedding vows. Arthur crossed his arms and frowned at the sheer curtains that hung in the living room window. Snow still fell. The city was being reduced to nothing but a soft, white
cloud, whereas Arthur’s mind was being clouded with dark shadows of uncertainty.

Sam looked like he was about to reach out and tell Arthur something else, but Delilah’s voice rang through the house before he had the chance. “Sam! Come help me with this!”

There was a metallic clang as Alfred shouted, “Watch it! Geez, you’re gonna burn yourself.”

Pushing himself up off of the sofa, Sam gave Arthur a tight-lipped smile before heading off into the kitchen. The solitude in the room didn’t soothe Arthur’s anxiety. He needed to be reassured. He needed Alfred to prove Delilah’s rumor wrong. He couldn’t remember what happened. He couldn’t remember why he yelled at her.

Everything that could make him feel better was missing in his memory. The piece of his heart that was replaced by his mother’s reassurance trembled in his chest, anxious and unsure. If he couldn’t even trust the man he was staying with to tell the truth, who could he trust? His hard-headed sister? The mystery woman? Arthur had no idea who she was.

He could only go to Alfred and ask for the truth. That was the only option Arthur could think of… but, would Alfred want to talk about it? Would he tell the truth? Alfred tended to walk away from emotional conversations. If the meeting with the mystery woman was business, then there would be no reason for him to lie or walk away. Arthur tried to assure himself of this as he shuffled to the kitchen. Alfred was a good man. A kind man. He wouldn’t lie. Not about this.

Drumming his fingers on the doorframe, Arthur leaned in the doorway and quietly watched Sam and Delilah dig through his kitchen while Alfred furiously tried to clean up after them.

“Alfred,” Arthur said evenly, trying to seem as calm as possible. Alfred looked over his shoulder at him, innocence and openness written all over his face. Arthur wanted to smile at that expression, but he couldn’t. Not until his suspicion was proved false. He took a step away from the doorway, waving Alfred toward him. “I want to talk to you for a moment.”

“Sure,” Alfred said. He hesitated, looking at Sam and Delilah as they grumbled to each other in disgruntled tones, before he finally went to Arthur and joined him in the hallway. There was a warm smile on his face when he asked, “What’s up?”

Folding his hands together, Arthur looked at the chest of Alfred’s green t-shirt, glaring at the faded superhero image. Arthur looked up to catch Alfred’s gaze, seeing a glint of anxiety in Alfred’s smile. Arthur narrowed his eyes.

“Did you cheat on me?”

Alfred’s smile disappeared and the lightness in his attitude melted down into a disappointed, hurt expression. “Wh… what?” He sputtered, tucking his hands into his pockets. Was he trying to keep his hands away from Arthur? Was he holding himself back? Arthur didn’t want to know. Alfred shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, apparently trying to absorb the question. “Sorry. My ears aren’t working. What did you just say?”

Arthur crossed his arms over his chest pointedly. “I was talking to Sam in the living room and he said that two years ago —”

“Oh,” Alfred said, drawing out the sound as his smile was immediately refreshed. Arthur felt something in his chest snap, and grow a little warmer. The relaxed way Alfred smiled made
him feel a little more confident that he’d never cheated. Arthur felt the tightness in his chest release when Alfred sighed and nodded his head. “Now I get it.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows. “That was quick. Would you care to fill me in?”

“It was an honest to god mistake. Delilah just,” Alfred waved his hand in a vague gesture. “She just took it really far. Too far.”

“She saw you out with some woman.” Arthur glared at Alfred’s t-shirt until he could smooth his expression into something neutral so he could look Alfred in the eye. “I would love to have this whole thing cleared up.”

Alfred leaned back against the wall, his smile seeming more forced as he sighed, “It was my mom. The woman Delilah saw me with… it was my mom.”

Arthur frowned. Why would Alfred go out in the city with his mother? She had been nothing less than a terror to her only child. Had she turned over a new leaf? Found the error in her drunken ways? Arthur huffed at the obscurity of the situation.

“Why were you with your mother? I thought you didn’t care for your parents.”

“I don’t!” Alfred assured quickly, laughing a bit. “I really… really hate my parents. Neither of them came to my wedding. It was rough. But,” Alfred paused, took a breath, and refreshed his bland smile. “She called me one day, out of the blue. Said she turned everything around. She wanted to ‘make up for lost time’ with me and junk.”

Arthur felt a hint of sadness spark in his stomach as he nodded. “So you went to lunch.”

“Yeah. We met at this little café on Fifth… and she went on and on about how sorry she was that she missed so much in my life.” Alfred’s smile melted away, and he shrugged loosely. “She wanted to hear about everything she missed. My schooling, my career… and you.”

“Well, that’s good isn’t it?” Arthur reasoned, leaning forward to whisper and keep their conversation private. “She wanted to talk? To fix things?”

Alfred made a garbled noise in the back of his throat. “Well, sort of… there was a whole ulterior motive. I knew she wasn’t gonna be a new person, but I talked to you about it, and I decided to go. It just… it wasn’t what I wanted.”

Arthur rolled his eyes and leaned his weight onto his right foot. “Alfred, get to the point. Enough dallying. What did she want?”

“Money,” Alfred said softly. He shuffled his foot back and forth as he continued. “She said she wanted to be there for me. Be a good mom. But I had to help her settle a debt.” His eyes turned steely as he shook his head. “Like I had to pay her to care about me.”

Deep in his chest, Arthur’s heart cracked at the thought. He’d spoken to his only mother only an hour ago. He never had to pay for her to say sweet things to him. There was not contractual, financial arrangement that bound them together. It was just… love. His mother loved him. As any mother should love their child.

Arthur’s attention snapped back to the conversation, and he gave Alfred a pitying glance. “And… the rumor? The one Delilah started?”

“She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Alfred muttered lowly. He glanced
back at the kitchen when there was a metallic clang, but when no one shouted in alarm, he turned back to Arthur. “I think she said she was out shopping when she saw me at a table with my mom. She didn’t know who my mom was, so she assumed I was cheating on you.”

Wincing, Arthur ducked his chin. “I see.”

“Yeah.” Alfred growled. Arthur had heard malice in his voice before, but this wasn’t anger. It was irritation. Perhaps a hint of disappointment. “She ran home and called your relatives. The Kirkland clan really loves gossip, so the news spread like wildfire.”

Arthur’s heart dropped, and he looked up at Alfred with wide eyes. “So, she just… told everyone? Everyone knew?”

“Hey, hey! I wasn’t cheating on you,” Alfred shot back as he raised his hands in surrender. “I was sitting and listening to my mom beg for money! They didn’t ‘know’ anything. They just believed whatever crap Delilah told them.”

Arthur cufféd a hand through his hair, winced as his healing scar throbbed, and gave Alfred a tentative look. “So? What happened after your lunch with your mum?”

“I came home. Back to our crappy apartment. You were working on your final draft of your book when I came in.” Alfred scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “I was… yeah, I was mad. Pretty pissed. I must’ve looked pretty bad.”

Arthur shifted his weight between his feet uncomfortably. Alfred’s rough past made for a prickly present, and a far less enjoyable future. Was he violent when he was upset? Arthur could easily recall his little row with the doctor in the hospital. Alfred looked a breath away from punching the man into the ground.

Alfred banished those concerns when he said, “You sat me down, we talked… and I never talked to my mom again. I don’t think she even stayed in town that long, anyway.”

Part of Arthur wanted to feel sorry for Alfred, but there was an intense wave of relief that overwhelmed him. Relief that Alfred had been faithful, that Delilah was mistaken… and that Alfred’s mother hadn’t stayed in their lives. It was in Alfred’s best interests not to have contact with his aggressors.

But one thing still nagged at Arthur’s mind; if Delilah told their entire extended family, why hadn’t Arthur been the first to point out she was wrong? Had she left him out of the loop, waiting for the “news” to crash down on him from a multitude of family members?

Arthur stepped close to Alfred and wrapped his arms around him. There wasn’t a hint of frustration in Alfred as he sighed and hugged Arthur back. It was warm. And kind. Just like Alfred himself. Arthur was a fool to have doubted him.

“So, what happened after Delilah spread the news?” Arthur murmured into Alfred’s shoulder, fighting down the bitter taste that rose in his mouth at the idea of Delilah’s lying. Alfred shrugged awkwardly, and Arthur pat his back. “Did we go set her straight? Sam said I yelled.”

“Well, yeah, I guess…” Another shrug. “You were really mad that she spread the whole cheating rumor around. We had to call all of your family members to smooth it out, but you were still pretty upset. A few days later, Delilah was still standing by what she said.”

Arthur leaned back to look at Alfred’s tired eyes. “But… but we knew the truth? You told me before you even left to see your mother.” He shook his head before giving Alfred an
irritated look. “Why would she still think you were cheating?”

There was a sad smile on Alfred’s face as he shrugged. “She doesn’t like me. She didn’t need more of a reason than that.” Arthur frowned, and Alfred laughed. “Hey, don’t worry about it. You went to her and Sam’s place, told her to knock it off, and the rest is history.”

With a huff, Arthur fell forward against Alfred again, hearing the air rush from his lungs as he leaned back against the wall. Arthur could feel Alfred’s heartbeat thudding against his chest, rhythmic and even as Alfred pat his back. Comforting… but not enough to brush the frustration in his mind.

“How can you be so calm about this?” Arthur wondered softly. “Why aren’t you angry?”

Alfred laughed, and the sound shook his chest. “I was mad, but… it was just a rumor. The thing that really made me sad was my mom and what she wanted from me. It broke my heart. I thought I’d come so far, you know? I thought… if anything could make my parents love me, it would be my success, right?” He was quiet for a moment, and Arthur closed his eyes. “But she didn’t. And that was fine. I had you and your family. You guys always loved me more than they ever did.”

Arthur pursed his lips. “I still think you should be upset.”

Humming thoughtfully, Alfred drummed his fingers against the small of Arthur’s back. “It was two years ago, sweetheart. And it was resolved pretty fast. I just don’t have it in me to be mad anymore.” He paused, then huffed a laugh. “Don’t tell me that you’re mad.”

“Of course I am,” Arthur grumbled. “Delilah saw something suspicious, and instead of just telling me, she goes gossiping to everyone else in our family? That’s a shoddy way for someone to act, let alone my own sister.”

Alfred made an awkward sound. “But it was two…”

“Two years ago, I know,” Arthur stepped back to pace the hallway for a moment. “But it’s still unfair. Unfair to you and I… and my family.” Arthur’s eyes went wide. “My god… did she tell my parents?”

Alfred nodded sheepishly. “Yeah… they didn’t really believe it. They were relieved when you called them to prove Delilah wrong.”

Arthur rolled his eyes and grumbled, “Of course they didn’t believe it. They’re wonderful people.”

Alfred opened his mouth to no doubt agree, but Delilah’s alarmed squeak from the kitchen caused both men in the hallway to jump. There was a slam, and Sam’s voice rumbling darkly from the kitchen. Something has obviously gone wrong.

Alfred was the first to rush back into the kitchen shouting, “Hey! Hands off my Cutco knives! You’re gonna cut your hand off!”

Shuffling into the kitchen after his husband, Arthur wrapped his arms around himself and hung in the doorway quietly, watching Delilah and Alfred bicker. Sam was at the stove, stirring some sort of simmering dish, ignoring Delilah as she waved a steak knife back and forth in front of Alfred. Alfred was gesturing to the knife block, insisting she put it back to no avail.

Arthur pursed his lips and cocked his head to the side. Alfred and Delilah had been in
their fair share of arguments… so how could they still face each other? If Arthur truly disliked someone, he’d go out of his way to avoid them. But Delilah… she kept close because she loved Arthur. Even after Arthur told her off, she came running back to him, trying to baby him into submission.

But Arthur didn’t need her to baby him anymore. Arthur may have been hurt and confused, but Alfred was there for him. Delilah was nowhere to be found when he was in the hospital. So, really, the only true support Arthur had was his husband. Arthur smiled at the thought. Alfred was a dependable man. A good man. Arthur was truly lucky to have him.

The sweet thought was cut short when Delilah said, “You’ve been taking a lot of days off from work, haven’t you?” She pointed the end of her steak knife at Alfred. “Mummy tells me that you’ve been calling in an awful lot.”

Arthur blinked. That was true. Alfred had taken several days to sit with Arthur in the hospital after the accident. Then a few more to keep Arthur company. And again to stay with Arthur when he caught his cold. He’d taken three days when he’d been in his accident in the lab. Arthur felt his heart plummet down to his stomach; he was taking so much time from his husband. So many days that could be held against him by his superiors. They might think he was abusing his time off.

Alfred, on the other hand, didn’t give the subject nearly as much thought. “I didn’t know you and your mom talked about me that often.” Alfred rolled his eyes when Delilah made a face. “Why would she tell you that, anyway?”

“No reason,” Delilah pivoted her hips and leaned against the fridge. “I just wanted to know if Arthur was really being taken care of.”

Something in Arthur’s chest – he wasn’t sure what – snapped at the implication that Alfred couldn’t properly care for him. Alfred was nothing less than the perfect caregiver. He was a saint. Giving Arthur what he wanted, caring for him, being honest even when it hurt… how could anyone doubt Alfred? He had the biggest heart in the world. And he wore it on his sleeve. Quick to trust, and so, so easy to break.

“Excuse me?” Arthur snapped as he stepped into the kitchen, pointing an accusing finger at his sister. “Why would you even care about my wellbeing? You never came to see me when I woke up in the hospital, but Alfred was there! Every day!” He narrowed his eyes at Delilah’s flabbergasted expression. “It’s hypocritical for you think he’s neglecting me.”

Delilah’s expression drooped, and she gave Alfred an unimpressed look. “Blimey, look at that. You’ve brainwashed him.” At the stove, Sam’s shoulders hunched over the pot he was stirring, trying to avoid the rising conflict behind him. Delilah paid the static in the air no heed, and set the steak knife in her hand on the kitchen counter. “It’s pathetic that you would go to all these lengths to get him to hate me.”

Delilah’s expression drooped, and she gave Alfred an unimpressed look. “Blimey, look at that. You’ve brainwashed him.” At the stove, Sam’s shoulders hunched over the pot he was stirring, trying to avoid the rising conflict behind him. Delilah paid the static in the air no heed, and set the steak knife in her hand on the kitchen counter. “It’s pathetic that you would go to all these lengths to get him to hate me.”

Alfred took a breath, slowly exhaled, and calmly said, “I didn’t brainwash him, Delilah. He has amnesia.”

Arthur bristled while his sister shrugged and said, “Same difference.” She turned to Arthur with a smile. “Don’t worry, poppet. I’m here, and I’ll fix whatever silly things he put into your head.”

Another snap, right between Arthur’s ribs. “What?” He shouted, his fists clenched tight and his cheeks warm with frustration. “How could you say something like that?”
Delilah shrugged and laughed lightheartedly. “Easy! It’s what people like him do.”

Alfred stepped in. “Hey. What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Oh, please,” Delilah snorted a laugh. “You didn’t really have a stable home life, Alfred. Your mum was a cheat and your dad was a drunk.” She shrugged. “People like you shouldn’t really be around my Arthur.”

Arthur ground his teeth and growled, “That isn’t really your decision to make.”

Delilah sighed heavily, “Look, you just don’t know any better because your little brain is all foggy.” She gave him a pitying smile. “It’ll clear up and you’ll see that I’m right.”

Alfred crossed his arms over his chest. “Right about what?”

“You’re filling his head with all sorts of bad stories about me!” Delilah pouted. “Figures a man like you would do that.”

There was a final, heart-wrenching snap that resounded through Arthur’s chest as he shouted, “Alfred didn’t ‘put things in my head,’ you nosy twit!”

Delilah blanched. “A-Arthur! How dare you call me a–”

“How dare you come into *my* house,” Arthur stomped his foot, “Waltz into *my* kitchen,” he pointed at Alfred, “And insult *my* husband! This is not your life, Delilah! It’s mine, and I want to keep it that way! So please, take your pointy little noise out of my business, out of my house, and out of my marriage!”

The kitchen was quiet. Delilah was pale. Sam stirred. Alfred had pressed his lips together in a tight line. Arthur let out a breath, and lowered his eyes to the floor. Why was he shouting? Why was he so upset? He could have resolved this without shouting. Couldn’t he? Arthur wasn’t sure anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur mumbled after a moment. A bit of tension left the room, but Arthur’s body still felt stiff with frustration when he said, “I should’ve have said that.”

Delilah eyebrow quirked as she huffed and looked away. “No, you shouldn’t have.”

Another stretch of silence. Sam tapped the metal spoon he was using against the side of the pot on the stove. He was possibly trying to fill this crushing silence. It made Arthur’s skin crawl. He was uncomfortable around Delilah, now. He disliked the way she treated Alfred. The way she viewed him. The way she hated him. Alfred didn’t deserve it.

After several minutes of Delilah pointedly tapping her foot, Sam stepped back from the stove and said, “I think Arthur is a little overwhelmed. He’s probably having a hard time processing.”

Arthur opened his mouth to disagree, but Alfred stepped in. “Yeah. Trying to remember things gives him a pretty bad headache.” He wrapped his arm around Arthur’s shoulders, looking down at him desperately. “Right, sweetheart?”

“Oh, yes.” Arthur nodded robotically, looking away from Alfred to see Delilah’s disapproving grimace. Arthur pasted a fake, sorry smile onto his face as he said, “Terrible headaches. Nasty things.”
Sam nodded, trying to tow Delilah from the kitchen. “Maybe we should come back some other time.”

“We’ve hardly been here an hour!” Delilah argued as Sam led her to the entryway. Arthur could hear her voice echoing in the hall as she said, “We need to keep an eye on him!”

“Alfred will keep an eye on him,” Sam replied calmly.

Arthur met them in the entryway, giving his sister and her husband a long, considering look. Sam wasn’t as bland as Alfred originally stated. He was sharp. Sharp enough to notice when he could step in and reign in Delilah’s forceful attitude. Kind enough to know when Alfred and Arthur were exhausted by Delilah. And amazingly strong-willed to be with such a hearty woman.

Delilah buttoned her coat slowly, glaring at her boots as she did. When she was done, she gave Arthur a sad smile. “Feel better, poppet.” She paused, then added, “Remember me soon?”

Slapping another fake smile onto his face, Arthur nodded. “Absolutely.”

His sister grabbed him and held him in a tight hug, murmuring, “Promise?”

Arthur bit the inside of his cheek, closed his eyes, and pat his sister’s back. “I promise.”

“Then we’ll be off,” Delilah announced as she leaned back with a haughty sniff. She gave Alfred a pointed look. “But we’ll be back for more visits.”

“Oh,” Alfred muttered. Arthur looked over his shoulder to see Alfred leaning against the wall, shoulders slumped and expression downtrodden. Alfred shrugged and sarcastically cheered, “Yay.”

Sam smiled as he opened the door, ushered Delilah out into the quietly falling snow, and stepped outside the house. Before he closed it, he leaned through the doorway to say, “Stay warm, you guys.” And just like that, he was gone. Disappeared into the storm like they’d never been in the house. The only evidence that said otherwise was the soup on the stove.

Alfred shuffled back into the kitchen, but Arthur stayed put in the entryway for a moment. His sister certainly had a dominant personality. Like a bold, demanding princess. Poor Sam was like her footman, following her and saying “Yes ma’am,” to whatever she dared to say. Arthur smiled at the thought.

When he wandered back into the kitchen, Alfred was fussing over the stove, turning knobs until they clicked, then turning them back. Over and over. Restless. Like a caged animal.

“Alright?” Arthur asked softly, hearing Alfred grumbling at the stove. He winced when Alfred kicked the stove, rattling the dishes in the cabinet just above it.

“Stupid,” Alfred grunted. “Stupid stove. It’s not… it won’t turn off.”

Arthur stepped forward, trying to get around his frustrated husband. “Let me try –”

“I can do it!” Alfred snapped, turning the knob back and forth. The burner under the pot remained a hot, burning red, no matter which way he turned it. “Fuckin’… I payed good money for this thing! Why isn’t it working?”

Arthur flinched at the raised tone of voice, but was quick to answer. “It needs time,
Alfred. It needs to cool off.” Alfred turned the switch several more times, and Arthur placed his hand atop Alfred’s, softly repeating, “The burner needs time to cool down. Just leave it be.”

For a moment, Alfred simply glare at the stovetop, seemingly very upset by what he saw. Then, with one, shaking breath, his eyes began to glisten. Arthur’s heart nearly leapt out of his chest at the sight.

“A-Alfred?” He asked, turning his husband so he could see Alfred’s face. Alfred gave him a halfhearted smile.

“She… she wears me out,” Alfred admitted softly, a tear rolling down his warm, pink cheek. Arthur brushed it away with his thumb, and Alfred smiled. “Every time.”

Arthur smiled sadly in return. “She wore me out, too.”

“Yeah,” Alfred laughed shakily, adjusting his glasses a few times before he said. “It always gets to me, ya know? Always…”

That tugged Arthur’s heartstrings, and he struggled to keep smiling. “Delilah gets to you?”

“No.” Alfred shook his head. “She always says that I shouldn’t have married you.” His smile was sad as he sniffled and shrugged. “And she always brings up my parents. She knows it bothers me.”

Arthur hummed sadly as he pondered what to say. What would make Alfred feel better? How could he show Alfred that he supported him and cared for him, regardless of Delilah’s ridiculous accusations? Something simple, yet profound. Arthur looked into Alfred’s eyes – bluer than the sea, as endless at the horizon – and smiled softly.

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks,” Arthur said warmly, cupping Alfred’s face in his hands and pulling him forward so their foreheads touched. “I’m so glad you married me.”

Alfred scoffed. “You don’t remember my whole life story. You don’t remember my rebellious pre-teens and even more crazy teenage years.”

“I think I know enough about them,” Arthur giggled to himself. He closed his eyes, barely feeling the frame of Alfred’s glasses pressed to his brow. He smiled wider. “I know enough to love you all over again.”

Alfred jolted and managed to sputter, “W-what did you –”

Arthur cut off the rest of his sentence when he hiked up his chin and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for waiting!
See you next chapter.
In his lifetime, Arthur Kirkland had kissed Alfred Jones countless times.

When they first started dating, each kiss was hesitant. Cautious. Unsure. Months passed, and they enrolled in university. Kisses were exchanged fervently, intensely, and often. The years wore on, and kisses became second-nature, mundane actions they took whenever someone came home or left the flat. Simple. Almost forgettable.

But that was before the accident. Arthur couldn’t sit and remember each kiss. He couldn’t feel them. Couldn’t give them away as he wished. He’d always felt there was too much distance between him and Alfred. And then… Delilah confronted Arthur’s thoughts on Alfred. Insulted Alfred. Infuriated Arthur… and he could cement how he felt.

How did he feel? Arthur loved his husband. So, so much. Alfred had to know. He had to. If he didn’t, he must’ve been blind. Alfred was a good man, but he was a little too smart for his own good. He didn’t see what Arthur saw. Maybe… just this once, he needed a little hint. And so, Arthur had kissed him.

When Arthur pulled away, he was met with Alfred’s wide, wide eyes. It was almost as if Alfred had touched a power outlet and it gave him a shock that made his skin tingle. Arthur slowly pulled his hands from Alfred’s face, letting them fall to his sides. He waited for Alfred to respond, but the seconds wore on silently.

What was Alfred thinking? What would he say? Arthur’s heart pounded in his chest, and his palms started to sweat. He wanted to be able to see what was happening in that brilliant mind. He wanted to be able to write out his emotions and preserve it in a soft, romantic paragraph. But Arthur couldn’t read minds, nor could he decipher the signals flashing in Alfred’s eyes.

After a long, excruciating minute, Arthur cleared his throat. “W-well,” he stuttered, twiddling his thumbs. “I’m not sure… should I… apologize? Should I –”

“No.” Alfred interrupted. Arthur looked up slowly, seeing a goofy grin on his husband’s face. Arthur’s heart melted at the sight. Alfred laughing just once and shook his head. “Don’t ever apologize for kissing me.”

Arthur hesitantly smiled back. “You’re not upset?”

Alfred laughed heartily. “What? Why would I be?”

“I don’t remember everything yet,” Arthur shrugged, looking off to the side. “I just… I know that I love you. And whatever Delilah says,” he looked back at Alfred. “It’s wrong. She’s wrong. I know you’re a good man.”

“Yeah?” Alfred cocked his head to the side as he stepped closer, wrapping his arms around Arthur’s waist. Arthur felt his heartbeat pick up at the proximity. They were so close. Arthur lifted his hands from his sides, slowly sliding them up Alfred’s arms. Alfred continued to smile as he looked at Arthur over the edge of his glasses. “You think I’m good?”

“Very good,” Arthur nodded.
“Really good?” Alfred asked, his fingers drumming against Arthur’s back. Arthur eagerly nodded again.

“Extremely good.”

“If you think that big of me,” Alfred said thoughtfully. “I must’ve done something right.”

Without thinking, Arthur stood on the tips of his toes and kissed Alfred again. His lips were so soft. So warm. Part of Arthur – a part he couldn’t quite recall – missed that feeling. The feeling where Alfred’s hands fit against his body just right. The way Alfred would moan against his lips when he pulled back. And the soft, smooth slide of Alfred’s hair through his fingers when Arthur’s hands reached for it.

Perfect, perfect, perfect… Arthur had missed it. He’d missed feeling that way. The warmth, the ache, the touch… Arthur craved those feelings. He’d had glimpses of it in dreams and flashbacks. Just sips of a sweet, addicting wine. Now, Arthur was drowning in the intoxicating essence of Alfred.

Arthur kissed with fervent desire, hardly taking a breath between kisses. Alfred readily followed his lead, pulling Arthur impossibly closer and tilting his head a bit to kiss Arthur deeper. His head was spinning. His heart was racing. Alfred’s hands were everywhere… but it wasn’t enough. There was so much he was missing. So much lost intimacy he had to make up for.

Grasping at Alfred’s short hair, Arthur hesitantly licked along the seam of Alfred’s lips, feeling a soft, breathy laugh breeze across his cheeks. Arthur paused, leaned back, and gave Alfred a questioning look. Alfred eyes were still closed, and his glasses were crooked on his face. Arthur had made a mess of his hair, and parts of his golden locks were sticking up at odd angles as Alfred stood with a dreamy smile on his face.

Opening his eyes, Alfred blinked slowly. “Why’d ya stop?”

“Not quite sure,” Arthur muttered. He smoothed Alfred’s hair back into complacency. “But I’ve made a mess of you.”

Alfred shrugged loosely. “Oh, it wouldn’t be the first time you’ve done that.”

Giving Alfred a sharp look, Arthur grabbed his shirt collar and pulled him down again. Their lips collided messily, but that didn’t stop them. Alfred kissed Arthur harder than before, making it harder for Arthur to catch his breath. Light-headed, light-headed… getting a tad dizzy. But Arthur didn’t try to stop him. Alfred’s hand slid down Arthur’s back, cupping Arthur’s backside and pulling him up onto the tips of his toes and making him gasp.

It was too hot. Not enough air. Alfred pulled Arthur’s hips against his thigh and Arthur’s knees nearly buckled. He’d been trying to hide the slight throb in his trousers, but Alfred seemed to enjoy knowing about its presence. Arthur breathed a moan against Alfred’s lips, and Alfred kissed it away, pressing Arthur closer, closer, closer…

A sensation flickered through Arthur’s mind. Blankets. Hands scratching at the sheets. Alfred’s expression just before orgasm; his eyes closed and his lips parted around every gasping breath. A sound split Arthur’s skull in half: the unmistakable, broken sound of his own voice crying Alfred’s name as he tumbled over the edge of pleasure, taking Alfred with him.

Feeling agony pierce his skull, Arthur tore himself away from Alfred and held his head in his hands, letting out an alarmed, pained shout. The grating feeling inside his head didn’t stop as
he stumbled back and hit the edge of the counter, and he couldn’t explain the feeling when Alfred tried to soothe him.

Why were these painful memories always coming to him whenever he was on the brink of something good? He crumbled down onto his knees, holding his head in his hands as he waited for the ringing in his ears to dissipate. The drilling pain in his head slowly started to fade, and Arthur grit his teeth against the nerve-numbing buzz that grated across his eye sockets.


Arthur’s hands trembled as he shook his head. “N-no… I r-remembered something.” The blurriness in his vision eventually cleared, and he blinked at Alfred’s wide, panicked eyes. Arthur smiled shakily. “It was too much… too much at once.”

Alfred’s hands shook as he smoothed Arthur’s hair, slid over his cheeks, and landed on his shoulders. Was he trying to make sure Arthur was all right, or trying to see if everything had been a dream? Arthur wasn’t sure. He simply gave Alfred an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed sadly. “Things were going so well…”

Alfred shook his head. “Don’t. Don’t apologize for this,” he said with a stern expression, lifting Arthur’s chin to get a good look at his face. “This was totally out of your control.”

Arthur blinked spastically. Wasn’t he upset that Arthur interrupted their perfect moment? “But –”

“Shush,” Alfred ordered. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Arthur’s lips. Then another. And another. And over and over until Arthur fell forward into his arms, happy and complacent putty in Alfred’s hands. Alfred leaned back with a smile. “God, I’ve missed that. Kissing you…” he reached up a hand to brush his thumb over Arthur’s cheek. “And touching you.”

Arthur’s face flushed and he couldn’t smother his smile. “I have, too. I keep remembering all of these candid moments… all of those perfect kisses,” he glanced up at Alfred. “But every time I try to reimagine them, they’re just out of reach.”

Alfred sighed happily. “I love it when you talk like that.”

Feeling his emotions spill over the edges of his heart, Arthur closed his eyes and leaned in for another kiss, only to feel Alfred stop him with a hand on his shoulder, holding him back. Arthur opened his eyes quickly, giving Alfred a questioning look. Alfred merely smiled. You said it was too much all at once, right?” Alfred asked gently, and Arthur frowned. It was true. The tactile memories bubbled over the surface and his brain couldn’t catch up. Alfred nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. So… we should take things slow.”

“Slow,” Arthur repeated owlishly.

Alfred nodded. “I don’t want anything to hurt. We just need to…” he made a vague hand gesture. “Scrape up some of those old memories.”

Arthur wrinkled his nose at the use of ‘scrape’ in that sentence. Couldn’t he have used something like ‘pull’ or ‘pry’ rather than something so rough.

“How would we do that?” Arthur wondered as Alfred helped him to his feet. “My
memories have been rather slow-going lately.”

“I have a few ideas,” Alfred said, still holding Arthur’s hands in his. Arthur looked up at him, seeing a warm, kind expression in his eyes, reflected by the lenses of his glasses. Alfred licked his lips and asked, “Things come back when it’s a little familiar, right?”


Alfred smiled wider. “Good. We should go out.”

“‘Out?’” Arthur echoed, pointing at the kitchen window. “Into the snow-covered city?”

Alfred nodded. “Yeah. Just for a while. We’ll have a nice little date, see if some things come back… and we’ll take it slow. Nice and easy.”

Arthur’s heart leapt up into his throat. He’d never remembered any real dates with Alfred. He’d remembered the wedding and a sultry, sensual moment of their honeymoon… but not a real date. Had there been dinners? Candlelight? Sweet, sappy poetry? Arthur’s mind itched for details that he could print out on paper and hang on the wall: and Ode to Alfred.

“A date,” Arthur said softly, leaning back against the edge of the counter. “Where would we go?”

“There’s a little park in the middle of the city,” Alfred said with a smile, spreading his hands wide in a dramatic gesture. “They have all these lights up in the trees for December. We normally go see them the week before Christmas, but…” he shrugged loosely. “I don’t see a problem with going to see them early.”

There was a warm, sparkling feeling that spread through Arthur’s chest as he smiled at Alfred. Strings of fairy lights in the chilled, winter air… holding Alfred’s hand as they strolled through the park. How many times had they done it? How many years was Arthur missing? Arthur tried to push the loneliness from his brain as he nodded eagerly.

“I’d love to.”

Alfred’s eyes widened just a bit. “R-really?”

“Yes,” Arthur nodded again, a small smile on his face. “I can’t remember any dates with the man I love…” he paused, and then smiled a bit wider. “I think I’d like to change that.”

“Okay,” Alfred’s smile shone brightly as he swung their joined hands back and forth. Arthur was sure Alfred’s face would forever be stuck with his huge smile. Alfred’s eyes glittered behind the lenses of his glasses as he said, “It’s a date.”

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Arthur laid back in bed, quietly waiting for Alfred. Alfred had been sitting in the living room on his laptop, furiously looking over whatever work he’d missed because of the snowstorm. Hours had passed since Delilah had come for her surprise visit. Hours since Arthur had told Alfred he loved him. Hours since they kissed.

They were going on a date tomorrow. This would be Arthur’s first date… almost. It would be the first date he’d experienced since the accident. Arthur fidgeted his hands atop his stomach anxiously. He shouldn’t be nervous. Alfred was his husband. There was no possible way for things to go wrong. Then again… Arthur worried his bottom lip as he debated everything he’d
learned thus far.

He knew that Alfred enjoyed bottling up important, emotional things. He didn’t like to express big, loud emotions; anger, sadness, fear… they seemed too vast for Alfred. He was always so mellow. Always so kind. But… there was still a gap. A very crucial piece of Alfred that made him complete… and it never showed.

In the hospital, Alfred had been upset with Arthur’s doctor. Arthur remembered the flashback that tore through his mind, the crystal clear memory of Alfred punching someone in the face. Arthur frowned at the thought of it. Alfred? Hurting someone? It felt strange. Almost wrong. Like someone had framed him for a crime. But the memory was there in his brain.

Pulling the blankets up to his chin, Arthur folded his hands behind his head and sighed. There was someone darker, angrier, and more frustrated than anyone Arthur had ever known… right inside his husband’s heart. Why did Alfred always smother that side of himself down? Why were those brash, important emotions simply ignored? Arthur wondered to himself as he heard footsteps stomping up the stairs.

Alfred sighed as he came into the bedroom and sat on the bed. “Finally finished with all that crap,” he breathed as he took off his glasses, put them on his nightstand, and tucked himself under the covers. He sidled down until he was comfortably lying on his side facing Arthur. He smiled at Arthur’s sleepy, sidelong look. “Hey. How you doin’?”

Arthur felt a silly grin come to his face and he rolled onto his side to properly face Alfred. “I’m fine. A little nervous.”

Brushing hair from Arthur’s eyes, Alfred quirked an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? Are you still on edge from Delilah’s little visit?”

“Well…” Arthur admitted before taking Alfred’s hand from his hair and holding it against the soft blankets. Alfred’s smile softened, and Arthur squeezed his fingers. “But I think I’m more nervous about our date.”

Alfred shrugged nonchalantly. “No sweat. I’ve been on tons of dates with you. I think we can make it through one more.”

Arthur laughed lightly at the thought. Alfred really was so kind… so warm. How had he managed to fall in love with this man? How was he so lucky? Arthur had an edge to his personality. A prickly, spikey, uppity tone that was ingrained in his brain. And despite that, Alfred still looked at him the way he did. Even with Arthur’s biting responses and uneasy glances, Alfred was there. Looking at him with so much adoration in his eyes, Arthur was sure he’d melt into a puddle of sweet, messy feelings. Arthur sighed happily, and Alfred smiled.

“I love you,” Alfred breathed, hardly above a whisper. Like a secret. Like a prayer. Arthur’s heart swelled, and Alfred repeated himself. “I love you. I missed being able to say it.”

“You told me once, after the accident.” Arthur remembered the morning Alfred had been racing out the door. He remembered how Alfred called ‘I love you’ up the stairs without thinking. It was second-nature to him. Arthur smiled softly. “I wasn’t sure what to say in response.”

Alfred winced at that. “Yeah… It just slipped out. I was so used to saying it when I left the house.” He paused, then his face lit up with a smile. “Hey! Now that we’re a little cozier, I can… maybe… say it again? When I leave?”
“I’d like that,” Arthur started, then stopped to think. Alfred loved all of Arthur. Every little piece of him that he’d learned over the period of several years. Arthur had simply fallen head over heels for Alfred over the course of a month and a half. Was that good enough? Was that love, or was he enamored? Arthur pursed his lips as Alfred squinted at him.

“Hey. Are you making a face? If you’re making a face, I have to get my glasses. I can’t see shit.”

Arthur shook his head. “It’s… everything is fine. I’m just thinking.”

“You think too hard,” sighed Alfred. Arthur felt a smile pull at the corner of his lips, but his expression quickly drooped.

“I don’t remember everything yet,” he murmured, looking at their joined hands that were still resting atop the sheets. “I just have to wonder if I… do I love you as much as I used to?” Arthur shook his head. “Probably not. I knew so much more about you before the accident. Now… now I just love you a fraction of what I used to.” He frowned deeper at the thought. “That must be disappointing for you.”

For a moment, both men were quiet, letting Arthur’s statement sink in. Alfred’s eyes were dim in the dark room, just a shadow of what they once were. It was like all of his heavier emotions were lingering like storm clouds in his eyes, blocking out the warm, sunny feelings that he always displayed. Arthur looked away from those eyes, feeling a little ashamed to have brought those dark feelings to the surface.

When a handful of minutes had passed, Alfred squeezed Arthur’s hand and sighed softly.

“Love… it’s not really something you can measure.” Alfred nodded to himself. “It’s not counted in meters, and it doesn’t have mass. It’s not a physical thing. It’s a feeling. A concept.” His blue, blue eyes locked with Arthur’s, and Alfred held his gaze as he spoke. “Love is infinite. Cut it in half, it’s still infinity. Take a fraction of it? It’s still infinity. That’s why they call it unconditional love, right?” Alfred smiled. “You can’t have too much or too little. It just keeps going.”

Arthur opened his mouth to say something. Anything. But no words came to mind. What could he say to this perfect man? This genius who loved him? Arthur was the writer… but Alfred was whispering poetry to him in the dead of night. Arthur felt his cheeks burn and his eyes glisten, but no tears fell. He took his hand from Alfred’s and grasped the back of Alfred’s neck, pulling him forward into a kiss.

A perfect, perfect man… Arthur had chosen the perfect man to love. It seemed like every day he was reminded of that. Over and over until he believed it. Arthur kissed Alfred’s smile until he was sure it wouldn’t go anywhere, a permanent smile that would always brighten everyone’s day.

Alfred pulled back for a breath, just a centimeter from Arthur’s lips. Arthur opened his eyes just a bit, seeing Alfred’s peaceful expression. His closed eyes, and his cheeks highlighted by a subtle blush in the dim bedroom. Arthur brushed his thumb over Alfred’s cheek soothingly.

“Did I say something good?” Alfred asked softly, his eyes still closed. Arthur giggled to himself.

“Yes,” Arthur breathed after a moment. “Yes, it was positively charming.”
“Huh,” Alfred hummed to himself. He rolled onto his back and squinted up at the ceiling with a befuddled look on his face. “I need to remember that little speech. It must’ve been pretty damn amazing.”

“It was,” Arthur smiled as he curled close to Alfred’s side. He rested his head on Alfred’s chest, pulling the blankets up to cover the two of them. Alfred’s heartbeat was steady and slow in Arthur’s ear, and Arthur finally felt more at home than he’d ever felt since the accident. Alfred’s arm wrapped around Arthur’s shoulder, and Arthur let his tired eyes fall shut. He smiled. “It was perfect.”

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Arthur was hunched over the dining room table, furiously trying to balance chemical equations as his mother sat in the living room and laughed at the telly. His father was at the sink, slowly scrubbing at the dishes from dinner and humming an old song Arthur vaguely remembered. A lullaby? Some kind of crooning song, Arthur was sure. But he didn’t have time to think about that. He had homework to do.

When the doorbell rang, everyone in the house froze. His father stopped scrubbing. His mother went silent. Even upstairs, Delilah stopped blaring her music. The house was quiet, shaking in the residual sound of the ringing doorbell. They waited. Arthur looked at the clock on the stove; it was nearly eleven o’clock. If it was Alfred, something had happened. He hoped it was a neighbor. Someone that wanted to complain about Delilah’s music or Seamus’ motorbike.

Someone knocked on the front door. Two shy, soft knocks. Arthur’s heart dropped to his stomach. It was Alfred. With that sound, Arthur’s parents flew into motion.

“I’ll get out the pasta,” George said softly as he shuffled to the fridge. “He’ll need something to eat.”

Marian was off the sofa and making a beeline for the bathroom. “I’ll get the first aid kit. Arthur, love, get the door.”

Pushing himself out of his chair, Arthur left his homework on the table, forgotten and unimportant. Alfred was their main worry. What happened this time? Did his mother throw something? Did his father hit him? Had Alfred fought back? Arthur felt nauseous at the thought.

Opening the door, Arthur was greeted with the sight of his best friend. Alfred Jones, in all of his fifteen-year-old glory, stood on Arthur’s front step with a split lip and a puffy, black eye. Where were his glasses? Arthur narrowed his eyes in question, but he didn’t speak. Alfred tried to smile, but it was too crooked to be natural. He was holding his arm. He was in pain. But he wouldn’t admit it. Arthur sighed.

“Hey, um…” Alfred mumbled. He still held his arm. Maybe his father twisted it again. Luckily it was his left arm this time. He could still write with his right hand. Alfred cleared his throat and shuffled his foot. “Mind if I crash here tonight?”

Arthur blinked. They never minded. It was a ridiculous question. The entire Kirkland household would be thrilled to care for Alfred. He needn’t ask. But he always did. Always. He was too polite. Where had he gotten those manners? Who taught him that? Certainly not his parents.

Taking a step back, Arthur waved Alfred inside. “Dad’s warming up some supper. Go sit at the table.”
“M’not hungry,” Alfred said softly as he stepped into the house.

Arthur frowned. He was lying. There was hardly any good food at the Jones’ house. Despite Alfred’s protest, he sat at the table, squinting at Arthur’s homework.

“Balancing elements, huh?” Alfred tried to smile, but he winced and touched his fingers to his bottom lip when it started to bleed. Arthur hummed to himself and sat next to him.

“I can’t get it right, though…” said Arthur as he fiddled with his pencil. Arthur’s father set a plate of spaghetti in front of Alfred and gave him a solid pat on the back. Alfred looked down at the food with blurry eyes. Arthur turned back to his homework. “I hate science.”

“Don’t worry,” Alfred said softly. “Science hates you, too.”

Giving Alfred an unamused look, Arthur gave Alfred a soft punch to his shoulder. Alfred feigned pain, but his eyes didn’t sparkle with humor. He couldn’t smile the way he used to. He was a shadow of the boy Arthur knew. Arthur looked away when his mother brought the first aid kit to the table.

“All right,” Arthur’s mother opened the kit and gave Alfred’s face a hard look. “Let’s get that lovely face all cleaned up.” She paused for a moment. “Where are your glasses?”

Alfred hesitated. “Um. At my house. I think I stepped on them when I left.”

Arthur’s eyes went wide at the thought. How had they fallen from his face? How hard had Alfred’s father hit him? Arthur’s mother hummed, but didn’t ask any more questions. Lowering his eyes to his papers, Arthur clicked his mechanical pencil as Alfred hissed and winced at the sting of antiseptic.

The house was quiet. Delilah didn’t turn on her music again. Arthur’s father resumed washing the dishes. No one asked what happened. They all knew enough. Alfred didn’t like to talk about it, nor did he like to talk about going to the police.

“Just until I’m done with high school,” Alfred would tell them. “I can make it until then. It’s no big deal.”

But it was. Everyone in the Kirkland household knew what a big deal it was. Bloodied lips and bruised faces were a common occurrence for Alfred. And it was wrong. They all wanted better for him. Arthur especially.

He loved Alfred. He loved Alfred more than any friend he’d ever had before. He wanted Alfred to smile and laugh more. Arthur wanted the world to bend and shape itself around Alfred’s happiness. But that wasn’t possible. Reality was sharp. Unfair. Cruel.

Arthur clicked his pencil and tapped it against his notebook. He couldn’t stop Alfred’s parents from hating him or beating him. He couldn’t even bring himself to look Alfred in the eye.

“Hey,” Alfred grumbled, tapping his finger against Arthur’s notebook. “You got this wrong. It’s supposed to be a five, not a four. That way, the hydrogen balances.”

Arthur looked at him. This bright, cheeky, sporadic fool that was his best friend. He looked at Alfred’s unfocused, narrowed eyes. He looked at the bruise that was quickly darkening just above his cheekbone, and the bright, red welt on his lip that had been cleaned and disinfected. He was broken. Torn apart beneath his caretakers. But to him, it was nothing. He didn’t know how truly mistreated he was. He ignored the pain. He didn’t cry. He just corrected Arthur’s homework.
without a care in the world. Arthur looked away.

“Right,” Arthur erased his mistake with shaking hands. “I’ll… I’ll fix it.”

Alfred slowly took a bite of spaghetti, chewing carefully. “’Kay,” he said with a mouthful of food. “Make sure you fix that other one. I’m pretty sure it’s wrong.”

Arthur blinked. There were at least twelve questions on his paper. “Which one?”

Shrugging a bit, Alfred swallowed. “Dunno. Can’t see ’em all without my glasses. But you suck at chemistry.”

Feeling a smile tug at his lips, Arthur shook his head as his father laughed to himself softly. Alfred ate leisurely, knowing he had more than enough time to relax. It was a Friday, after all. They could sleep late. Heaven knows Arthur’s parents would let Alfred sleep as long as he wanted. He needed to be free. He needed to know peace, if only for a few moments. To feel safe. To feel loved.

Arthur’s fingers clenched around his pencil as Alfred continued to eat. He lifted his eyes, looking at Alfred’s blank, semi-alert expression. Did he know that Arthur cared so much? So deeply? So strangely? It was a kind of care that burned in his chest and lingered in his mind when he was trying to sleep. One that made him feel restless standing still. One that begged him to move. To help. To hold Alfred. To keep him safe from everything in the world.

This wasn’t something that people naturally thought, was it? He was a child. Both he and Alfred were young. Hardly aware enough of the world to know that it was unjust. And yet… there they sat, quiet at the kitchen table, feeling all of these feelings that ought not be felt. Arthur frowned and clicked his pencil. The lead fell out. He didn’t pick it up.

Arthur looked at Alfred. Those blue eyes, that golden hair… that personality which continued on and on with happiness. Over and over. Feeling the only safe thing that he could feel. But… that wasn’t really happiness. His smile wasn’t real. It was missing. Buried under emotions that Alfred didn’t dare to express.

Alfred didn’t cry when he came to the Kirkland household. His hands never shook. He was, for all intents and purposes, content with his unfair, unorderly home life. Arthur’s chest hurt at the thought. He felt useless. Too quiet. Like he wasn’t good enough, old enough, strong enough… he wasn’t enough to keep Alfred safe. To let him feel. He should’ve been able to cry. He should’ve been able to be afraid. To express his frustration, his anger, his disgust. But Alfred never said a word about it. He didn’t shout. It was like he didn’t have it in him. Arthur wanted him to be able to feel those emotions. He wanted Alfred to open his heart and be free. Not just survive on basic emotions… he wanted Alfred to really, genuinely feel.

Reaching his hand across the table, Arthur gripped Alfred’s left wrist, and held it. Alfred stopped eating, holding his fork in his right hand, just against his lips. He squinted down at Arthur’s hand.

“What’re you doing?”

“I know you’re not scared,” Arthur said softly. “But it’s okay if you are.”

Alfred was quiet for a moment. “I’m not.”

“But if you were,” Arthur pressed. “It would be okay.” He looked at Alfred, hoping that even without his glasses, Alfred could feel the intent in his eyes. “It’s all right to be scared.”
“But I’m not,” Alfred insisted as he pulled his wrist away. He leaned over his plate and took another bite. He sounded so sure, but as he continued to eat, Alfred’s hands shook ever so slightly. He glared at his plate, but his eyes turned glossy, filling with tears. Arthur looked away, but he heard Alfred sniffle quietly. As if to scrape together his pride, Alfred took another bite of spaghetti and grumbled, “I’m not scared.”

There was a tremble in his voice. One that made Arthur’s heart ache. But, even if it hurt, it meant that Alfred was feeling it. Not suppressing it. Arthur clicked his pencil, and looked down at his paperwork.

“I know,” Arthur agreed. At the sink, Arthur’s father was quiet as Alfred sniffled again. He looked over his shoulder at Arthur, and Arthur smiled uneasily. His father gave him a stern nod. Arthur sighed. “I know.”

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Arthur opened his eyes slowly, hearing the telltale sounds of Alfred rummaging around the room. There was the sound of him opening the wardrobe, the flutter of fabric as he pulled on a shirt, and his unintelligible grumbling as he looked for the spray that would clean his glasses.

Rubbing his eyes, Arthur felt the warm line of fresh tears along the sides of his face, falling back into his hair. Arthur looked at his damp fingertips. There was so much in his past with Alfred… so many dark, unhappy things. And yet, there was something bright in the dirty trail of their past. A light that glimmered like a star in an empty, navy sky.

Smiling to himself, Arthur wiped the remaining tears from his face as he sat up. He watched Alfred dart into the bathroom, dig in the cabinet for a moment, then poke his head out of the doorway. Arthur arched a questioning eyebrow.

“I can’t find the stuff to clean my glasses.” Alfred took off his – apparently – dirty glasses and slowly trudged back into the bedroom. He made it all the way to the bed before he walked into the bedframe, swore, and moved around it. “I’ll have to wear my spares.”

Arthur gave his husband a bemused look. “How tragic. You poor thing.”

“Cut me some slack,” Alfred said as he fumbled for the drawer on his nightstand. He plucked out an old glasses case and pushed the new pair onto his nose. The frames were a bit thicker, and they held a gold tint. Almost reminiscent of something a person would wear in the early 90’s. Arthur bit back a laugh as Alfred turned to him. “How do I look?”

“Dashing,” Arthur managed to say with a straight face. “Absolutely dashing.”

Grinning widely, Alfred straightened his glasses and nodded officially. “Great! Then I’m outta here,” he came to the bedside, leaned close to Arthur and said, “I’ll take you out when I get home.”

Sparks flared in Arthur’s chest, wild and untamable as Arthur smiled. “I can’t wait.”

Without hesitation, Alfred leaned forward for a kiss, and Arthur closed his eyes happily. It was chaste. Warm and simple. Just a placeholder for much longer, much more sensual kisses to come in the future. It left Arthur feeling a little hazy when Alfred left the room and stomped down the stairs.

Just as the front door creaked open, Alfred called, “I love you!” into the house. Arthur felt a hot, gooey emotion flood his chest, and he couldn’t help but smile wider as he shouted, “I
love you, too!”

The front door slammed shut, and Arthur was left with tingly, giddy feelings that made his skin itch and his toes curl. Laughing softly to himself, Arthur fell back against the pillows, looking up at the beige ceiling with a brighter outlook than he’d ever had for himself before.

Memories were returning, his husband was once again at his side, and the gap between who he was and who he wanted to be was beginning to shrink. Arthur took a deep breath and let out a content sigh. It only took time for things to fall into place. Of course, there were several messes and sticky confrontations that left Arthur a bit more than frazzled, but nonetheless, he was starting to feel like himself. He was no longer an outsider in his own life.

Arthur had never liked to be a spectator or flustered young something waiting for their knight in shining armor. He knew that very well. He had a will of titanium – except when it came to Alfred Jones – and didn’t like to hold still when he could be making progress.

Kicking off the blankets, Arthur groomed his wild hair and brushed his teeth. The bandage over his scar was removed slowly and painfully, but to his surprise, there was hardly any scar to see. It was no more than a faint, pink line that marked his brow, already being covered by his blonde hair. The bruises that had covered the right side of his body were all but gone, leaving only a slight soreness in Arthur’s knee when he got up from a chair or the sofa. Arthur smiled; he was nearly himself again. It was almost like the accident hadn’t happened. For a moment, he could pretend that everything was normal.

Putting on a fresh change of clothes, Arthur pattered around the house aimlessly. What would he normally do during the day? Write? Clean? When he’d gone on his cleaning spree a few weeks ago, it merely left him drained. Arthur folded his arms over his chest and tapped his foot crossly. He had to do something. He couldn’t just sit and twiddle his thumbs until Alfred came home and whisked him away on their date. That would be preposterous. And terribly lazy, as a side note.

Looking around the entryway, Arthur saw his comfortable wool coat along with a slightly dull, used windbreaker. Arthur squinted at the jacket for a moment before blinking in realization. It was the jacket from Sara’s café. Irritation prickled at the back of Arthur’s brain; why hadn’t he returned it sooner? So many things had happened since he’d visited the café last… he’d been sick, then Alfred had caught the bug. Then the snow storm and Delilah… time had blurred together, weaving each day together like the chapters of a book that melded into one story.

Taking his own jacket from the coat rack, Arthur put it on and pushed his feet into his shoes. It was about time he went outside, anyway. He couldn’t stay cooped up in his house forever. Before he left, he sent Alfred a text that said, ‘I’m going out for coffee. I’ll be home soon.’ Hopefully, Alfred wouldn’t panic like the first time Arthur went on his own adventure. So, with a slight smile, Arthur took the spare jacket from the hook and stepped outside.

The air was cold. Slightly bitter. But it wasn’t cold enough to make his cheeks hurt when he shut the front door. There was a fresh layer of fallen snow on the ground, and it crunched loudly as he trekked down the quiet, winter pavement of uptown Seattle. He sighed, and his breath clouded in the air, almost like his anxieties were being expelled and taken away by the chilled, winter air.

As Arthur walked, Arthur felt a familiarity bubbled up inside of him. He’d walked these streets with Alfred. More times than he could remember, he was sure. He may have even taken a stroll with Delilah, Seamus, or even Alistair, once upon a time. Arthur smiled at the thought of having his siblings so close. But, Seamus was off on the other side of America. Delilah was far too
controlling. And Alistair… Arthur sighed again. He’d made his peace with his brother being gone. It didn’t hurt any less, but Arthur had accepted it.

He didn’t remember how long it took him to reach the café, but when he walked through the front door, reality came crashing into him like a wave. His toes were so cold, they no longer felt like anything. His bare hands were bright red and aching from the exposure to the elements, and his nose was already beginning to run. Luckily for him, Sara was at the front counter and recognized him right away.

Her eyes lit up as she waved to him. “Mr. K! How’ve you been? I haven’t seen you in weeks!”

Arthur chuckled a bit as he approached the counter, taking a napkin from the holder in front of Sara to wipe his nose. “Heavens… a bit nippy outside.”

Sara hummed thoughtfully. “Yeah. At least I’m back here,” she laughed. Leaning over the counter, Sara whispered, “How’s the memory thing? Feeling any better?”

“A bit,” Arthur smiled to himself. He held out the jacket. “I’ve been meaning to return this.”

Sara looked at the jacket for a moment, then slowly took it. “Wow. Thanks! This is just the spare jacket we have in case we have to go into the big cooler,” she adjusted her sapphire-colored hijab before she gave Arthur an interesting look. “I honestly didn’t think you’d bring it back.”

They shared a laugh. Arthur ordered hot tea. Sara sat with him on her break while a coworker watched the front. Sara’s hands were wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee while she rocked her feet back and forth under her chair. Arthur smiled at the action.

“Pardon my asking again,” Arthur said softly. “How long have we known each other?”

“No problem.” Sara held her coffee close to her face, soaking in the warmth before she said. “Just about two years, now. Why?”

Arthur winced. “I was thinking about the first time we met. You said I was in a foul mood.”

“Oh, yeah.” Sara nodded as she set her cup down without taking a drink. “You were really mad. But the next day you came back and apologized. You said it was some family thing.”

Family thing? That sparked Arthur’s interest. He tapped his finger against the side of his paper cup, looking down into his green tea.

“I don’t quite recall,” he said softly. “Did I ever mention what kind of problem I was having?”

Sara leaned back and sighed. “Um… I think… it was a fight? With your sister or something?” Arthur’s eyes widened, and Sara nodded to herself. “Yeah. Yeah, that was it. I think you came from her place to get a cup of tea and calm down or something… and I spilled your tea on the counter.” She leaned forward to take a sip of her mocha before giving Arthur a bashful smile. “You were so mad… but you didn’t yell or anything. You just turned around and left.”

Arthur was quiet for a moment. Two years ago… a fight with his sister. Delilah had spread the rumor of Alfred two years ago. Arthur blinked. That’s why he was upset that day. He’d
gone to confront Delilah. To tell her to keep her mouth shut. To stay away from his and Alfred’s business. Arthur gave Sara a wide-eyed look. Everything fit together seamlessly. Sara, Delilah, the city… each memory and story was falling back into the perfect position, almost laying out Arthur’s past few years like an outline for a book.

Sara squinted at him. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Sorry,” Arthur sat back and looked at the tea in his hands. “I was just thinking. I know so much more than I used to… it’s interesting to see my life laid out for me like this.”

“Maybe you should write it down,” Sara laughed before she took a sip of coffee. “That way, you won’t forget anything you learn.”

Arthur quirked an eyebrow as he took a slow drink of tea. “Mm… I don’t think I could do that. I’d have to describe everything I feel, and I don’t feel up to writing my own biography.”

“Why not?” Sara shrugged. “You’ve got time.”

Arthur laughed at that. “No, no… not tonight, I don’t.”

Sara paused, then leaned forward at the table. “Oh. Mr. K… do you have…” Sara raised her eyebrows and emphasized the word, “Plans?”

Arthur leaned forward, too. It was almost like they were exchanging idle gossip. It made Arthur feel giddy when he said, “I have a date.” Sara gasped and covered her mouth. Arthur laughed as he sat back in his chair. “I haven’t remembered any of our dates in the past… so Alfred’s taking me out for a night on the town.” Sara cooed at the thought, and Arthur felt his cheeks warm when he said, “Alfred said something about lights in the park. It’ll be nice to go with him.”

“You’re gonna see the Christmas lights?” Sara asked, her eyes sparkling with interest. “I love those. They’re so pretty. The trees look so cool…” She gave Arthur a knowing smile as she said, “And it’s going to be so romantic.”

“Yes,” Arthur agreed with a smile. He looked down at his tea with a sly smile as he said, “At least, that’s what I’m hoping for.”

Sara gave his right hand a comforting pat. “Don’t worry, Mr. K.” She winked at him before she stood and threw away her empty cup. “I’ll be rooting for you.”

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Arthur twitched where he sat on the sofa, irritably watching an interview with an American singer. The young man was slouched so far down in his chair, Arthur was assuming he’d fall out of his seat at any moment. He was on national television. Didn’t he have any sort of pride? Had it been Arthur, he’d have been sitting up straight with a pleasant smile on his face. Arthur blinked.

He had been on television. Girls at the bookstore had recognized him from his interviews. Had he looked all right? Hopefully his hair wasn’t a mess. Arthur passed a hand through his hair absentely. If the interview went well, he hoped he’d had a smile on his face. He touched his cheek softly… there was no hint of a smile, even when he was thinking about it. That made Arthur frown harder.

Alfred chose a strange man to fall in love with. A grumpy, moody, disagreeable man.
What did Alfred see in him? Creativity? That hardly seemed like enough for Alfred to fall in love. Arthur crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the sofa cushions. Alfred loved him… he loved Alfred. Wasn’t that enough? Why wasn’t Arthur satisfied? He was a writer… he liked details. Perhaps that was his issue. He needed more. He needed every note and correction in their relationship. Each page, each chapter… Arthur needed the story, not the summary.

The front door opened and shut, and Arthur looked over his shoulder to smile at Alfred as he came inside. He shook his winter jacket and made loud, obnoxious sounds that indicated chilliness. Arthur rolled his eyes and turned off the telly.

“Ah, that was a day.” Alfred dropped his computer bag next to the coat rack. He adjusted his glasses on his nose, and much to Arthur’s amusement, the lenses were fogged with steam. Alfred smiled nonetheless. “Honey, I’m home!”


“D’aww… you haven’t called me that in ages.” The fog on his glasses started to thin, and Arthur could finally see his blue eyes behind the frames. Alfred laced his hands together at the small of Arthur’s back as he cocked his head to the side coyly. “You ready for your first date?”

Arthur sniffed haughtily. “I’ve been on dates before, Alfred.” He looked off to the side when he mumbled, “I just don’t remember them.”

Without warning, Alfred hopped out of Arthur’s arms and bounced to the front door. “That’s what tonight is for!” He exclaimed as he opened the front door. “Let’s go! Time’s a-wasting!”

Arthur rolled his eyes and put on his jacket while Alfred practically vibrated with excitement.

“Oh, calm yourself,” Arthur chided as he finally stepped outside. He closed the door and Alfred locked it, but before Arthur could take his hand, Alfred was next to the car, waving Arthur inside with the repetitive, swinging motion of his arm. Arthur rolled his eyes. “Alfred, the park isn’t going anywhere.”

“No, but the big lights will be turned on, soon!” Alfred said loudly. People that were walking on the pavement turned and looked at the frantic man, and Arthur saw a few people laugh. Pulling up his collar to hide his embarrassed, burning ears, Arthur shuffled down the front steps and into the car. Alfred leaned in the doorway, breathing out exuberant puffs of breath when he announced, “I’m gonna make this the best date of your life!”

With a slightly enthusiastic hum, Arthur nodded when Alfred shut the car door and bounded over to the driver’s side. He was obviously excited. There was no doubt he had a wonderful evening in store. Arthur buckled his seat belt and sat back with a smile as Alfred clambered into the car. It was going to be a good night. He just had to remain positive.

That was easier said than done when Alfred put the keys into the ignition. Arthur’s fingers shook as the engine revved and roared to life. Riding in cars was more nerve wracking than he remembered. Alfred, however, didn’t notice the trembling of Arthur’s hands, and put the car into drive.
When he pulled out into traffic, Alfred slammed his foot on the car and sent the car flying down the street fast enough for Arthur to slam back in his seat. Feeling a panic attack rising in his chest, Arthur grasped at the dashboard with his left hand and the car door with his right, trying to keep himself in place.

“Oi, oi! What’s the rush?” Arthur squeaked, pushing his foot down frantically. It was no use. There wasn’t a brake under his foot. Alfred went a little slower when he took a left turn, but didn’t make any move to so much slower.

“I’m not going that fast, Arthur. I just wanna make it there before they turn on the lights,” said Alfred lowly.

Arthur gave him a horrified look. How fast were they going to go? What if they slid on ice? What if they drifted into a snowbank? What if they crashed? Arthur’s eyes went wide. He felt sick. His chest felt hot and cold at the same time. Numb with fear.

“Slow down,” Arthur ordered. Alfred reduced his speed, but didn’t seem to be taking Arthur seriously. Arthur swallowed hard and repeated, “Slow down.”

“I am,” Alfred said calmly. His hands were so lax on the steering wheel. How was he not terrified of this speed? Arthur pressed his foot to the floor of the car, pushing an imaginary break. They were still going too fast.

“You’re not slowing down,” Arthur hissed. He pushed his foot against the floor. The car didn’t slow down. They’d speed through a red light. They were going to crash. It was Alistair all over again. “S-slow down. Slow --”


Arthur nearly had a heart attack.

“Are you insane?” He screeched as he leaned over to grab the wheel. The car didn’t swerve. The way he was leaning, Arthur could see Alfred’s feet on the pedals. His foot wasn’t even on the gas. Arthur paused, and looked out at the road.

They were stopped at a traffic light.

“You… you were driving too fast,” Arthur blinked hard, and slowly let go of the wheel. “I didn’t feel us stop.”

Alfred replaced his hands on the wheel. “I know. But after you told me to slow down the first time, I started coasting at fifteen miles an hour.” Alfred calmly hit his turning signal and took a right turn. “That was still too fast. So I slowed down some more. But, to you, it must’ve felt like I was speeding.”

Arthur felt the strange numbness in his chest slowly dissipate as he sat with his hands in his lap. “Oh,” he breathed. He looked out the passenger-side window, seeing just how slow the car was crawling along the street. There were at least four cars behind them, trailing bumper-to-bumper while a few honked their horns. Arthur blinked. “I must’ve… I thought…”

“PTSD is a real thing, Arthur,” Alfred said quietly. “I know it is.”

Arthur snorted and shook his head. “Right. Of course. If it’s so real, why haven’t I had a panic attack every other time I’ve ridden in a car?”
Alfred took a deep breath through his nose, and slowly exhaled as he let the car creep to a stop at a stop sign. “Our brains are the most complex thing in this universe, Arthur. We’re living computers.” He paused, then shrugged a bit. “Sometimes, things happen in our brains… and we can’t always explain it. Stuff like panic attacks and triggers to certain things… they can happen at any time.”

Arthur looked away from the somber look on Alfred’s face. He didn’t want to see that expression. This wasn’t what Alfred should’ve been thinking of on their date night. Arthur clenched his fists and huffed. He was ruining their evening. This was supposed to be about Arthur remembering their relationship and all that it involved over the years. He was supposed to be thinking about love. Not fear.

“Sorry,” Arthur said with a melancholy smile. “I’m making a proper mess of this night.”

“No.” Alfred reached over and put his right hand on Arthur’s knee. “It’s totally okay. I’m glad I was here with you when this happened. It’d be pretty bad if you were in a taxi and you panicked.” Arthur winced at the idea, and Alfred gave him a quick, sidelong glance. “You don’t have to be sorry, Arthur. Dates aren’t always perfect.”

Pursing his lips, Arthur looked away from Alfred and turned to the window. Hopefully, Alfred couldn’t see the way his ears were burning with a happy flush. Alfred’s hand was still on his knee, and Arthur placed his own hand on top of it. Alfred laced their fingers together silently, watching the road as their joined hands rested atop Arthur’s thigh. Arthur smiled. It felt good to hold Alfred’s hand again. It reminded him of something. Something far, far away in his memory. Arthur closed his eyes and tried to immerse himself in the feeling. It was warm, summer days. The faint whiff of vanilla and the crisp, taste of strawberry on his tongue. His mother’s laughter and Alfred’s voice yelling something exciting, but just too far away to be audible. Cold, cold water lapping against his ankles, and the bitter sting of a sunburn over his cheeks.

Arthur blinked himself out of his thoughts when the car creaked to a stop. They were in a parking lot. There were trees all along a path in front of them. This must’ve been the park Alfred wanted to see. Arthur tried to shake the memories from his head when Alfred took his hand away, but he could still feel the heat of a sunburn on his face. He brushed his fingertips over the ridges of his cheekbones; there was no sting. Though, Arthur had remembered seeing freckles on his cheeks when he looked in the mirror closely. He smiled softly. He’d gotten those freckles through long, sunny summers with Alfred.

Alfred opened Arthur’s door and leaned down to smile at him. “Hey. You ready to go?” He paused, then said, “We can come back some other time if you –”

“No, no,” Arthur shook his head and climbed out of the car. He gave Alfred a smile. “I just got distracted for a moment.”

Alfred locked the car and held out his hand for Arthur. Arthur happily took it as they started for the pathway through the park. “Were you thinking about something good?”

“Very good,” Arthur nodded to himself. “Positively lovely.” He looked up at the trees, admiring their sinewy, bare branches, lightly dusted with snow. He could see the fairy lights hanging on the branches, but they weren’t lit yet. Arthur smiled. “I remembered summer.”

“And you,” he breathed softly. “I remembered… holding your hand. Getting sunburns on
my face. The water…”

“The lake,” Alfred said quickly. Arthur looked to him, seeing a smile on Alfred’s face.
“You would go up to a lake in the summer. All through middle school and high school. You guys
would bring me along most of the time.” Alfred’s smile shone in the light of the small, dim
lamplights that lit the path. “We would have a lot of fun. Your dad would try fishing…but he
never caught anything.”

Arthur chuckled a bit. “I don’t quite remember that. But I do remember the warmth. And
the lake.” Arthur looked up at the sky, seeing the bright, city lights drowning out the glitter of the
stars. “I remember… echoes. It’s like a shadow of my own memory.” He lowered his eyes back to
the pathway, and smiled. “I’m hoping that I’ll get it all back, someday. Perhaps…I could fill in
those gaps.”

For a moment, Alfred was quiet. He let Arthur’s words linger in the air like their clouds
of breath, thick and heavy in the cool air. Arthur looked at the dark trees. He saw the lights of
buildings streaming through the branches. He saw the tremble of the trees in the wind. Shaking in
fear of winter’s chilling embrace.

After a few minutes, Alfred let out a long breath and said, “I hope you’ll get everything
back.” He reached up a hand to adjusted his glasses as they kept walking. “But, even if you don’t,
it’ll be okay.”

Arthur gave him a speculative look. “And how’s that?”

“Because I’ll be here,” Alfred smiled at him. “I’ll fill in whatever gaps you want.”

Stopping, Arthur held Alfred’s hand tight and kept him from moving forward. Alfred
gave him a strange look, but Arthur stayed still. He was promising to tell him anything. Everything.
If Arthur ever wanted to know about their shared memories… Alfred would tell him. Even the
dark, heavy memories Alfred didn’t like to discuss. He would tell him. Whatever Arthur wanted, he
could have. Arthur sighed.

“You’ll tell me… anything?”

Alfred hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Everything?”

Another hesitation. It was just a fraction of a second where Alfred’s eyes darted off to the

“Tell me,” about your parents, Arthur wanted to say. Tell me why you stayed. Tell me
what kept you going. Arthur bit the inside of his cheek. He wanted to know the details. To know
Alfred’s motivation as a character in the story. To know all of his deep, dark secrets. Arthur
squeezed his hand. No one man was meant to be omnipotent. But Alfred was his husband. Arthur
should know. Shouldn’t he? Arthur met Alfred’s eyes, and slowly said, “Tell me about…
yourself.”

Alfred blinked and pointed to himself. “Me?” Arthur nodded, and Alfred laughed a little.
“O-oh. Well. Ha… there’s not much to say that you don’t know.” He started them down the path
again, and Arthur easily kept pace with Alfred, holding his hand as Alfred smiled to himself. “You
already know how long I was in school. I have a doctorate in microbiology and I love space stuff.”
Arthur smiled at that, and Alfred took the smile as a good sign. He went on. “I was born in a little town in the south corner of Washington state. I went to school there for a few years until my folks moved us up here.

“I met you when we were ten years old. We didn’t get along at first, but we always had fun when we played on the playground.” Alfred looked up at the sky, remembering something fondly as Arthur waited for him to go on. “I… I don’t remember when I fell for you. It was in middle school somewhere, I think. I just looked at you and said: ‘wow. I wanna be with him forever.’” He looked back at Arthur with a big smile on his face. “And here we are.”

“Here we are,” Arthur repeated softly.

They must’ve made it to the center of the park, because there were several benches sent up in a circle, facing the trees. Some type of viewing place? A place to stop and see the lights, Arthur thought to himself. Alfred let go of his hand and hopped toward the nearest bench, tapping the spot next to him and waiting for Arthur to come sit next to him. Arthur smiled.

“Alfred,” Arthur said quietly as he sat down next to his husband. “I want to know… about your parents, if I could.”

Alfred’s smile disappeared, and he swallowed thickly. Adjusting his glasses anxiously, Alfred nodded just once. “Yeah. Okay.”

Arthur frowned at the reaction. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“No, I should, it’s just…” Alfred shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket and ducked his chin into his coat collar. “There’s nothing else to tell you. You already know everything.”

Arthur turned away, admiring the frosty concrete under his feet. “I’ve noticed you don’t like to talk about those things.”

“What things?” Alfred sounded almost irritated, but Arthur paid it no mind.


“That’s what my therapist said,” Alfred mumbled into his collar.

Arthur blinked spastically. Therapist? Alfred had a therapist? When? How? He never spoke about it. Arthur didn’t remember him coming home late on any specific days, or leaving early… when would he have gone to any appointments? While Arthur wracked his brain for information, Alfred sighed and kicked his right foot back and forth.

“When… I got into college and moved out of my parents’ place, I…” Alfred took a breath, then slowly exhaled. “I dunno. I just had a lot of anger, I guess. About my parents, about my life… It was all just… shoved down. And I kept pushing it down.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose. “It was like… two weeks into our freshman year. We were at this party. You didn’t wanna drink, but… I did. You told me it wasn’t smart to drink something at a party like that, and I… I got mad.” He paused. “I got really mad.”

Arthur felt uncomfortable. This conversation wasn’t going where he expected it to go. He thought he was going to hear about Alfred’s horrifying parents. Now, they were talking about therapists and college parties. What was he talking about? Getting angry about Arthur wanting to
stay sober? Why would that be an issue?

“I hit you.” Alfred said bluntly. Arthur felt his heart stutter and stop before fluttering back to life in a panic. He leaned away from Alfred a bit.

“W-what?” Arthur squeaked breathlessly. Alfred was looking down at the ground shamefully, and he closed his eyes tight.

“I… did something really bad. It was just once. One hit. But that’s all it took.” He opened his eyes and peered over at Arthur sadly. “You didn’t talk to me for three weeks.” Arthur stomach churned uncomfortably, but he still felt a flicker of empathy for Alfred’s ashamed expression. After a few long, stretched seconds of silence, Alfred sniffled and said, “I went to therapy. Anger management. I had a therapist name Samantha. We talked about my parents and,” he looked up at Arthur, “We talked about you.”

Arthur blinked. “Me?”

Alfred smiled a bit. “Yeah. You meant a lot to me, Arthur. You still mean a lot to me. I don’t know where I’d be without you.” He leaned back and lifted his chin a bit. “You keep me on the right track.” He stopped, then let out another breath. “I met up with you on campus after a month of therapy. I apologized. I told you I missed you. And you…” Alfred smiled to himself, “You said that you wanted to help me get better. You wanted me to be myself again.” Sniffling again, Alfred took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Arthur felt his chest tighten. Was he crying? Alfred put his glasses back on before Arthur could see. “All that anger… It messed with my head. It made me lash out against people that care about me because of the unhealthy amount of repression in my youth.”

Arthur scooted closer to him, and put a hand on Alfred knee. “And… now?”

“Now, I’m a lot better.” He smiled at Arthur. “I still see Samantha every couple months, but… ever since that party, things were different. I was different. I wanted…” he paused, and shook his head. “I don’t want to be a kind of man that scares his partner. I want to be someone that you can feel safe with. And… and I’m glad you gave me the opportunity to be that person.” Alfred smiled, but it was still a bit sad when he said, “I’m really glad you gave me a second chance.”

“I am, too,” Arthur breathed through his smile. Alfred’s eyes glistened a bit, and Arthur leaned forward to press a kiss to his soft lips. When he leaned back, a tear was already making its way down Alfred’s cheek. Arthur giggled softly as he brushed his thumb over Alfred’s cheek. “Look at you… my poor poppet.”

Alfred sniffled and laughed to himself. “God… I’ve become such a crybaby.”

Arthur smiled and nodded. “So have I. All I can do since this godforsaken accident is cry.”

Alfred laughed harder. “Great! We’ve got one thing in common.”

While the two of them laughed, Arthur felt something warm bubble up in his chest. It was a chain reaction that made the knots in his stomach unravel and settle down. The butterflies in his stomach all took flight, leaving him feeling relaxed and free. Satisfied and relaxed. Arthur looked at his husband. His wonderful, adoring husband. The one to fought his past and his own mind to be with him. The one that believed in him unconditionally. Who loved him despite everything that should’ve driven them apart.
Arthur cupped Alfred’s face and pulled him in, feeling Alfred’s smile pressed against his lips as they kissed. With or without memories, Arthur loved him. And Alfred loved him back. They both leaned back with ridiculous smiles on their faces, and the lights in the park flared to life.

The trees sparkled with different sets of lights that twinkled and flickered, and Arthur let out a disbelieving breath. It was beautiful. Hundreds of thousands of shimmering stars were caught in the trees. It was as if magic was laced around every branch, and everyone walking past was a member of this spectacular, enchanted realm. Alfred and Arthur were just among it all, sitting and staring up at the lights in unabashed awe.

“Shoot,” Alfred hissed. Arthur gave him a flabbergasted look, and Alfred frowned at him. “I didn’t get to see your face when the lights turned on. You distracted me.”

Letting out a startled laugh, Arthur shook his head and said, “Come here, you.” And kissed Alfred again. And again, and again…

For the countless time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you!
See you next chapter.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Arthur was startled awake by the sound of an alarm going off. He rolled to the side, slipping off of his chair and tumbling to the floor. He swore a few times, holding his elbow and pushing himself up from the floor.

He didn’t remember setting an alarm, nor did he remember falling asleep at the counter of a bookstore. Were the days blurring together more than he recalled? Placing his hands on the worn, wooden countertop, Arthur looked down at his phone. The screen read Edith Grates in bold, white print. Arthur squinted at the name in confusion. Who was Edith? What was this alarm for?

Time caught up with Arthur faster than he could process, and he gasped when it all came slamming to a halt at the front of his mind. Edith Grates was a publisher at a company in Seattle. They had an appointment. He wanted to get his book published. Edith was his last chance to be published in Washington. He was going to be late.

Scrambling out from behind the front counter, Arthur grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. He nearly barreled over a young woman browsing the religious section, but he made sure to apologize before he opened the front door. He hesitated; if he was already late, wouldn’t that automatically mean his book wouldn’t be published? Arthur shook his head. He could still make it. He had to sprint, that was all.

“Kiku!” Arthur shouted to the back of the store, hoping his coworker would hear him. “I’m leaving for the day! Watch the front!”

Arthur was certain he’d heard a shrill and uncertain, “What?” before he bounded out the door, but he didn’t have time to explain. The owner could complain if there was an issue. Hell, he could fire Arthur if he wanted. If Arthur got a contract with Edith, he could find another job. He just needed to make it there on time.

He checked his phone. He had seven minutes to get to a building that was fifteen minutes away. He ran into several shoulders as he started to run down the busy pavement of Seattle, more than ready to run into traffic if it meant getting to his meeting on time.

For reference, Arthur was not a runner. In primary school, he enjoyed painting and playing pretend more than rowdy games outside. When he’d come to America, he’d avoided gym classes like the plague, only putting minimum effort when it was demanded. This continued on through high school in America, as well. Yet, there he was, running with all he had down the street. Granted, his top speed was nothing to praise, but he hoped it was enough to get him to Edith’s office before he was too late.

His hopes were riding on this woman. She was only in Washington for a short time. She’d be going back to New York at the end of the day. It was Arthur’s last shot. Alfred had always believed in him. Encouraged him. Adored him. No matter what. Even so, Arthur felt guilty with his failures when it came to finally publishing his book.

Eight months had gone by since he’d started searching for a publisher. Eight months flew by, and one by one, every available publisher in Washington had turned him down. It was sizzling
his nerves and making every last bit of passion he had for writing fade out like a dying candle. He had to make this meeting. If he could see what Edith thought of the manuscript he’d sent to her, then he would be able to fix it to her standards, and then… if she still didn’t want to publish him, he’d have to do something else. He’d have to settle for a different career.

That would mean throwing away all the kindness Alfred had shown toward him. Disregarding all his praise and faith. Giving up on his dream and shrinking down into a shell of what he could have been.

And so, Arthur ran. He ran until his lungs burned for air. He narrowly dodged a speeding car as it flew through an intersection. He ran until he could see the building, and sprinted when he could see the front doors. By the time he’d stumbled through the doors and made it to the elevator, he was gasping for breath and seeing double. He checked his phone when the elevator doors slid shut; two minutes until his meeting. If he’d had the energy, he would’ve celebrated.

The doors chimed and opened, showing Arthur a familiar view of the waiting room outside of Edith’s temporary office. He’d been there to drop off his manuscript… and he’d been overjoyed when Edith wanted to meet with him. He’d been turned down so many times. Each meeting ended unhappily. But this had to go well. He had to get a contract. Arthur nodded to himself as he continued to catch his breath and approach the secretary at her small desk.

“Arthur… Arthur,” he gasped, coughed a few times, and took a deep breath before he finished. “Arthur Kirkland to see Ms. Grates.”

The secretary smiled – too stiff to be real – and nodded before she indicated to one of the many chairs available. “I’ll let her know you’re here.”

There was an older man sitting in one of the chairs giving Arthur a strange look as he turned away from the desk. Arthur tried to act as inconspicuous as possible as he took a seat. There was a young lady sitting with someone Arthur assumed to be a parent, anxiously fidgeting with the large stack of papers in her lap. Arthur understood her anxiety; he’d been in her shoes so many times, he could still remember the quake in his hands.

Trying to smooth the front of his button-down shirt, Arthur felt his heart still pounding in his chest as he bounced his leg. He wasn’t a religious man, but now, he was praying. He was begging whatever or whoever was on a higher plain for a miracle. He needed this to work. He needed to publish this book.

The door of Edith’s office opened. Her eyes landed on Arthur immediately. She gave him a smile. Big, bright, and obviously whitened. She waved him forward. Stumbling out of his seat, Arthur gave Edith a quick onceover as he approached her. Sharp eyeliner, dark eyes, and blonde hair that was cut in a flashy, excessive style that didn’t fit a woman of her age. Arthur gave her highlights one last look before he shook her hand.

“Arthur Kirkland…” Edith smiled. Her lips were too tight. Her eyes didn’t reflect the expression. Arthur smiled uneasily, and she nodded him inside. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

She led him inside, closing the door behind Arthur. Arthur licked his lips as he looked around the office. It was almost completely white. Ivory floor tiles and a glass desk glittered in the sunlight that streamed through the many windows that lined the room.

“Take a seat,” Edith said as she waved Alfred toward a metallic chair in front of her desk.
Arthur obediently sat as Edith leaned her hip against the edge of her desk, standing directly in front of him. There was a smug look on her face, almost like she knew something about Arthur’s book that he didn’t. He twiddled his thumbs for a moment, waiting for her to reveal whatever secret she had. But she was quiet. Holding him in suspense until the proper moment. Arthur fidgeted with the cuffs of his jumper. Edith smiled. The silver clock on Edith’s desk ticked routinely. Every second heightened Arthur’s anxiety.

“I read your book.” Edith looked over her shoulder at the stack of bound paper on her desk. Arthur blinked. It was his manuscript. It was the only thing on her desk aside from her computer. He looked back up at her coy expression.

“Oh?” Arthur asked, his voice a tad too high-pitch. He cleared his throat and tried to relax as he asked, “What did you think?”

Edith hesitated, her smiled fracturing for just a moment. Arthur’s heart dropped to his stomach. It was a failure. She’d hated the book. He was going to be rejected. He’d be working in a public library for the rest of his life, punching in codes and ringing up fines to pass the time. He wasn’t an author… all of Alfred’s faith was being thrown to the wind. Arthur looked down at his hands in his lap, accepting his fate. Edith finally took a breath, and spoke.

“I liked it.”

Arthur’s head snapped up and he gave Edith a look of unabashed surprise. She liked it. She said it. Out loud. She’d liked his book. Did that mean he was getting published? Or did this mean she was going to hand him off to the next available publisher? Either way, this was better than any feedback Arthur had ever been given.

Before he could stop himself, Arthur sat forward in his chair and asked, “R-really?”

Edith nodded as she picked up his manuscript and held it up as evidence. “This kind of story… the adventure, the magic, the inner struggle… it’s popular. Real popular with the young adult demo. Maybe even teens.” She paused, then said, “I want to get this book published.”

Arthur’s heart stuttered as he looked up at Edith. His book would be published. She said it would be popular. His book was worth something. Despite Alfred’s constant reassurance, Arthur wasn’t sure how to react now that success was within reach. So, he sat with his mouth open and his eyes wide as Edith started to explain her plans.

“I want to start you off with advertisement in big bookstore chains. Picture big billboards in the fiction section,” Edith spread her hands wide. “The title in big, bold print. Book signings after you sell ten thousand copies. Interviews about how you went from nothing to everything. I’ll represent you, and we’ll go places.”

Arthur was sure he was having an out-of-body experience as Edith waved a stack of papers in front of him. A contract. Representation. His book published, and his dream achieved. Edith grinned at his star-struck expression.

“You sign here, and I’ll make it happen.”

When she sat down the contract, Arthur leaned forward and took her pen with trembling fingers. He had to tell Alfred as soon as he got home. He had to tell him how things were changing. He was no longer a recreational writer. He was a professional. Even if a few copies sold, he was officially making something of himself.
Arthur tried to read over the terms of their contract, but he couldn’t focus on the words. His hands were shaking. Everything was numb. His right hand simply went through the motions of signing his name. Edith was still talking about how she would push the sales of his book. She had so much faith in his writing. So had Alfred.

Smiling shakily to himself, Arthur realized it was about time he started having faith in himself, too.

He didn’t feel Edith shake his hand, but he was standing up from the chair and being promised contact details. A call next week. Wednesday. Thursday. Arthur didn’t pay attention. He was floating on air. Edith’s voice was bubbling in his ears. He was walking somewhere. Leaving the office. The door shut behind him. Arthur blinked.

“I’m getting published,” he whispered softly. The young woman sitting in the waiting area looked up at him questioningly, and Arthur repeated, “I’m getting published.”

His hands were shaking. His heart was beginning to pound. There was a paper in his hand. He looked down at it. A contract. His contract. He was officially going to be published. Edith would talk to him next week. Publishing his book. He’d be a professional author. Professional. Arthur’s lips kicked up into a smile. He had to tell Alfred.

Jumping to the lift, Arthur slammed the button for the ground floor more times than he could count, hoping to get home faster. The woman next to him in the lift gave him an odd look, but Arthur merely held up his contract.

“I’m getting published,” he said with a giddy smile.

“Congratulations,” she grumbled as she looked away.

The lift didn’t move fast enough. He couldn’t get out sooner. He ran into several businessmen on his way out, but he didn’t care. He was thinking of Alfred. He had to tell him what was happening. Tell him how excited he was. Tell him how optimistic she was about Arthur’s book. Arthur ran down the streets of Seattle at full speed, his contract fluttering in his hand as he went. He’d make money on this. He’d provide for the two of them. His legs ached with strain from all his running, but he didn’t care. He and Alfred could finally be a comfortable, married couple. They wouldn’t be living in a shoddy flat.

When Arthur saw the apartment building, he couldn’t help but smile at the thought of meeting Alfred and giving him the good news. Alfred was probably studying for his finals, but he was a genius. He could take a break. Just for a moment. Just a second to celebrate. Just so Arthur could thank him for everything and tell Alfred he was the most wonderful man in the world for believing in him.

Arthur burst through the front door and fell forward onto the hardwood floor. He got up on his hands and knees, but his contact had fallen from his hand, sliding across the floor. Across the apartment, Alfred was sitting on their mattress on the floor with several books on his lap, staring at Arthur with wide eyes.

“Holy Jesus!” He spat as he jumped up and ran to Arthur. “Arthur… what the hell are you doing?”

“I’m –” Arthur gasped for breath. He reached for his contract, but it was on the other side of the room. Alfred gave him a strange look as he helped him to his feet. Arthur took heaving breaths, trying to speak as he said. “I’m… I went to… I…” He pointed at the contract again.
Alfred looked at the paper, then looked back at Arthur. “Arthur. I can’t… wait.” Alfred put his hands on Arthur’s shoulders and held him completely still. “You had your appointment uptown.”

“Yes,” Arthur wheezed.

Alfred squinted at him. “It went… bad? You’re running away from writing?”

Arthur scowled and slapped Alfred square in his chest. “No.” He pointed at the contract again and said, “Published.”

Very slowly, Alfred raised his eyebrows. “Published?” Arthur nodded, and Alfred’s eyes lit up. “You’re getting published.” They were both quiet for a moment, then Alfred grabbed Arthur and started to jump up and down. “You’re getting published!”

“Yes!” Arthur laughed, trying to hold on while Alfred spun him around and dropped him back onto his feet. Alfred knelt down in front of him and held his hand dramatically.


Humming happily, Arthur wrapped his arms around Alfred’s neck and kicked the door shut behind him. “Thank you, love.”

“We should celebrate,” Alfred said softly. Another warm, lingering kiss. Arthur moaned against Alfred’s lips.

“Definitely,” Arthur’s voice was low as he leaned forward to kiss Alfred again. He didn’t make it, though. Alfred leaned back with a smile.

“Let’s go out to eat. Whatever you want. My treat,” Alfred said happily. Arthur quirked an eyebrow, and Alfred smiled. “We could go to that good sushi place!” Alfred paused, then shook his head. “Wait… that’s too expensive. Um… we could go to that Thai place down in that little place by –”

“Take off your pants,” Arthur said.

Alfred blinked spastically. “W-what?”

“Take. Off. Your pants,” Arthur repeated, taking the front of Alfred’s t-shirt and dragging him toward the mattress. Alfred laughed as he dropped down onto the bedding.

“Ah. Skipping dinner and going straight for desert, Mr. Kirkland?” There was a glimmer in his eyes when he took off his glasses and set them atop his textbooks. Arthur smiled and cocked his head to the side coyly.

“Exactly, Mr. Jones.” Arthur unbuttoned the top button of his shirt with a flourish of his hand and a sly smile. “I’m famished.”

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Arthur opened his eyes startled and breathless. He could almost feel the ache in his legs from running, and there was a tingling blush spreading across his chest at the thought of Alfred
looking at him with that dark, smug smile. Sitting up, Arthur took deep breaths as he looked around the dark bedroom. He looked at the clock. Two a.m. Arthur sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face, rubbing the blush away. Now was not the time for such memories.

“Arthur?” Alfred’s tired, gravelly voice came from next to him. Arthur looked over at Alfred’s sleepy face and hardly open eyes. Alfred’s hand reached for him blindly, ending up with his fingers grazing Arthur’s elbow. Arthur smiled at the gesture, and Alfred yawned. “What’s wrong?”

“Just a dream,” Arthur breathed as he pat Alfred’s hand and put it back on the blankets. Arthur paused when he felt the cool, metal band of his wedding ring. Arthur lifted Alfred’s hand and gave the ring a good look.

It was simple. Just a silver band. But it was so very Alfred. Simple but lovely. Mixed together into a perfect concoction that shimmered and glowed in perfect light. Arthur smiled at the thought, then blinked. Where was his ring? A memory from his first week in the house flickered in his brain, and Arthur leaned over to open the drawer on his nightstand. There, on top of a copy of his own book, was his wedding ring. It was waiting for him. Waiting for him to need it. To fall in love with it again. To remember it.

Arthur plucked the ring from the drawer and gave it a fond look. He could vaguely remember the feeling of Alfred putting the very same ring on him when they were married. He remembered crying. He remembered the way Alfred’s eyes shone with joy. Slowly, Arthur put the ring on his hand and gave it a long look.

It looked natural. It was meant to be on his hand.

“Hey,” Alfred whispered. Arthur looked at him, and Alfred was peering up at him curiously. “Whatcha doin’? You okay?”

“Fine,” Arthur murmured with a smile, laying back against the pillows again. His ring felt a little heavy on his finger and the metal was cold, but he kept it on. He smiled at Alfred’s blank expression. “Just thinking.”


Laughing a bit, Arthur shook his head. “You’ve told me that before.”

“I know.” Alfred paused, and carefully said, “Did you have a bad dream?”

Arthur smiled. “No.”

Alfred narrowed his eyes. “Really? ‘Cuz you can tell me if you did.”

“Alfred, love,” he placed it left hand on Alfred’s cheek and gave it a comforting pat. “It was a good dream. It took a sharp turn toward the end, but all in all… it was a fairly good dream.”

Alfred’s eyes fluttered shut. “I don’t know what ‘a sharp turn’ means, but okay.” He was quiet for a moment, letting Arthur’s thumb brush over his cheek softly. When he spoke again, it was hardly a whisper. Just a breath of his voice when he said, “You’re wearing your ring... I can feel it.”

Arthur hesitated, then nodded. “Yes.”

Alfred smiled at that, cracking his eyes open just a bit to ask, “Did you miss it?”
“I did.” Arthur smiled, watching Alfred right to keep his eyes open. They kept fluttering shut. Alfred was fighting a losing battle with his fatigue. Arthur scooted close to press a kiss to Alfred’s nose. He leaned back to see Alfred had already fallen asleep. Arthur took his left hand away and held it to his chest as he watched Alfred’s eyelashes flutter for a moment. “I missed it. I missed this very, very much.”

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There was a soft breath of wind that brushed over Arthur’s cheeks as he slept. Like a whisper, or a soft sigh washing over him. He looked up at an orange, darkening sky. It was sunset in a windswept landscape. Empty, grassy fields surrounded him. He almost wished for Alfred to be there with him, but this place was so hollow… there was nothing to experience, here. It was nearly lonely.

Arthur closed his eyes, trying to sink down underneath the grass and disappear from this endless place. He nearly achieved his goal until he felt a kiss pressed to his cheek. Arthur’s eyes snapped open. The sunset was still shining on the horizon. He was still lying back against the grass. No one was with him. Arthur let his eyes fall shut again. Another kiss. This time, to his right cheek. Arthur opened his eyes, giving the sky a rather irritated look. It someone was going to kiss him, he’d prefer to be dreaming of Alfred.

But there was no one with him. Arthur was alone.

When another kiss was place on his forehead, Arthur closed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his face, trying to wipe away the trails of the strange kisses. In response, he heard a low, soft chuckle. A voice that was soft and smooth like caramel… Arthur smiled and opened his eyes. Alfred was leaning over him with an amused look on his face.

“Wow,” he breathed. Arthur could smell the sharp peppermint of his toothpaste. Alfred stood up and away from him, straightening his glasses. “I just tried to give you a kiss goodbye, and you started swatting at me.”

Arthur stretched his arms above his head and yawned. “It wasn’t intentional,” Arthur said after he put his hands down. “I thought there was something on my face.”

Shrugging loosely, Alfred picked up a jump drive from the nightstand and put it in the small pocket in his shirt. He clicked his tongue before he smiled and said, “That’s what I get for trying to be considerate.”

Arthur went to rub his eyes and winced when the cold band of his ring touched his eyelid. He lowered his hand and gave his ring a fond look. Before he could put it down, Alfred took his hand and kissed his ring. Arthur gave him a vaguely confused look, but Alfred only smiled.

“All right,” Arthur sighed softly. “What’s gotten into you? You’re acting very,” he wiggled his fingers as he tried to think of an adequate description. “Affectionate this morning.”

Alfred paused in the bedroom doorway, his fingers drumming along the doorframe. Arthur gave his stance an odd look. It was still so lax. So why was he so quiet? Was Arthur not supposed to question his levels of affection? Was his current behavior normal? Arthur shook his head. No, that wasn’t it. In his memory, Alfred was normally nonchalant and laidback with his affectionate idiosyncrasies. Arthur blinked.

Was he missing something? Was it Alfred’s birthday? Arthur felt his heart jump into his
throat; was it his own birthday? What day was it? Arthur glanced down and counted on his fingers. December… December 20th. Arthur lifted his eyes and gave Alfred a strange look. He didn’t remember anyone’s birthday being in December.

Alfred, lingering in the doorway, made sure to give Arthur a smile before he left. Arthur saw the hesitation in his eyes, and the tiny glimmer of regret. Arthur felt a pang of anxiety at the sight.

“It’s just a good day,” Alfred murmured before he slipped down the stairs.

Taking a moment, Arthur sat with his hands in his lap, giving the empty doorway a strange look. The front door opened and closed, and Arthur was left alone in the house with an aching head and a frown on his face. Getting out of bed, Arthur threw the blankets back and shuffled down the stairs.

He felt something itching in the back of his brain, something irritatingly familiar. December 20th… what was so special about that day? Had something happened years ago? Something good… or was Alfred just being affectionate? For all Arthur new, Alfred could’ve just been feeling lonely. Scratching his healing stitches, Arthur sighed.

There could’ve been any number of things going on, and all of them were things Arthur didn’t remember. Birthdays, celebrations… possibly deaths? Arthur didn’t know. Rounding the kitchen, Arthur started a pot of tea. He was missing something. But if it were really important, wouldn’t Alfred have told him? Or…

Arthur flinched when the phone rang. His heart nearly stopped. How could he focus on a new conversation when something – possibly many things – had gone wrong in the past twenty-four hours? Another ring. Arthur felt his concentration tear in two as he tried to way his options. Sit and dwell about Alfred, or answer the phone and talk to a stranger? The phone continued to ring.

Walking out of the kitchen and going into the living room, Arthur found the house phone lying on the arm of the sofa. Alfred must’ve left it there. The caller ID read: Edith Grates. Arthur’s anxiety fizzled down into unamused bitterness as he picked up the phone.

“Hello?” He answered, his voice low and irritated. Edith didn’t seem to notice.

“Arthur! Good to talk to you again,” her voice was sweet and fake. Almost tacky in its sound. Arthur rolled his eyes, and Edith sighed into the phone. “I know you had a little break-down last time we spoke, but I gave you some time to calm down.”

“Edith,” Arthur closed his eyes and put his right hand on his forehead. “Now isn’t a good time.”

“Oh, this’ll just take a second.” There was paper rustling in the background of Edith’s side of the line, and Arthur nearly groaned. He managed to bite it back as Edith said, “All right. You had a book signing arranged for next Tuesday. You remember that, right?”

Arthur blinked. “I have amnesia.” Edith didn’t respond, and Arthur huffed. “I… I’m surprised you’re calling me. I was very clear the last time we spoke.” Still no response, and Arthur said, “I told you not to call again.”

“Sure you did, honey,” Edith said flippantly. “But this is important. We have a contract.
So you need to get off your ass and get back to work.”

“Oh, I know all about the contract,” said Arthur in a less than enthusiastic tone. Edith paid it no mind.

“You have a signing on Tuesday. I’ve emailed you the location and time info to you and –”

“Edith!” Arthur interrupted. “I don’t know the password to my email! I don’t have it on my phone! I can’t even log onto my own laptop!”

After a long, dramatic exhale, Edith murmured, “Oh, honey. You should really write down your passwords.”

Struggling to keep his voice level, Arthur grit his teeth and growled, “Even if I did write them down somewhere, I still don’t remember where I wrote them down.”

Another sigh. “Well, I’ll just have to tell you where it is. Have a pen, sweetie? I’ll just –”

“Stop. Just… stop,” Arthur spat quickly, efficiently ending Edith’s reign over the conversation. He took a deep breath and shook his head. “I can’t do this. I can’t give a book signing… not like this. I need time to… to get better.” Edith didn’t fight him this time. Arthur gave the floor a defeated look. “I need to remember more things. I… I can’t do it.”

After several long, painfully silent seconds, Edith clicked her tongue. Arthur barely heard the words, “I didn’t sign up for this,” before she hung up on him. Arthur looked at the phone, half contemplating whether he wanted to call her back or not.

Arthur put the phone on the coffee table.

He had other things to focus on. His changing relationship with Alfred. Learning more things about Alfred… and about himself. He wanted to know about Alfred’s mysterious mood, but it was almost impossible for him to gather up the courage. Like he was sneaking around on his tiptoes, afraid to tell Alfred what he wanted.

Arthur twiddled his thumbs as he sat on the sofa, trying to think about what he’d just done. Edith sounded put-out. Alfred was acting strange. All of this made Arthur feel odd. Things were strangely off-set in the house when Arthur thought this way. Arthur pursed his lips. His mother had told him he had a tendency to sit and dwell. What would solve this issue? Who would answer his question? Reaching for his mobile, Arthur tapped his thumb against the locked touch screen.

He unlocked it and stared at his contacts. His mother. His sister. Seamus, Alistair… Arthur’s finger hovered over Alistair’s name for a moment. It would be no use calling. No one would answer. Or, perhaps, someone new had his brother’s phone number. A stranger might answer. Arthur frowned at the screen, and scrolled past his brother’s name.

Before Arthur could call Alfred and ask what had gone wrong, Arthur saw Francis’ name hovering right over Alfred’s. Arthur hesitated. What would happen if he called? Would Francis know something that Arthur had forgotten? Considering how close they used to be, Arthur wouldn’t be surprised if he did.

Throwing caution to the wind, Arthur pressed ‘Call’ and held the phone to his ear. It rang three times before the line clicked, went silent, and then crackled as Francis answered.
"Allô?" Francis breathed, sounding slightly harried. Arthur pulled a face at that, but he was civil when he replied.

“Hello, Francis.” He paused. “It’s Arthur.”

Francis chuckled. There was sound in the background. A busy street? A store? Francis’ restaurant? Arthur couldn’t quite tell. “That is what I assumed when I saw your name on my phone, cher. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Arthur opened his mouth to ask Francis his initial question, Arthur heard some sort of commotion on Francis’ side of the connection. Some sort of clatter… it was almost metallic. Like someone had dropped a pan of some sort. There was rustling as Francis lowered his phone and shouted something inaudible to the source of the noise, and then another chorus of static as he put the phone back to his ear.

“Sorry, mon frère,” Francis sighed. He sounded irritated. Arthur hummed thoughtfully, and Francis heaved another sigh. “I am teaching a cooking class at the university… these Americans are… how you say…” he fumbled with his English for a moment before he finally grumbled, “Hopeless.”

Arthur bit back a sneer as he listened to another round of clattering on Francis’ side of the line. Francis grunted something in French, and Arthur knew whatever he said wasn’t entirely decent. After yet another sigh, Francis said something to his students. Arthur arched an eyebrow.

“I didn’t know you were a teacher,” Arthur said smugly, enjoying Francis’ groans of discomfort. Arthur smiled. “Alfred told me you worked at the university, but I think you’re better suited for your restaurant.”

Francis clicked his tongue. “I am just a guest for the day. I come once a month to give a cooking class…” he trailed off unhappily, and Arthur raised his eyebrows when Francis said, “And it is the most miserable thing I’ve ever done. That includes attending Alfred’s 22nd birthday party…”

Arthur squinted. What did that mean? It made Arthur curious, but he didn’t want to know about Alfred’s 22nd birthday. He wanted to know about this day in particular. What was so special about December 20th?

Shaking his head, Arthur meandered to the living room sofa and sat down. “Francis, as interesting as this is, I called for a reason.”

“Ah, oui,” Francis sounded slightly bored as he left whatever classroom he’d been working with. The noise behind him was cut abruptly short, and the background was crystal clear silence as Francis sighed. “What can I do for you, cher?”

Arthur wrinkled his nose. “Stop calling me that. I was wondering about today…” he crossed his legs, right over left. “Is this particular day special to me or Alfred?”

“Hmm?” Francis hummed softly, apparently thinking. Arthur bounced his foot idly while he waited. When Francis spoke, it was softly, like he was talking to himself and only vaguely aware that Arthur was listening. “Today is… the 19th, no?”

Arthur quirked an eyebrow. “No. It’s the 20th, today. December 20th.”

“Ah!” Francis laughed to himself for a moment, and announced, “Joyeux anniversaire,
Arthur!

Trying to overcome his need to smile at Francis’ French, Arthur bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t remember much French from his university days, but he knew bits and pieces. What Francis was saying was… Happy… birthday? No, Arthur had looked at his medical records many times before; his birthday was in April. April 23rd. It wasn’t his birthday. Then… an anniversary? Arthur’s heart stopped.

It was his wedding anniversary.


Numbly shuffling into the kitchen when the teapot started to whistle, Arthur took the kettle off the stove and stared down at the red-hot burner. Three years ago, on the 20th of December, Arthur had married Alfred. They had been joined in holy matrimony. For better or for worse. And Arthur hadn’t bothered to wonder when their anniversary was.

“It’s my anniversary,” Arthur said quietly. Francis hummed lowly.

“That’s right.” Francis paused, then asked, “You… did you not remember?”

“No.” Arthur turned off the stove and reached for a cup for his tea. A good cuppa would soothe these frayed nerves. Hopefully. Arthur’s hands shook when he opened the tin of tea. “Francis… Alfred didn’t tell me it was our anniversary was today. Does… does that mean he doesn’t want to celebrate?”

There was a distinct, pregnant silence. Arthur’s heart started to shrivel up in his chest, feeling guilt climb up over his back and weigh down on his shoulders.

“Maybe he thinks it would be too much,” Francis finally said with an annoyingly considerate tone. Arthur frowned, and Francis went on, “You know how much he worries about you, cher. He doesn’t want to overwhelm you.”

Arthur wrinkled his nose. “Don’t call me that.” He sat down and turned his mug of tea in a circle, frowning at the memory of Alfred’s slightly downtrodden look when he left for work that morning. Arthur sighed. “It doesn’t overwhelm me. He’s my husband. I want to celebrate with him,” he paused, then looked down at his tea with a serious expression. “I want him to be happy, Francis. We’ve been married for three years. Isn’t that worth celebrating?”

There was a pause before Francis let out a soft, amused laugh. “Of course.”

Arthur nodded to himself. “I should do something for him.”


“Yes, perfect! Someplace romantic.”

Francis hummed. “Not too extravagant. Alfred doesn’t like strange cuisine.”

Arthur looked down at the table; he needed to write this all down. An idea… should he get flowers? Would Alfred like flowers? He wandered around the kitchen looking for a writing tool while Francis hummed lightly in the background.

Arthur fumbled with his thoughts as he found a notepad. What should he do? Say? Give? There were so many things that he could – or should – do for Alfred. Thank him for his patience,
tell him what a wonderful man he was, and tell him how much Arthur loved him. And Arthur always would. No matter what would happen.

“I have a reservation for 6:20,” Francis said lowly, as if he was a little distracted. Arthur blinked. Francis’ restaurant? For his anniversary? Arthur paused. It would make up for the dinner that he and Alfred had never gotten to enjoy. Arthur smiled.

“Perfect.” Arthur said quickly. “I’ll take it.”

Francis hummed personably. “We’ll be expecting you and Alfred tonight.”

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“Dinner?” Alfred’s voice was crackly and slightly confused as he spoke to Arthur over the phone. “At Franny’s restaurant? Why?”

Arthur fiddled with the hem of his sweater, looking over at the bouquet of roses that were sitting in a vase on the table. He’d ordered them an hour ago. They were lovely. Red. Perfect for Alfred. A dozen roses for his husband. Arthur hoped he liked them when he got home.

“He had an open reservation,” Arthur said thinly. He wanted it to be a pleasant surprise. Alfred didn’t know that Arthur knew the importance of this day. Arthur tugged at his sweater again. “I thought it’d be nice to go there together.”


Arthur narrowed his eyes. Was this some sort of test? He pursed his lips and said, “Is there?” It would be best to feign ignorance for now. “I just wanted to make up for the meal we missed when you had that accident at your lab.”

Alfred fumbled with his words for a moment, obviously unsure of Arthur’s intentions. Arthur narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Was there something wrong with having dinner with him? Was Alfred scared to be in an inexplicably romantic situation with Arthur?

They missed each other. They both knew it. Each kiss proved it. Every moment they spent catching the other looking in each other’s direction, they would smile. Arthur could feel it. Every suppressed, forgotten affectionate tendency falling into place whenever he was around Alfred. He kissed Alfred’s cheek before he sat next to him. He would wake up with Alfred clinging to him, and Arthur would fall asleep again in a heartbeat. There wasn’t discomfort anymore. It was smooth.

At least, it would be if Alfred wasn’t hesitating.

“Alfred,” Arthur sighed when his husband continued to sputter into the receiver. “The reservation is made. It’s after you’re off work. I’ll meet you there.”

Alfred was quiet. “You… you made a reservation?”

Something felt off-balance in Arthur’s chest when he responded, “Yes.” He waited for an answer, but Alfred didn’t speak. Arthur sighed. “Should I not have?”

“No.” Alfred said quickly. “No, it’s not… it’s great. When is the reservation?”

Arthur blinked. “Just after you leave work. 6:20.”
“Great,” Alfred let out a breath. “Okay. I’ll meet you there.”

“Right,” Arthur nodded, hearing the line click as Alfred hung up. Arthur looked over at the roses on the table. They didn’t look as vibrant as they had before. A single, silky petal sat on the tabletop. Arthur frowned, and walked away.

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Arthur drummed his fingers against the cloth-covered dinner table. Francis stood over him, straightening the candle in the center. “This is ridiculous.”

“No wine,” Francis insisted for the third time. Arthur rolled his eyes.

“I’m not going to drink myself into a stupor, Francis,” he grumbled. Francis gave him a sidelong glance, and Arthur groaned as he leaned back in his chair. “Last time was a fluke.”

Francis hummed thoughtfully, smoothing the tablecloth. Pursing his lips, Arthur tapped his finger against the side of his water glass. The dining room was full but hushed. Each couple and group leaned together to speak in secretive tones. Arthur brushed his hair back from his eyes. He was early, but the memory of Alfred not coming to dinner still crawled uncomfortably across his skin.

Arthur shook his head. Alfred was coming this time. He wouldn’t have time to scare himself into reaching for a bottle of wine. At least, that’s what Arthur hoped. Francis pat the tablecloth once more before he gave Arthur a hard look, and swept himself away to work in the kitchen.

Seconds later, Arthur could see Alfred tearing his way through the dining room. Arthur stumbled out of his seat and stood with an anxious smile, only to feel the smile crumble when he saw Alfred’s straight expression and red face as he pushed past different tables. Arthur glanced down at Alfred’s clothes in confusion; he hadn’t worn a suit jacket that morning when he left the house. Had he gone home before coming to dinner? Why would he? Arthur tried to remain optimistic when Alfred came to an abrupt stop in front of him.

For a few seconds, Alfred simply stood in front of him, red-faced and staring at Arthur with wide, blue eyes. Arthur blinked at his expression. It was vulnerable. Open to… just about anything. Like he was the victim of a harmless prank. Arthur quirked an eyebrow at the sight.

“I went home,” Alfred said breathlessly. Arthur nodded in acknowledgement, and Alfred leaned forward, crowding Arthur’s face, and repeated, “I went home.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes as he nodded again. “I can see that,” he said as he indicated to Alfred’s suit jacket and tie. “You’ve changed.”

Licking his lips, Alfred looked away for a moment. He rubbed a hand over his chin thoughtfully, staring at the velvety carpet while Arthur stood hesitantly before him. After what seemed like several minutes, Alfred let out a low laugh and looked back at Arthur.

“I had my suspicions… so I went home.” He shook his head with a smile, and said, “You bought roses.”

Arthur blinked. “Yes, I did.”

“Red roses. I always buy you red roses for a special occasion,” said Alfred as he put his hands into his pockets. His smile was still big and warm as he tipped his head to the side and said,
“You love roses.”

“I don’t remember that,” Arthur said softly. “But I know I like roses.”

Alfred reached forward and cupped Arthur’s cheek as he leaned in for a kiss. Arthur melted into it immediately, feeling Alfred’s thumb brushing over his cheek ever so softly. A familiar caress. A long-loved situation. It was over quickly as Alfred pulled away and gave Arthur an award-winning smile.

“Who told you?” Alfred asked gently. There wasn’t any hint of malice.

Arthur rolled his eyes and stepped away from Alfred, highly aware of how many people were glancing in their direction. He sat down slowly, looking up at Alfred through a fan of eyelashes as he coyly asked, “It doesn’t matter. The real question is: why didn’t you tell me?”

Groaning dramatically, Alfred slid into his chair on the opposite side of the table. “I would have, but…” he clicked his tongue and shook his head. “I didn’t want to make things uncomfortable. Like… I didn’t want you to feel like you had to do something. We just started to feel normal, ya know?”

Arthur looked down at his lap. “It’s our anniversary.” He lifted his eyes to look at Alfred again. His face was interestingly lit in golden candlelight. Arthur smiled. “I’ve loved you for much, much longer than three years. And every day I learn more about why I love you.”

 Attempting to take a drink of water, Alfred choked and sputtered for a bit before he let out a breathless laugh. Arthur arched an eyebrow skeptically, and Alfred smiled again. “God, you’re always saying something like that. Always romantic and stuff,” Alfred wiggled his fingers for lack of a better explanation. “All I have is science. I’m not a fancy writer.” He shrugged. “All I have is corny one-liners.”

Arthur laughed at that. It was so easy to talk to each other. Things almost felt normal as they sat at the candlelight table. If he hadn’t been thinking about it, Arthur could’ve forgotten that he’d been in an accident. He could imagine that their anniversary dinner had been planned a long while ago, and it was a pleasant surprise for Alfred. Arthur smiled.

“Even if they’re corny, I think your little lines are still charming,” Arthur said as he slowly spun his water glass in a circle. Arthur sighed. “I still think that despite the accident, we should celebrate our anniversary. Regardless of the amnesia, we’ve been married for three years.”

Alfred adjusted his glasses slightly. “Well, the third year of marriage is supposed to be about durability. I don’t think we can be any more durable than we are now.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes slyly. “Oh, of course. Because living with your amnesiac husband is a sign of durability.”

“Hey, hey! I never said that. You’re the durable one,” Alfred insisted calmly. “You survived the crash.”

Taking a breath, Arthur spun around his water glass again. It was almost strange to be joking about the accident. Alfred had been so hesitant to even mention the car crash for so long… but, for quite some time, Arthur had been distraught at the idea of being physically intimate with Alfred. Yet, here they were, comfortably sharing a meal with one another.

“I’m ‘durable,’” Arthur said softly before he took a sip of water. “I sound like a plastic container.”
Across the table, Alfred leaned his chin into his palm, gave Arthur a dreamy smile, and said, “A sexy plastic container.” Arthur pause mid-sip with his glass to his lips, looking at Alfred carefully. There was a dark, interesting glimmer in Alfred’s eyes as he continued. “A gorgeous container. With like, muscles, and bones… and blood… inside it…” Alfred’s expression started to crumble as his simile started to break down. Arthur made a slightly perturbed face as Alfred sat back in his chair with a defeated expression. Alfred huffed. “That… didn’t really go the way I wanted it to go.”

“I assumed,” Arthur said as he set his water glass aside. “For a moment, I thought you were trying to flirt with me.”

Alfred winced. “I’m a little rusty,” he confessed. “See, I’ve been married for three years. I don’t have to flirt that often.”

Humming to himself lowly, Arthur gave his husband a speculative look. “That’s a little disappointing,” he admitted. “Over all these years, you don’t try a little spontaneity?”

Before Alfred could defend himself, a waiter came to ask for their order. Arthur blinked at the young man. Order? How could he order when he hadn’t even looked at the menu? Alfred looked down at the menu in front of him and order something with beef and sauce… Arthur, however, had no idea what to order.

Fidgeting with the menu that was placed next to him, Arthur tried to make sense of the sparse English that was scattered across the pages. Before he had a chance to utilize his rusty – or perhaps nonexistent – French skills, Alfred reached across the table and took his hand.

“Don’t worry,” said Alfred with a smile. “I can remember which of Franny’s meals you liked the most.”

“Oh, delightful,” Arthur said with a less than enthusiastic smile. “At least that makes one of us.”

Snorting into his water glass, Alfred coughed and set his cup down. Arthur couldn’t help but laugh in response, seeing the way water dribbled down Alfred’s chin. Licking his lips slowly, Arthur quirked an eyebrow while Alfred awkwardly wiped his chin.

Turning over his napkin in his lap, Arthur glanced back at the double doors that lead to the kitchen. When they swung open, he could barely see Francis waving and pointing at different cooks, no doubt bossing them around with his nearly indistinguishable commands. Somewhere in the back of the kitchen, Angelique was most likely creating some sort of wondrous desert.

Arthur glanced down at his glass; if he hadn’t called Francis that day, he and Alfred wouldn’t be dining together like they were. In fact, if he hadn’t called Francis, he probably wouldn’t have learned as much about himself so quickly. Whether he liked it or not, Francis was indeed a large part of his life. Through university and out into the reckless days he spent trying to get his book published, Francis had been there in his mind. And old friend, an enemy… even so, Arthur and Alfred remained strong.

Lifting his eyes from his cup, Arthur met Alfred’s curious, open gaze. There was a smile on Alfred’s face. That ever-present expression that wouldn’t go away. Instead of looking forced – like it had been for so long after the crash – it was easygoing. Gentle. Warm. Arthur smiled back.

“I’m glad we’re here together,” said Arthur calmly. Across the table, Alfred blinked and laughed just once.
“So am I.” Alfred lifted his glass and gave Arthur a cheeky grin. “Happy anniversary, Arthur.”

Arthur smiled and clinked his glass against Alfred’s gently. “Happy anniversary, love.”

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Wedding bells are synonymous with happiness, Arthur knew. They chime and people cheer and cry tears of joy… if he thought hard enough, Arthur could nearly remember writing a scene in a book with wedding bells ringing. Who had been married? He couldn’t recall. But he could remember closing his eyes and imagining the echoic ringing of those grand, silver bells.

Opening his eyes, Arthur stood in the chilled, winter air, staring up at a church with dull amazement. The bells rang. His breath clouded the air. His head swam. What was he doing out here? He couldn’t quite remember why he was there…

“Arthur!” Alfred called across the way, jogging across the snowy walkway that lead to the church. Arthur gave him a hazy smile, watching Alfred’s foggy breath fill the air as he huffed and puffed. “God… you’ve gotta stop wandering away from me.”

Arthur squinted in confusion. “Wandering? I wasn’t… I was…” he blinked. The bells had stopped ringing. Turning away from Alfred, Arthur looked up at the bell tower with a frown. “I was listening to the bells.”

“Arthur, sweetheart,” Alfred wrapped an arm around Arthur and began to steer him away from the church. Arthur smiled at the endearment. He loved it when Alfred talked like that. That warm, velvety tone in his voice made Arthur feel all sticky inside. He let Alfred lead him away quietly, only half-listening when Alfred said, “I am never letting you have wine at Franny’s again.”

Arthur wanted to laugh, but he merely hiccupped instead. “I had wine the last time I was there,” he noted serenely.

Alfred hummed as they neared the car. It was idling next to the pavement, waiting for Arthur and Alfred to go home. Alfred grumbled, “Yeah, and the whole thing worked out great.” He paused and gave Arthur a sidelong glance. “You are such a lightweight. Three glasses of wine, and you’re out.”

Sputtering, Arthur swatted Alfred’s hands away feebly. “I am not a lightweight! I can hold my li… liquor just as… as good as anyone.” He crossed his arms as Alfred laughed. His husband should be defending his honor, not insulting it. Shouldn’t he? Arthur rubbed his eyes before he said, “It’s a… special thing. We’re having dinner to… celebrate,” Arthur paused, then threw his arms in the air while proclaiming, “Happy anniversary, Alfred!”

Grasping Arthur’s wrist, Alfred slung Arthur’s arm over his shoulders and smiled. “Happy anniversary, baby. Let’s get you home.”

Arthur happily clambered into the car, fiddled with his seatbelt, and watched the slightly hazy view of the city roll past them as Alfred drove. He felt warm. In his face, in his chest… even his fingertips. Arthur smiled and looked at Alfred. There was no hint of stress in his face. Was there? Things were a little fuzzy. So strange. Arthur wanted to describe this perfectly. Like a chapter in a book that he wanted to publish someday. He wanted to be able to go back and reread his memories of Alfred over and over again. He looked out the window at the city. It had begun to snow.
“Dinner was good,” Arthur said softly.

“Yeah.”

Arthur looked back to Alfred. There was a smile on his lips. Arthur smiled, too. “I liked having dinner with you.”

“I liked it, too,” Alfred nodded as he turn on the turning signal. The car crawled to a stop outside their house, and Alfred looked at Arthur fondly. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a nice dinner with you.”

Leaning across the seats, Arthur took Alfred’s hand. “We’ll do it again.”

“Sure,” Alfred laughed. “And this time, I won’t let the waiter talk me into ordering a bottle of wine.”

“Jolly good,” Arthur nodded to himself as he sat back and struggled with his seatbelt. Alfred undid it for him, and Arthur stumbled out of the car and into the snow. He leaned his head back and felt the snowflakes on his cheeks. Bitter, bitter cold… but gentle. Like rain in slow-motion. Arthur heard the front door open. When had Alfred gone past him?

“Come on,” Alfred called from the doorway with a smile. “I think we’ve had enough fun for one night. Let’s call it a day.”

Kicking off his shoes in the entryway, Arthur stumbled forward, into Alfred’s waiting arms. When he looked up, he saw Alfred looking down at him with a warm glimmer in his eyes.

“Hey,” Alfred breathed softly. Arthur felt warmth tingle in his cheeks, and there was a buzz in the back of his brain as he leaned into Alfred’s arms. Alfred chuckled at his hazy enthusiasm. “It’s time for bed.”

Arthur frowned. He wasn’t tired yet. He didn’t just want to crawl into bed like some lazy lout. No, no… that wouldn’t be right. He wanted to spend more time with Alfred. Alfred and his magnetic personality. Alfred and his warm hands. His soothing voice. Gentle touch. Perfect eyes. Arthur couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Alfred. His Alfred. His wonderful, sweet, Alfred… his husband.

Throwing caution to the wind, Arthur threw his arms around Alfred’s neck and dragged him down into a sloppy kiss. There was a brief moment of struggle while Alfred had to decide between leaning into the kiss or holding Arthur upright. Arthur could feel his socked feet slipping across the hardwood floor, but he was distracted by the pleasant feeling of Alfred’s arms slipping around his waist.

“Arthur,” Alfred grumbled against his lips. Arthur kissed him again. Because he could. Because he should. What difference did it make? Alfred was his. He was Alfred’s. It was their anniversary. Love, love, love… it was tainting every thought and movement while Alfred pulled back, took a breath, and kissed him again. Alfred’s hands on his waist faltered as the two of them tilted. “A-Arthur… you’re dragging me down.”

Arthur smiled smugly. “Good. Down to my level.”

Attempting to pull himself free, Alfred laughed at that. “What does that mean?”

“Whatever I want it to mean,” Arthur slurred as he put one hand on the back of Alfred’s
neck and pulled him forward again. This time, Alfred didn’t pull away.

A moan was breathed into Arthur’s mouth, and he pulled Alfred closer as he tilted his head and kiss him again, and again, and again… there was a solid thump as Arthur’s knees hit the floor. Leaning back from Alfred, Arthur looked down. How had he gotten down here? He gave Alfred a strange look, seeing Alfred’s bemused smile and red cheeks.

“You just kept pulling me down,” he explained softly. Arthur gave his husband an odd look. Alfred was bent over double, still trying to hold Arthur’s waist while he was kneeling on the floor. Arthur blinked slowly, trying to make his mind speed up and process the situation. Sadly, his brain was still muddled with a few glasses of wine, and he continued to kneel while Alfred released him and stood up straight. Alfred sighed. “As fun as that was, I really think we should get you to bed.”

“I’m not finished with you yet!” Arthur whined as he grabbed Alfred’s waist and held on tight. His cheek was pressed to Alfred’s stomach, and he felt Alfred let out a quick breath. “I’m not going to sleep until I’m done.”

“Arthur, sweetheart,” Alfred sighed as he passed his hand through Arthur’s hair. Arthur liked the touch. He closed his eyes but didn’t let go as Alfred said, “I think… the wine just has you all excited, okay? I don’t want to do something and then have you regret it tomorrow.”

“I won’t,” Arthur promised, grasping Alfred’s belt loops and pulling himself up, off of the floor. Alfred grunted at the tug to his waist, but didn’t stop Arthur as he wrapped his arms around Alfred and leaned against him. “I won’t regret it.”

“You’re drunk,” said Alfred.


“This…” Alfred was interrupted by another kiss, but he didn’t let it stop him. “This is too fast, you --” Arthur kissed him again, and Alfred hummed into the kiss before he turned away and grabbed Arthur’s shoulders, pushing him back a bit. “I don’t wanna wreck this, Arthur. Things just changed. You’re… finally coming back, and --”


“You know what I mean.” He stepped away and habitually fidgeted with his glasses. “I’m… this… you know I love you, yeah?” Arthur nodded, and Alfred went on. “So… this is one of those times where I’m gonna ask you a favor as your husband.” He looked Arthur in the eye and slowly, clearly said, “I don’t want to go any further tonight.”

Arthur blinked. Wasn’t sleeping together was married couples were allowed -- and expected -- to do? Now, when Arthur was ready and more than willing, Alfred was shooting him down. Arthur looked down at the floor.

This wasn’t what he’d expected. He’d expected himself to hesitate. That’s why he was more than happy to have a sip of wine. It was called liquid courage for a reason. He wanted to do this. To address the elephant in the room; they fact that Alfred, as kind and patient as he was, hadn’t had sex in almost two months. He was a young man in his prime. Hell, so was Arthur. And now that he had so much more of his memories, he was excited to breach this new level of intimacy once more. He wanted it, but… Alfred didn’t.
Looking down at his hands, Arthur looked up at Alfred with only slightly hazy eyes. “Why?”

Sighing heavily, Alfred shook his head. “Arthur…”

“No, no, no.” Arthur shook a finger at Alfred with a frown. “You don’t get to ask for something like that without an explanation.” Alfred was quiet, and Arthur crossed his arms over his chest. “What is it? Is something wrong?” There was another long pause, and Arthur felt a jolt go through his chest. “Did… did I do something wrong?”

Alfred’s eyes went wide as he stepped forward to reassure Arthur, still just a breath away from actually touching him. “No! No, you didn’t, it’s not you. I just…”


“Can you just drop this?” Alfred sighed.

“No.” Arthur held his ground, even if he was a little tipsy, he knew that he hated to lose an argument. “You’re my husband. I thought this would be fine.”

“I know.” Arthur ran his hands through his hair. He was stressed. But Arthur pushed it. “So it is fine?”

“Well, yeah,” Alfred paused, then shook his head, raising his voice slightly as he said, “No. No, it’s not.”

Arthur huffed and stomped his foot. “Which is it, Alfred?”

Working his jaw for several seconds, Alfred visibly strained to keep his temper in check. For a moment, Arthur felt a flicker of fear flutter through his chest. It burned away when Alfred shook his head and turned around, heading for the stairs. “I’m not talking about this anymore.”

“Alfred.” Arthur continued to hold his ground, but Alfred was halfway up the stairs. Running, running, running from the argument. From the feelings. From Arthur. Arthur didn’t like that. Not one bit. He stumbled after Alfred, hot on his heels. “Alfred, don’t walk away from me. We should be able to talk about this. This is…” he laughed a bit. “It’s just sex!”

Stopping at the top of the stairs, Alfred turned around and gave Arthur a harsh glare. “This isn’t ’just sex,’ Arthur.”

Arthur held onto the railing to keep from tumbling backwards. Damn balance was off. Still, he stared defiantly up at Alfred. “Then what’s the problem?”

“It’s us! I can’t do this again!” Alfred shouted, his arms spread wide. “I can’t go through all of this two times! I lost you once, and you…” he struggled for words, looking in every direction except at Arthur. “You were gone! You didn’t know me! You didn’t trust me, didn’t like me… I woke up in the morning, and it hurt to look at you because I knew you wouldn’t remember. You didn’t look at me the same way.”

Arthur blinked. “Alfred, I --”

“If we sleep together tonight, you might change your mind in the morning!” Alfred continued with a panicked look on his face. “You might wake up and not trust me anymore! You’ll wake up and not know me anymore! I can’t do that! I can’t…!” Alfred ripped his glasses off of his
face and pinched the bridge of his nose before he took a deep breath. “I can’t do it again.”

Without thinking, Arthur took Alfred’s hand from his face and held it tight. “You’re not going to lose me,” he said softly. Alfred gave him a nearly heartbroken look, and Arthur merely smiled. Stepping around his husband, Arthur pulled Alfred toward the doorway of their bedroom. “Because I’m not changing my mind.”

Alfred paused in the doorway. “What if you do?” Arthur quirked an eyebrow, and Alfred sighed. “What if you change your mind in the morning? What if you decide it’s a mistake?”

Giving Alfred a tired smile, Arthur dropped his hand and cupped Alfred’s cheeks, pulling him in for a soft kiss. When Alfred lingered close after they parted, Arthur leaned forward to kiss him once more. Alfred’s hands found his waist again. Arthur let himself be pulled close. His hands slid back into Alfred’s hair smoothly, grasping the blond hair and pulling ever so slightly when Alfred bit his lower lip.

He felt warm again, but this wasn’t the alcohol burning through his blood. He was nearly sobered up… this was all Alfred. Alfred, and a repressed feeling he hadn’t been acknowledging for months. Arthur stood on the tips of his toes and moaned when Alfred licked along the seam of his lips. When Alfred’s hands slipped down from his waist to grasp along the back of his thigh, Arthur’s knees nearly buckled. Good god, he wanted this… he wanted Alfred to be with him again. He wanted to have Alfred. To be had. To forget they’d ever been apart.

They nearly fell backwards through the bedroom doorway, Arthur’s fingers pulling at the buttons on Alfred’s shirt while Alfred was complacently towed along. When Alfred’s dress shirt was peeled away, Arthur grasped the hem of Alfred’s undershirt and lifted it over Alfred’s head. There was a clink when Alfred dropped his glasses on the floor, completely forgotten while Alfred gathered Arthur in his arms and kissed him hard.

There was so much to feel, so much to remember, so much to do… Arthur’s hands trembled with excitement as they traveled over the bare skin of Alfred’s back. He nearly remembered this heat. This desire. This inevitable pull. Alfred’s tongue slid into Arthur’s mouth, and Arthur couldn’t help but moan at the feeling. He could feel Alfred untucking his shirt from his trousers. Arthur didn’t stop him. He merely stepped back, towards the bed.

Alfred broke the kiss first. “Arthur,” he breathed. Arthur nearly melted at the sound of his voice; so husky, so breathless… Arthur tried to slip a hand between them, sliding up Alfred’s thigh… Alfred grasped Arthur’s wrist and stopped him from going any further. “Arthur.”

Finally given a chance to see Alfred’s bare chest, Arthur took a deep breath and let it out in a low, appreciative hum. Alfred distracted him from his exploration as he said, “Do you wanna stop?”

“No,” Arthur said definitively. He shook Alfred’s hand away from his wrist and grabbed Alfred’s shoulders pulling him towards the bed.

Arthur gasped when he misjudged the distance and he fell backwards onto the bed, bringing Alfred with him. Luckily, Alfred had the foresight to brace himself before he collapsed atop Arthur. In this position, Arthur could see Alfred’s erection through his trousers. He nearly felt like the sight was a victory. It made his own arousal throb, but he didn’t pay it much attention as Alfred ducked down for a kiss. Then another. And another. Until Arthur couldn’t catch his breath and he was grasping at Alfred’s bare shoulders for something to hold onto.

Without warning, Alfred pulled Arthur up into a sitting position, pulling at the hem of
his shirt.

“Off,” Alfred ordered gruffly. Arthur immediately clawed the shirt away, eager to feel Alfred’s warm skin against his own.

The kisses were getting desperate now, each of them knowing that the foreplay was a means to an end. But, neither of them knew which of them would be the first to make a move. So piece by piece, clothing was stripped away, breathless words of praise were whispered against warm, bare skin, and hands explored without shame.

Alfred kissed down Arthur’s neck, tasting the skin here, and biting ever so gently there. Arthur didn’t try to stifle a gasp when Alfred sucked on his abused skin. The room was spinning. For the life of him, Arthur couldn’t tell which way was up. He just moaned into Alfred’s shoulder when Alfred reached between them and grasped Arthur’s cock and gave it a slow stroke. Arthur threw his head back against the blankets and moaned, bucking into the Alfred’s hand and aching for more.

Alfred’s voice was low when he whispered, “God, you’re so beautiful…” Arthur forced eyes open to see Alfred’s sterling, blue eyes watching him. His lips parted around each heavy breath, his face and chest flushed with arousal, and his voice so desperate… Arthur could’ve wept at the sight. Alfred kissed his neck again, and Arthur let his eyelids flutter shut again, listening to Alfred as he breathed against his skin, “Arthur… mmm… Arthur…”

With trembling hands, Arthur grasped Alfred’s shoulders and clung tight. He was falling apart, bit by bit in Alfred’s hands. He didn’t restrain his gasps or breathless moans when Alfred stretched him, and he struggled to focus on Alfred’s words of praise as bottle of lube was popped open.

“Almost there, baby… god, you look so good,” Alfred goaded, grasping the back of Arthur’s knee and pushing Arthur’s legs apart. Arthur couldn’t help but let out a faint whine; he didn’t remember discomfort in any sexual memories. He didn’t want that. He wanted to feel good. He wanted to feel Alfred.

Reaching up for Alfred’s shoulders, Arthur looked down at Alfred’s cock, firm and erect, and bit his lip. He met Alfred’s gaze uneasily, seeing a hint of hesitation in Alfred’s eyes.

“Stop?” Alfred asked bluntly, his hand on the back of Arthur’s knee still poised and ready.

Licking his lips, Arthur shook his head. “No.” He laid his head back against the pillows and closed his eyes. “Don’t stop, Alfred. Please don’t stop.”

Without warning, Alfred pushed in, leaving Arthur to curl his toes and let out a breathless cry of surprise. Good, bad, pain, pleasure… it was an intoxicating mix. Like getting drunk all over again. Arthur couldn’t feel the blankets beneath him. Just Alfred pushing further in, little by little. Panting desperately, Arthur gritted his teeth and felt his nails biting into the skin of Alfred’s shoulders.

“Ah! Al-Alfred,” Arthur gasped, feeling Alfred lose his hold on his knee. Alfred quickly grabbed Arthur’s leg again, pushing into Arthur a little further. Arthur couldn’t help but gasp again. “Fuck… Alfred… all… almost?” Arthur breathed, hardly able to form a coherent sentence.

“Almost, baby,” Alfred said lowly, “Almost all the way in.” He reached forward with his spare hand to push sweat-dampened hair from Arthur’s forehead. “You okay?”

When Alfred pulled back and thrust back into him, Arthur felt the world stop spinning for a moment. Like lightning hitting the ground for a split second. Time stopped. Arthur’s voice rang off the walls. Alfred’s hand on the back of his knee gripped tight. Arthur tried to catch his breath, but Alfred was already moving again. Desperate to get his own share of the pleasure, Arthur grasped his own cock and tried to match Alfred’s sporadic rhythm, his head filled with the sound of Alfred’s grunts as he thrust forward again and again…

There was too much heat between them. Arthur felt sweat roll down his face, and back into his hair. He couldn’t get a good hold on Alfred’s shoulders because his hands shook too much. He was leaving Alfred with harsh scratches down the left side of his back. Like a brand. Property of Arthur Kirkland. Alfred didn’t mind it.

“Come on, baby,” Alfred’s voice rumbled through the room, catching Arthur’s attention and holding it as Alfred pushed in, hard and fast. “Get there, baby.” Arthur’s toes curled and his back arched off of the bed when he moaned, trying to meet Alfred thrust for thrust. So close, so close… Alfred moaned before he thrusted a few more times and said, “Just like that, sweetheart. Yeah, just like that…” Arthur gasped for breath, grasping the base of his cock to stave off orgasm. Just a little longer… a bit more… he wanted to feel like this just a bit longer… Alfred broke the haze when he moaned each word with a thrust of his hips, “Oh. Yes. Arthur…! Yes! Yes!”

With that, Arthur lost control, letting out a breathless call of Alfred’s name as he came hard, all over Alfred’s chest. His nerves tingled, and his body felt numb. He lay against the blankets while Alfred continued to thrust harder, harder, harder… saying such perfectly evil things… Arthur couldn’t help but moan with Alfred as he finally climaxed, thrusting twice more before he finally let go of Arthur’s knee and hunched over Arthur, completely spent. He pulled out and fell forward, lying half on Arthur and half on the blankets, his eyes closed and his breathing heavy.

Arthur stared up at the beige ceiling. The room was quiet, say for the chorus of their heavy breathing, fighting to calm their racing hearts. Arthur closed his eyes and smiled when Alfred kissed his chest, then his collarbone, then his temple. This was bliss. Being with Alfred. Feeling this way. There was no mistake about it. Arthur sighed contentedly.

For a moment, they simply laid together, quiet and happy while their hearts raced in tandem. Arthur’s hand came up to card through Alfred’s hair. He had been sweating, too. Arthur sighed again.

“I… I really hope,” Alfred huffed. “I really hope… you don’t wake up and decide this was a bad idea.”

Without thinking, Arthur started to laugh. A mistake? This? It was an absurd thought. He laughed until Alfred sat up and pushed away the hair that was matted to his forehead. He laughed while Alfred kissed his cheeks, his nose, his chin… this wasn’t a mistake. Before Alfred had a chance to sit back, Arthur caught his face in his hand and held him close.

“This isn’t a mistake.” He promised with a smile. There was something akin to relief in Alfred’s eyes as he smiled back. Arthur’s thumb brushed across Alfred’s cheek. “This is very, very far from being a mistake.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
See you next chapter.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Human beings, as stated by the laws of nature, cannot fly. Arthur believed this with a great deal of enthusiasm. Humans are not supposed to fly. Especially in large metal tubes that were hurtling through the air at ridiculous speeds. And yet, Arthur sat in a plane, holding onto the armrests for dear life. Next to him, Alfred sighed and looked up from his PSP.

“Arthur, babe,” he mumbled, trying to get Arthur’s attention. Arthur continued staring straight ahead, wide-eyed and uneasy. Alfred took one of his hands and pat it comfortingly. “Relax. We only have 45 more minutes left on the flight.”

Arthur scrunched down in his seat a little further. “We’ve already been flying for an hour?” When Alfred reached over to open the shade over the window, Arthur leaned over and scrambled to stop him. “Don’t! It might be broken. We’ll all be sucked out of the plane,” Arthur squeaked as he leaned back into his aisle seat, furthest from the window. “If I’m going to die on the plane, I’d like to stay inside of it.”

Alfred rolled his eyes. “This was a bad idea.”

“Very, very bad idea.” Arthur nodded, grasping the armrests again. “Why do Marie and Alistair have to go to San Francisco to get married? Seattle is nice. We wouldn’t have to fly if they’d just stayed in Seattle.”

Clicking a few buttons on his PSP, Alfred shrugged. “Marie’s parents can’t travel, Arthur. You know that. She wants them to be there.”

Shifting in his seat anxiously, Arthur glared at Alfred. “We could’ve driven, you know.” He bounced his leg idly as a flight attendant walked down the aisle, giving him a strange look on her way. He pressed in on himself as he grumbled, “We really shouldn’t have flown. I hate flying.”

“Jesus, I should’ve bought you a sleeping pill or something,” Alfred griped as he pushed his glasses up on his nose.

Arthur laughed just once, high-pitched and hysteric. “Great! So, I’d die in my sleep! That would be fantastic!”

“Shh!” Alfred hissed, grabbing Arthur’s wrist and holding it. “Arthur, you’re starting to scare people. You need to relax. The plane isn’t going to crash.”

“That’s what they all say,” Arthur groaned as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat. “They said the Titanic would never sink, and what happened?”

Alfred sighed. “It sank.”

“It sank!” Arthur said in a tone that was three octaves higher than his normal speaking voice. Alfred winced at the sound, but Arthur paid it no mind. He wanted to get off the plane as soon as possible. If he had to, he would just walk the rest of the way to San Francisco.

Feeling Alfred pat his wrist again, Arthur opened his eyes and glanced at his calm, American boyfriend. “Hey. Chill. We have half an hour left. You’ll be okay.”
“But,” Arthur sputtered, “But… the engine could fail. The wings could –”

Alfred held up a hand to silence him. “Arthur. We have spring finals coming up soon. Why don’t you think about that instead?” Arthur gave Alfred an unamused expression, and Alfred sighed again. “Just… don’t think about it so hard. Try to think of something else.”

For a moment, Arthur was quiet, letting his discomfort bubble just beneath the surface. All around them, people were glancing in Arthur’s direction and whispering to each other. Arthur knew why. He’d been restless and fidgeting through the entire flight. He wouldn’t be surprised if one of them accused him of smuggling something illegal under his jacket.

When the plane shook, Arthur jumped in his seat and let out a startled shout. Alfred gripped his wrist hard, trying to hold him to reality, but Arthur glanced around the plane nonetheless.

“Oh god,” Arthur breathed, “We’re all going to die.”

Before Arthur could work himself into a panic attack, a flight attendant shuffled down the aisle and stood next to Arthur’s seat, looking down at him with a sickly-sweet smile.

“Sir,” he said calmly with his brown eyes glittering. “There was just a small amount of turbulence. Please don’t be alarmed.”

Arthur gripped the armrests tighter. “Right. I’m fine.” Next to him, Alfred snorted. Arthur kicked his shin in response as he looked at the flight attendant, smiled uneasily, and said, “I’m just not good with flying.”

The flight attendant nodded. “Your yelling just made a few of the other flyers nervous,” he said with his tight, fake smile. “Is there anything we can do to help you?”

“Get him a muzzle,” Alfred suggested under his breath. Arthur kicked him again, and this time, Alfred winced and glared at him. “Hey! Take it easy. It was just a joke.”

Arthur tried to smile at the attendant as he shook his head. “No. Nothing. Sorry about all this.” When the attendant had walked far enough away, Arthur leaned over and grumbled in Alfred’s ear, “Why in god’s name am I dating you, you twit?”

Alfred didn’t look up from his PSP as he smiled. “Because we love each other.”


Without missing a beat, Alfred took one of Arthur’s clenched fists and held it in his. Their fingers intertwined naturally, and Arthur couldn’t help but feel slightly comforted. Alfred kissed the back of his hand.

“You love me,” he mumbled against Arthur’s hand. The plane shook, and Arthur’s breath hitched as he squeezed Alfred’s hand. Alfred merely smiled. “You’re gonna be just fine, sweetheart.”

Arthur blinked. Sweetheart? What was that? Alfred had never called him that before… was he trying to be cute, or was it something else? Arthur couldn’t help but feel his brain itch with curiosity.
“‘Sweetheart?’” Arthur echoed, watching Alfred’s eyes dart away from his. “Is that what you called me?”

“Yeah,” Alfred said slowly as he fidgeted with his glasses anxiously. “I was just tryin’ it.” He looked at Arthur with a goofy smile. “Do you not like it?”

“N-no, I like it,” Arthur sputtered quickly. He tapped his empty hand against his armrest and thought to himself quietly.

Alfred had always, always, called him ‘babe.’ It was one of Alfred’s American idiosyncrasies that Arthur had grown accustomed to. There were no other names he’d used. And Arthur was satisfied with that. He hated people that overused pet names. They were obnoxious and unnecessary. And now, despite himself, Arthur felt his lips turn up in a smile at the thought.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered. “I like it.”

Alfred smiled and nodded to himself. “Good. I’ll have to use it more often.”

Arthur tried to smile, but the plane shook once more. Clenching his fists, Arthur closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He needed to keep himself calm… he wasn’t about to make a scene on a plane. A hand pat his shoulder comfortingly, and Arthur took another breath, slowly letting it out as Alfred’s chuckle echoed in his ear.

“Arthur, sweetheart,” Alfred’s voice sounded far, far away. Like he was buried under mountains of blankets, calling to Arthur with a voice hardly above a whisper. Arthur hummed, and Alfred laughed again. A hand passed through Arthur’s hair, and Arthur couldn’t help but smile at the feeling. “Arthur,” he tried again. “I have to go to work, honey.”

Taking a deep, hissing breath, Arthur scrubbed a hand over his face, trying to rub away the sleepiness in his eyes. While he stretched and groaned at the click and pop of joints, Alfred bent over and kissed his cheek softly. Arthur couldn’t help the grin that came to his face. He let his arms drop onto Alfred’s shoulders, holding him close so Arthur could get a kiss before Alfred needed to slip away.

Alfred smiled against Arthur’s lips, and kissed him once more before he pulled away, holding an inch away from Arthur to say, “Good morning.”

Opening his eyes, Arthur was greeted with a view of his husband in handsome work shirt and a prize-winning grin. There was a light in his eyes. One that hadn’t been there for… well, as long as Arthur could remember. But there he was. Perfectly content. It was true, marital contentment for the first time in months. Arthur basked in the feeling as Alfred slipped a watch onto his wrist and checked his phone.

“I’ll be home around six,” Alfred said gently, staring at his phone with a disapproving expression. “Ah… Edith keeps sending me emails about a book signing. Did she tell you about this?”

Ah. Marital bliss was disrupted too quickly. Sitting up slowly – his muscles ached and throbbed as he groaned – Arthur frowned and gave Alfred’s phone a disapproving look. How dare that electronic device interrupt his morning. This morning was supposed to be the calm after the storm. He was supposed to be reveling in the joy of his and Alfred’s rekindled relationship, overwhelmed by falling in love again, and recovering from memory loss. He should not be thinking of Edith.
“She was bothering me some days ago,” Arthur confessed slowly, seeing Alfred’s expression darken. He was quick to soothe it as he slipped out of bed. “But I’d always tell her that I was still recovering! She simply… wouldn’t listen.”

“Yeah,” Alfred grumbled. “That sounds like Edith.”

Watching as Alfred stuffed his phone into his pocket, Arthur pressed his lips together in a tight line. Perhaps it was time to go shopping for a publisher. If not to make himself happy, it would probably be for the good of his marriage.

While Alfred mumbled something unsavory about Edith, Arthur set to work finding his pants. Alfred had dropped them next to the bed last night, hadn’t he? Fumbling for a moment, Arthur winced when his muscles screamed in protest when he pulled on his pants and a clean pair of trousers. On the other side of the room, Alfred sighed.

“You’re not gonna go the whole day in the nude?” His bottom lip stuck out as he petulantly pouted. Arthur rolled his eyes and dug through his dresser for a shirt while Alfred whined. “You look so good naked. You should just walk around naked all the time.”

Rolling his eyes again, Arthur gave Alfred a tired look. “That’s indecent,” he reprimanded softly as he pulled on a white t-shirt. Alfred adjusted his glasses and smiled innocently when Arthur raised his eyebrows and said, “Hopefully I still look good while clothed?”

Alfred laughed at that. “You always look good, sweetheart.” He stepped in close for a kiss before leaning back and smiling. “Especially naked.”

Placing his hand over Alfred’s face, Arthur pushed his husband away and sighed, “Don’t you have to be going?”

“I do, I do,” Alfred said in a sing-song voice as he headed for the bedroom door. “But first I need to finish my coffee.”

Almost begrudgingly, Arthur followed his husband out of the room. As he was slowly trudging down the stairs, Arthur watched Alfred rush through the house with a spring in his step and no pain in his back. Arthur grimaced at the sight. Lucky sod. Next time, Arthur would top. Show him how it felt to be up on his feet after a night of fun.

“Okay!” Alfred called from the doorway as he zipped up his coat. “I’ll be home around six. Need anything before I go?”

Leaning against the entryway wall, Arthur raised his eyebrows. “I don’t need much,” he admitted. “But first I need to finish my coffee.”

Sighing dramatically, Alfred shuffled towards him with a frown on his face. “Goodbyes are so sad, though. How about an ‘I love you’ kiss? Would that work?”

Arthur shook his head. “No refunds or exchanges. Only the real thing will do.”

Laughing just once, Alfred leaned in and kissed him. “So bossy,” Alfred whispered against his lips before another kiss. “But I still love you.”

“You’re damn right you do,” Arthur murmured before Alfred pulled away and headed for the door. Something felt light in his chest. Something that fluttered and tickled when he sighed happily. Alfred turned around to smile at him, and whatever it was in Arthur’s chest thudded madly. Arthur smiled hopelessly. God, he was a fool in love.
“Don’t burn the house down while I’m gone,” Alfred called through the doorway as he headed out. Arthur rolled his eyes.

“Bugger off, Alfred! Don’t run any red lights!”

Alfred’s laughter filled the entryway before the door closed and abruptly cut him off, leaving Arthur alone with a hollow, warm house. Wrapping his arms around himself, Arthur headed to the kitchen to make a warm cuppa with Edith’s email still tickling in the back of his brain.

She was so insistent that she was bothering Alfred now. Was a book signing really that important? Well, Arthur thought as he set the kettle on the stove, if he was popular enough to hold signings, then his books must be very much in demand. He tapped his foot on the floor idly.

According to some, he’d been on television. This meant accident was broadcasted on the news, no doubt. People at the signing would probably want to know what he’d been doing with all his time out of the public eye. Edith would be demanding. People would pry. The more he thought about it, going to the signing seemed more daunting and less rewarding.

When the kettle whistled, Arthur poured himself a cup of tea. He could barely remember his books -- published and unpublished -- so, if he did go and someone asked him a question about his stories, he wouldn’t know how to answer. Then again, he could lie. Say it was up to the reader. ‘It’s open to interpretation,’ as one of his college professors would say. Arthur took a sip of tea as he wondered when he’d remembered that quote.

To go or not to go, that was quite the dilemma. Arthur felt like there was something he had to do before he’d be able to go. Some sort of hurdle that needed to be jumped. But he wasn’t sure what it was. Surely, he couldn’t just wait for all of his memories to come back. He was still missing giant chunks of his life, and it had been three months since the accident. No, that wouldn’t do.

Was there a rite of passage that he could gain? Something that would boost his confidence? Wandering away from the kitchen, Arthur made his way to his office. The door was shut, just as he had left it two weeks ago, and when he opened it, he was hit with a strange sense of nostalgia. He’d visited this room not long ago, so why did it feel sad to see the empty chair and desk?

This was the room where he’d written novels. Stories of larger-than-life prophecies and destinies. His worlds were built here. And if he was going to a book signing for his worlds, he had to remember how he got there in the first place. Taking a deep breath, Arthur stepped into his office and set his cup of tea on the desk. It was about time he’d gotten back to work.

Sitting down at his office chair, Arthur glanced around the room. It was spotless. Bookshelves were chocked full, but no dust lined the edges. Everything was in its place. Set and waiting for him. It was almost lonely to see. How many countless hours had he spent here? Had he liked it in its formerly messy state? He couldn’t say.

This place, as renewed and reborn as it was, was still someplace dear to him. It was where he’d written several books, once upon a time. Something inside these four walls were supposed to be familiar. Arthur knew the memories were in his brain. They were just taking their sweet time coming back.

Opening his laptop, Arthur looked at the locked screen. Bright, vivid blue and an icon with a chess piece on it. His own name written as the owner. It was his computer. He had to
remember the password. Perhaps, like tying Alfred's tie, the password would come back to him easily with muscle memory.

Even with that hope, he was still anxious. If it didn't come back, he'd lose his livelihood.

He pulled open the pen drawer on his desk, taking out his wedding picture and setting it beside the laptop. Maybe the picture -- along with its subsequent memories -- would help him shake the password out of his head. He put his hands on the keyboard, glanced at the picture, and waited.

But nothing came to him.

No special phrase or word came to mind. His fingers hovered over the keys, ready to type, but he couldn’t think of anything. There were so many things the password could be. Wiggling his fingers, Arthur typed in December20th as a swift guess. Unsurprisingly, the computer rejected him. He frowned at the screen, his leg bouncing agitatedly. Honestly, why did he have that wedding picture in his desk? If that wasn’t a hint to his password, what was it for?

Tapping his fingers in agitation, Arthur glanced at the Hint? Button below the password bar. On a whim, he clicked it. A hint couldn’t hurt. When the screen flickered and added one word, Arthur leaned forward, squinted, and huffed.

*Hint: Alfred*

Well, there he had it. Arthur quickly typed Alfred’s name into the bar and pressed enter. Incorrect. He growled and tried leaving out the capitalization. Incorrect. His eye twitched involuntarily, and he tried adding a period after Alfred’s name, with and without capitalization. Incorrect and incorrect again. He tried adding Alfred’s last name, his own last name, adding in pet names Alfred had used, and even abbreviating Alfred’s name and putting dashes between them. Nothing worked.

Sitting back in his chair, Arthur sighed heavily. Perhaps he had lost something of himself in the crash. Though, it seemed odd that a computer password was the only thing eluding him.

Drumming his fingers against the desk, Arthur glanced at his wedding picture. Alfred’s smile still shone, tears still glittered in the light of the camera, and they still embraced. Overjoyed. Overwhelmed. And yet, it was overbearing. What was the relevance of this picture in his desk? What was it supposed to mean? Did he really like looking back at this picture that much? If so, why was it so wrinkled? Why wasn’t it in a frame? Why was it shoved in the back of his pencil drawer? He looked away.

Alfred. Alfred Jones. His husband, his lover, his best friend… his password. How did it all connect? Did it have something to do with the picture? Things couldn’t keep going wrong forever. Last night was supposed to do… something. They had been so close. Felt so much. Didn’t that mean anything? Did that honestly not unlock anything in his memory? Nothing at all?

Sitting forward again, Arthur took up his picture and glared at it.

“Do something,” he grumbled at the glossy photopaper. His thumb idly pressed down on the wrinkled corners, flattening them and trying to make them right. They curled around his thumb lovingly when he pulled back, holding on when Arthur was keen on letting go. He sighed, and turned over the picture, glancing at the date on the back.

*December 20th. Arthur James Kirkland and Alfred Franklin Jones.*
Without thinking, Arthur smiled. Alfred had always been so proud of his middle name. He bragged that it made him smarter. Blinking rapidly, Arthur set the picture down. That was... something. Wasn’t it? He’d remembered something, but he wasn’t quite sure what it meant.

Quickly putting his hands back on the keyboard, Arthur hesitated, then typed *Franklin* into the password box. Within seconds, he was looking at an open word document. He hardly believed it. After three months, he’d logged into his own computer.

Letting out a breath, Arthur scrolled through the open document. It was a story. A fairly new one, by the looks of it. There were nearly 40 pages, each one covered in green-marked grammatical errors and red typos, but none had been fixed. Arthur continued to scroll, only glancing at pieces of dialogue as an afterthought.

It was a sad story. Less about a tragic love and more of a waning one. A love that fizzled out and drowned beneath the weight of time and space. Long inner monologues, sorrow-filled goodbyes, and agonizing pining. And this was only 40 pages worth. His hands itched to write more, but he still didn’t know where the tale was supposed to go. Was it supposed to end this sad? Where was the information on the characters? At this point, he was an innocent bystander and curious reader. He didn’t know anything about the main character and her lover.

Quickly saving the story, Arthur labeled it as ‘*In Progress*’ before closing the program. His wallpaper was a picture of a steaming cup of tea. Very fitting. On the desktop was a yellow post-it that read: *Don’t forget book signing. Ask Edith for details.* Arthur smirked. He had forgotten. Rather spectacularly at that.

Looking past the note, Arthur noticed he had hardly anything on the laptop. It wasn’t a very new model, and it didn’t look like it was running the fastest programs... but that must not have mattered. It was just for writing. Arthur sat back and gave the screen a considering look. A computer owned for the simple task of creating worlds. It was the literary version of a never-ending, blank canvas.

Rubbing his fingers together for a moment, Arthur opened another word document. He stared at the black cursor. It taunted him. Dared him to write something, anything that would prove he’d lost his spark. Arthur took a deep breath, put his fingers on the keyboard, and wrote.

He wrote about waking up with this world a blank slate. He wrote about his head reeling and mind boggled at the emptiness of his memory. Losing his name, his husband, his life... and his brother. He wrote about the sharp sting of loss and how it felt strange without the emotion to match it. He wrote of the taste of chocolate pudding. The ache for acceptance. Falling in love. And falling all over again.

Each word felt like a love letter to himself and Alfred alike. A promise that somehow, in the future, it would get better. Part of him wanted to pause, to look back at what he’d written, but there was so much more to say. He had to write about meeting new -- old -- friends, remembering -- suffering -- through memories, and how Alfred loved him -- and feared him -- through the whole ordeal.

Without noticing it, Arthur had opened at least three documents, some of them ten pages, others were longer. Like small stories. Chapters of a larger story. His story. Arthur glanced at his wedding picture and corrected himself. It was their story.

After a while, his eyes began to hurt, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering a low curse under his breath. Perhaps writing an entire story in one sitting was overreaching his limits. Clicking through his pages of work, Arthur smiled. He was due for a break. He closed his
laptop, groaned as he stood, and hobbled to the kitchen. He needed a pudding cup and an aspirin.

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Hours seemed to pass Arthur in a slight blur, melting together as he continued to write. It felt like he was coming home. Falling back into a rhythm that he remembered all too well. He had missed writing so much, and he hadn’t even realized it.

But the time Arthur was ready for another pause in his routine, he glanced at the clock in the bottom right of his screen and read 9:05 pm. Arthur blinked. It felt like morning had only been moments ago. He leaned back and pushed his hands through his hair.

“Christ,” he muttered, letting out a long breath before he stretched.

“Ah. It speaks,” a familiar voice said behind him. Jumping in his seat, Arthur swiveled in his chair to face the doorway with wide, alarmed eyes. Alfred stood, perfectly handsome and horribly smug in the doorway with a can of soda in his hand. Arthur felt his heart rate immediately slow.

“Lord almighty,” Arthur breathed. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Alfred shrugged. “I’m not surprised. You’ve been in your own little world since I got home.”

Giving his husband a look, Arthur glanced back at his computer, then back to Alfred, “How… how long have you been standing there?”

“Just a minute,” Alfred said as he looked down at his drink shyly. “I wanted to check on you. Make sure you didn’t fall asleep at your desk.”

Closing his computer, Arthur stretched again. “Have I fallen asleep while writing before?”

Alfred smiled. “You’d be surprised how many times I’ve tried to wake you up and bring you to bed,” he smiled a little wider and said, “But you’d always smack me and say that you were working. And then you’d just keep writing.” He smiled and spread his hands wide dramatically and said, “A man on a mission.”

Slipping out of his seat, Arthur slowly stood and pushed in his chair. There was something satisfying about going back to work, but even as he left his seat, his fingers itched to write something new. Something else that would tie up loose ends neatly. Even with this urge, Arthur wasn’t sure what he wanted to write as a new conclusion. It was like standing up had wiped away his inspiration, leaving him an empty husk.

In the doorway, Alfred gave him a strange look. “You all right?” He asked, a slightly bemused expression on his face. “You look a little lost.”

Arthur blinked, looking up from the floor. “I feel a bit… drained.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Alfred stepped close and put an arm around Arthur’s shoulders and steered him out of the room. “That’s not unusual. If you write all day, you normally end up as a zombie.”

Wrinkling his nose, Arthur let himself be led into the living room. “I’m not sure I’d call myself a zombie, but my mind is a little hazy… I don’t remember writing being so tiring.”
“Well, you always liked days like this more than the times when you were bored out of your mind,” Alfred confessed as they sat on the sofa. Arthur stretched his legs out over Alfred’s thighs as he laid back against the sofa cushions. Alfred took a drink of his soda before continuing. “When you were stuck on stuff, you would sit in that room and just stare at your laptop. It was like you were possessed.”

Settling into the sofa, the couple fell quiet for a bit. A handsome newscaster predicted sleet and overcast skies for the next few days. Something happened in American politics. Sports coverage was replayed in slow motion. And through it all, Arthur’s mind was in a haze.

He’d written today. Fallen back into a habit he nearly assumed dead. It was true; he was an author by trade. It was his calling. He just didn’t expect the call to be so forthright. He wiggled his feet a bit, slightly enthused with no output for his energy. Alfred pat the top of his thigh soothingly, almost like a parent telling their child to settle down. But Arthur couldn’t help it.

“Alfred,” he said as a commercial for a new car flickered on the screen. Alfred hummed, half-interested, and Arthur let his head loll back against the cushions. “I think I missed writing.”

“Makes sense to me.” Alfred leaned forward to put his empty can on the table, holding onto Arthur’s legs so he didn’t slip off the couch. When he sat back, Arthur could barely see his smile illuminated by the light of the television. “Writing has always been a big part of your life. You’ve been writing since we were kids.”

Arthur winced. “Ah… those stories must’ve been…” he trailed off oddly, not knowing how to phrase his disappointment. Alfred, however, laughed at the statement. “They weren’t the greatest, but they were something.” He gave Arthur a sideways glance. “We all started somewhere.”

Walking Alfred carefully, Arthur nodded to himself. “We all started somewhere” was a phrase that he’d heard many times before. He couldn’t remember where or when, but he knew that he’d been pat on the shoulder and consoled by this phrase over and over. He’d started with magical children’s stories. He’d been in love with fiction since he was just a toddler. It’s where he started but… how did a young boy with an inclination to science fall for a boy who craved the written word?

Wiggling his feet again, Arthur shifted his shoulders to get comfortable. “Alfred, were we good friends? When we were children.” Alfred gave him a strange, questioning look. There was a hint of fear there, but Arthur didn’t indulge it. He merely shrugged and reiterated, “I just can’t imagine we had much in common.”

For just a bit, Alfred quiet. He took up the remote, muted the TV, and sighed. “We didn’t. And we didn’t get along super well. Not at first anyway.” Arthur raised an eyebrow at this, and Alfred went on. “You came to America when we were ten. We didn’t get a ton of British kids in that school,” he looked down when he spoke, as if he were ashamed. Arthur narrowed his eyes, bracing himself for a confession. Alfred paused, took a breath, and said, “First, I would make fun of your accent.”

Arthur blinked. “I see.”

Alfred went on quietly, “Then I’d make fun of the books you read. And then the way you spelled stuff. And then I would tease you about your height. You’ve always been kinda short.”

Arthur pursed his lips and took a steadying breath before he repeated, “I see.”
“It wasn’t just me,” Alfred said slowly. “There were plenty of kids who liked to join in. You have one hell of a temper, Arthur. Always have.”

“So,” Arthur summarized with a hint of agitation. “You enjoyed riling me up.”

Lifting one hand from Arthur’s thighs to adjust his glasses, Alfred cleared his throat. “Well, I thought it was all fun, ya know? I didn’t think I was doing any harm,” he paused, then said, “I know it’s not much of an excuse, but my parents hadn’t really taught me otherwise.”

“... ah.” Arthur said numbly. Alfred was... his childhood bully? That wasn’t what he’d understood in any of his memories. He remembered being friends with Alfred when he was ten. He’d remembered a sleep over at Alfred’s house. He remembered trusting Alfred. So... what was this?

Story after story, layer after layer, he peeled away one perception of Alfred and revealed another. Abusive parents, anger issues, and a newly revealed schoolyard bully. There was so much to Alfred, it was almost irritating. Couldn’t he have learned this information long ago? Instead of slowly picking away details, why not just reveal the truth at the beginning? Enough trying to patch it up with soft, warm memories. Arthur wanted to rip of the Band-Aid and reveal the scars beneath, no matter how little.

“How... how long?” Arthur managed to stutter. “How long did this go on?”

Alfred fidgeted with his glasses again. One of his most common nervous tics. “About... a week, I think?” Arthur blinked in barely contained surprise. A week. A week of bullying and then... what? Immediate friendship? As if he could feel Arthur’s confusion, Alfred was quick to explain. “You have three older siblings, Arthur. All of them love you,” there was an edge to his voice as he said, “And at that point, they hated me.”

Arthur’s eyes went wide. “Please tell me Alistair didn’t hurt you.”

Without warning, Alfred burst out laughing. Arthur jumped in surprise, feeling a smile come to his face while Alfred rocked forward where he sat.

“Oh my god,” Alfred managed to sputter between laughs, “No. No, no. He scared the hell out of me, yeah. But he didn't hurt me. Alistair is a big softy,” he gave Arthur a big smile, and Arthur felt his heart warm at the sight. “Alistair wouldn’t deliberately hurt someone.”

Alfred started tracing circles atop Arthur’s right thigh while he spoke, not taking his eyes from Arthur’s. “I’m pretty sure you had been telling your siblings about me. When two big high schoolers showed up on the elementary school playground, it was kinda surprising.” He chuckled at that, and Arthur smiled. “Alistair and Delilah came up to you, asked which one was the bully, and you pointed at me,” Alfred said lowly, a smile still playing on his lips. “And Alistair came up to me, grabbed my arm, and pulled me to where you were. He told me to apologize.”

Arthur crossed his arms as his smile turned smug. “And did you?”

“Yeah,” laughed Alfred as he shook his head. “Alistair scared the crap outta me. I wasn’t gonna make him mad.” He took a breath, shrugged, and pat Arthur’s thigh. “And that was the story of the time I bullied you for a week and almost peed my pants at school.”

Wrinkling his nose at the last detail, Arthur sighed. “But that doesn’t quite answer my question,” Arthur admitted. “How did we actually become friends? I can’t imagine I was very cozy toward you after that week.” He narrowed his eyes. “Bullying leaves a rather shoddy first
Pushing the heel of his hand through his hair, Alfred nodded thoughtfully. “That’s true. You kinda avoided me for a while. And I avoided you, too. Your brother and sister still scared me.” He then looked at Arthur with a glimmer of excitement in his blue, blue eyes. “Until Halloween rolled around,” he said with more enthusiasm than was necessary. Arthur quirked an eyebrow, and Alfred merely smiled wider. “All the kids got to dress up. I came to school as Superman, and you dressed up as a pirate. Lucky for us, I love pirate stories. I walked up to you, asked if you wanted to play Pirate vs Superman, and the rest is history.”

Arthur blinked slowly. “Costumes. That’s what brought us together? Honestly?”

Looking slightly offended, Alfred pouted. “I thought it was a cute story. Enemies to friends. Friends to boyfriends. Boyfriends to husbands.” He spread his arms wide. “We are practically a Hallmark movie waiting to happen!”

Arthur rolled his eyes and moved his legs from Alfred’s lap, sitting up with a slightly thoughtful expression. “Still… we avoided each other for so long, and playing pretend is what patched the gap between us?” He gave Alfred an exasperated look. “You have to admit that’s a tad farfetched.”

Raising his hands in surrender, Alfred shrugged. “Hey, ask anybody. Your parents will back me up. You invited me to your house after school that day, and we played until it was time to go trick-or-treating.” He lowered his hands slowly. “Delilah didn’t like that I was there, but… well, I was there. And we had a blast. We hung out almost every day after that.” He grinned proudly. “And the rest is history.”

Arthur hummed. “You never made fun of me again?”

“Oh, I made fun of you all the time,” Alfred said earnestly. Arthur frowned, and Alfred was quick to say, “You made fun of me, too. It was a mutual sort of thing. What did your mom call it? Batter? Barter?”

“No, Banter,” Arthur said softly, an involuntary smile on his lips. “She called it banter.”

Arthur could almost hear it in his head. Alfred imitating his accent while at the dinner table with his family, and the entire Kirkland household adopting horrendous American accents to show Alfred how silly he sounded. There was laughter. And warmth. Years of it flooded through his mind, burning through the cold, teary thoughts of embarrassment and replacing them with fun. Acceptance. Joy. Arthur closed his eyes and tried to feel it all over again, the feeling of having his whole family packed together in their small-town home. The sensation of having Alfred next to him, struggling to pronounce “codger” correctly. Alistair ruffling his hair. His mother pinching Alfred’s cheek. All of it washing over him and pulling him down into a comforting embrace.

Memories of first love incarnate.

“Hey,” Alfred’s voice broke through the haze, almost sounding concerned. “You okay? You’ve been quiet for a little bit.”

“I’m fine,” Arthur murmured. “Just thinking of home,” he paused, then said, “Remembering.”

Alfred stiffened. “And… you’re okay?”

Nodding slowly, Arthur opened his eyes and looked at his dimly lit living room. His
family was no longer gathered around him. Alistair wouldn’t ruffle his hair again. The feeling left a bitter feeling that settled into his chest and burned where it sat. Arthur swallowed thickly.

“Alistair is gone,” he breathed, as if it was something he’d just realized. It hit him all over again. The accident, his brother, his wound… old memories and ones that would never be made. His face felt hot as he took a breath and repeated, “Alistair is gone.”

“Yeah.”

Arthur blinked, and a tear rolled down his cheek. He wiped it away angrily. He’d already cried for Alistair. He’d already felt remorse. And yet, it still stung. Alistair had been with him his whole life. Protected him. Loved him. And now… Arthur huffed sadly. “It still hurts.”

Without saying anything, Alfred put an arm around Arthur’s shoulders, pulling him in close. Arthur pressed his face to Alfred’s chest, soaking in the warmth and listening to the routine thud of his heartbeat. Comforting, but not enough to close the wounds.

How was Arthur able to write about the accident without fear? How could he so coolly examine his situation with an outside eye? He hadn’t cried when he wrote his feelings in detail, but now, wrapped in the feelings and experiencing them firsthand, Arthur couldn’t feel but feeling like he was drowning. He was feeling the impact of the crash over and over again. Hearing the car horns blare. Alistair. His smile, his warmth, his hands patting his shoulder. Before Marie. Before the change. Before they all lost him. Arthur closed his eyes and let Alfred hold him close.

“He’s gone, Alfred,” he gasped, fully aware that his tears were soaking the collar of Alfred’s t-shirt. Alfred didn’t say anything, and Arthur grasped at Alfred’s shoulders pulling him closer as he sputtered, “He’s dead! Alistair… Alistair is dead, and I… didn’t even say goodbye… at the funeral.”

They’d left immediately after the service had begun. He hadn’t been able to see his brother one last time. He hadn’t said anything. Now this… this feeling was one that would break hearts in a novel. This feeling was one that would win awards. And yet, Arthur wasn’t writing. He was bitterly living. Experiencing. Dying with his brother all over again.

And so, he cried. He mourned the loss of his brother in earnest, clinging to Alfred and hoping he wouldn’t fall apart. Alfred pet his hair and held him. He was quiet. It could have been minutes or hours that they stayed like that, curled together on the sofa while Arthur cried. Arthur didn’t care to know. He just sniffled and gasped for breath.

When he finally released Alfred, he leaned back and looked up at his face. Alfred’s eyes were red. Glossy tears were highlighted by the glow of the TV. His lips were pressed together in a tight line. Arthur brushed his thumb over Alfred’s cheek.

“He’s gone,” Alfred whispered as if it were a revelation. Arthur nodded slowly. One accident. Two men. One life spared. They’d both loved Alistair. It was a blessing and a curse to have lost him. Alfred’s breath caught in his throat, and he choked on a sob. “Y-you’re still here.”

Arthur nodded again. “I’m here,” he agreed softly. It was Alfred’s turn to hold on tight, burying his face in Arthur’s neck and crushing him in a torrid embrace. Arthur closed his eyes, feeling fresh, stinging tears roll down his cheeks and burn his eyes. His fingernails dug into Alfred’s shoulders, trying to reassure himself that he was truly alive. He sighed. “I’m right here, Alfred.”

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With only a breath, Arthur could tell he’d hit a wall. He watched his own writing develop word by word. Paragraph by paragraph. Page by page. When writing each simile, he remembered countless ones that came before it. Metaphors were like an old hobby, coming to him as a second-nature motion. It burned to write his feelings -- his own for once, and not a fictional character’s -- and yet, it was nearly soothing. Alistair, Alfred, himself… somehow, it felt like he was digging away at himself. Carving away at the stinging memories until they were almost… hollow.

Even with the progress he’d made, he knew that he was reaching the end of his rope. It was emotionally exhausting to write. He remembered that better than anything. He’d had a running start at the beginning as everything came to him easily, but now he was wading through concrete. Each detail about his family life pulled him down harder, while the promise of advancing his own life story was tantalizingly close. He tried to get closer, skipping bits of information, but with those missing holes, with those gaps in detail and plot, he knew he was drowning himself.

He sat back in his chair heavily, feeling the seat recline and teeter as he closed his eyes. He didn’t know how long he’d been writing, nor did he mind. His book signing segment was less than a week away, and all he was doing was writing an elegy. He sighed and rolled his shoulders back, feeling the joints pop.

At the very least, he was working again. Remembering fragments of his own life and work through his story. It was as rewarding as it was exhausting.

From the hallway, Arthur heard a calm, almost passive voice say, “Done for the day?”

He looked over his shoulder, spotting Alfred leaning calmly in the doorway. A beautiful man in repose. With a smile on his lips and a glass of water in his hand, Alfred cocked his head to the side in question. It was slight curiosity. Possibly wondering what Arthur had been writing so feverishly for the past few days. Drumming his fingers on the table, Arthur couldn’t quite decide whether or not he wanted to tell Alfred what was in the documents before him.

There was something too personal in the words. But, if he wanted it published, Alfred was bound to read it either way. Arthur pursed his lips at that thought. He could hide this book away in the recesses of his computer. He could even print it out and place it on his bookshelves along with the countless other novels that were never going to be seen by the public eye. But… was that what he wanted?

Part of him wanted the recognition. Part of him craved the attention that a successful book could bring. He’d been through so much – a quick glance back at Alfred before he turned off his laptop – they had been through so much. A crash, a death, an aching, hollowing feeling that came from years of memories that simply vanished… Arthur wanted it to be written. He wanted the world to know that he and Alfred had -- somehow, beyond all odds – managed to find each other again. Through the clouds of Arthur’s murky memories, Alfred had been there. His feelings had never changed. Arthur smiled; he wanted the world to know that.

Swiveling in his chair, Arthur shrugged. “I think I’m done for the moment,” he made a vague gesture with his hands before he managed to say, “Stuck. Stuck on this damn part.”


“Oh… us, huh? That’s,” he grappled for words, and Arthur could almost hear the sirens going off in Alfred’s brain from across the room. “I mean, I don’t… what… what exactly are you writing?”

Tapping his fingers on the armrest of his chair, Arthur kept a level-head while he said, “I’m writing about the accident. How it affected me…” he paid close attention to Alfred’s expression when he said, “And us.”

Gladly, this response didn’t garner any discomfort. Alfred simply nodded again. “Are… are you writing about Alistair, too? About all of that?” Arthur hummed affirmatively. Alfred fingered the side of his glass of water. “And the… the memories? Those, too?” Another hum, and Alfred shifted his weight between his feet, finally standing up straight in the doorway. “You’re… you’re not, uh –” he cleared his throat and gestured between the two of them awkwardly, “You’re not gonna write… about the… um…”

“Fighting?” Arthur supplied.

“No –”

“Confusion?” He tried again.

Alfred looked more embarrassed as he repeated, “No.”

Arthur fought the urge to smirk. “Sex?” To Arthur’s delight, Alfred’s ears burned a bright red along with his cheeks. Arthur nearly laughed at the sight. “What’s wrong, Alfred? I never thought you were a prude.”

“I’m not,” said Alfred quickly, as if he were trying to cover up his less-than-bold reaction. “I’m just not sure I want everyone in the world to know about our sexlife.” He adjusted his glasses. “That’s private stuff.”

“Oh my,” Arthur breathed, placing a hand over his heart. “I’m married to a quaker.”

“Fuck you,” Alfred grumbled as he wandered away from the doorway, his cheeks still red. Arthur couldn’t help but laugh.

“No, no!” Arthur laughed as he gave chase after Alfred, wrapping his arms around Alfred’s waist and pressing himself against Alfred’s back. Alfred tried to keep trudging through the living room, but Arthur leaned all of his weight onto him, leaving Alfred to grunt and set his water glass on a table while he struggled to hold Arthur up. “How private is our sex life, love?”

“God, you’re heavier than I remember,” Alfred groaned, already bent over double while Arthur dragged him down.

Arthur frowned. “How rude. Are you really embarrassed, Alfred? You’re a handsome man and an impeccable lover. It would be difficult to make you look bad if I wrote down our deviances.”

“Jesus! You’ve put on weight,” Alfred huffed. His knees hit the ground heavily, still pressed down upon by Arthur’s deadweight.

“That’s still rude.”

“Are you trying to kill me?”
Arthur hummed thoughtfully. “Not today, darling. Another day, perhaps.”

Alfred groaned dramatically as he laid face-down on the floor. A symbol of his surrender. “It sure feels like you’re trying to kill me.”

Humming again, Arthur rested his cheek against Alfred’s shoulder blade. “It feels like you’re trying to dodge my questions.”

For a moment, Alfred was quiet. There may have been wheels turning in his head, each clicking into place when a new thought was formed, but Arthur couldn’t hear them this time. It was merely quiet. He could hear the routine thud of Alfred’s heartbeat, and he steady sounds of his breathing. Waiting. Thinking. Resting. Alfred below him and Arthur comfortably atop him. Like an odd stack of husbands.

“I don’t want anyone to know what… no, that’s not right…” Alfred sighed and audibly struggled to take another breath. “Our bedroom is our bedroom, ya know? I just… I don’t think we need anyone else in there with us.” He paused, then reached a hand behind him to blindly pat Arthur. He found Arthur’s thigh first, patting it twice. “Do you get what I’m sayin’?”

Arthur smiled. “I do. But I think it’s worth mentioning: I wasn’t planning to write about sex in this book. If I would, it would hardly be explicit.”

Faster than he could follow, Alfred rolled the side and sat up, throwing Arthur across the carpet floor and into the side of the sofa without a moment to breathe. Hearing his back crack awkwardly, Arthur hissed and pushed himself up on his hands and knees. Rubbing his back tenderly, he caught Alfred’s eyes. His wide, disbelieving eyes. His face was red with exasperation and his glasses were askew, and it merely added to the disgruntled visage.

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

Arthur shrugged sorely. “I was curious, you damn tosser,” he rubbed his back again. “God, next time when you’re planning on launching me across the room, you should warn me.”

Scooting across the floor on his knees, Alfred held out his hands. “Are you okay?” Arthur swatted him away, and Alfred sat back on his hands and knees. Rubbing his back tenderly, he caught Alfred’s eyes. His wide, disbelieving eyes. His face was red with exasperation and his glasses were askew, and it merely added to the disgruntled visage.

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Scooting across the floor on his knees, Alfred held out his hands. “Are you okay?” Arthur swatted him away, and Alfred sat back on his hands and knees, sighing like a man who carried the world on his shoulders. “You’re… you’re really gonna write about this? All of it?”

Raising his eyes from the floor, Arthur narrowed them at Alfred. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“I’m not saying you can’t or shouldn’t, I’m just… I’m just…” Alfred huffed and looked up at the ceiling. “These past months have been… tough. Really tough, and… I know it’s not just me who feels that way. Everything was different for you. Everything was new.”

“I know how it felt, Alfred,” Arthur said softly. “I was there.”

Nodding fervently as he stood, Alfred pushed a hand through his hair. “It’s just… a lot.”

“I know,” Arthur repeated.

Alfred looked down to him with a slightly concerned expression. “And… and you’re sure you wanna do it? Write about the feelings and stuff?”

“I think…” Arthur took a breath. “I think I have to write it. If it stays in me any longer,” he traced the healing scar on his forehead. “I might just drive myself insane by dwelling over it.”
Giving Arthur a hand, Alfred pulled him onto his feet. “If something is so deep that it’s enough to drive you crazy,” he said softly. “Then this is going to be one hell of a book.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
See you next chapter.
Arthur had never enjoyed writing emails. Professionally, at least. They always sounded angry, upset, sarcastic... they were a Pandora’s box full of misunderstandings just waiting to be opened. With that in mind, he sat at his desk, glaring at an open draft of an email. Blank and waiting. He frowned. How was he supposed to email Edith when she had been such an unbearable person?

Nonetheless, he had to write to her. Not only to affirm that he would be at the book signing, but to tell her than he was going to be moving on with his writing career -- hopefully with a new publisher. Ah, that would open another can of worms. Who would be his new publisher? Where was he supposed to turn after this? Something itched at the back of his memory, begging to be acknowledged, but he had to focus on Edith first.

Edith, he started. So far so good. I’ll be at the signing Arthur paused, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, just before he finished with: we need to have a talk afterwards.

“Hey,” Alfred said from his office doorway. Arthur jumped, his finger tapping Send before he could stop himself. For a moment he felt alarmed, but... he’d said everything he wanted to say. Short, sweet, and to the point. Sighing, Arthur turned in his chair to face Alfred. His husband wore a casually curious smile. “I’m headin’ out. You...” he glanced at the computer for a moment, then back to Arthur. “You doing okay in here?”

“Just fine.” Arthur tapped his fingers along the worn leather armrests of his chair. His foot wanted to bounce restlessly, but he held himself still. “Just fine.” He repeated.

Alfred hesitated, but didn’t lose his smile when he nodded. “Cool, cool... hey, look,” he stepped into Arthur’s office with small, calculated steps. His eyes were gentle. So gentle. It was a velvet emotion that cloaked Arthur in warmth when Alfred said, “Don’t worry about the book signing, okay? It’ll be easy.” He smiled, and Arthur couldn't help but smile back. “Your readers love you, Arthur. And I love you, too. The hardest part about tomorrow should be writing your name.”

Biting the inside of his cheek to keep from contradicting Alfred, Arthur nodded calmly. So many things could go wrong tomorrow. He could get a migraine, but harassed by Edith, or worse, he could be harassed by news reporters. But Alfred was trying so hard to comfort him and his efforts were so genuine, Arthur let his bitterness bubble just beneath the surface, not quite hot enough to warrant an actual disagreement.

One quick kiss later, the front door was slammed shut, leaving Arthur feeling slightly uneasy as Alfred left.

Loneliness settled into the house quickly like an old friend. There were many things Arthur despised – emails being one – but loneliness was very high on the list. He wanted Alfred to come back. To comfort him. But at the same time, he knew this was his own problem. It was something that he had to work out alone.

Leaving the living room, he shuffled into his office and sat at the computer. He logged in. Opened a word document. His hands hovered over the keys. Why were such simple things,
things he’d done in the past, so difficult now that he was standing on his own two feet? He still felt like a strange piece that didn’t fit in his own puzzle. An anomaly. An outsider in his own body.

How could he go to his own book signing and be fine? How could he wrap his head around everything he’d lost? His hands wavered over the keys, thinking about what exactly he wanted to write. Everything was blank in his mind, running back through his own thoughts. He thought of everything except the story. It burned. An irritating, disheartening feeling. With a resigned sigh, Arthur took his hands back and dropped them into his lap.

Things hurt again. How did this happen so quickly? He had been so determined to make a change; to move forward again. But now… he lingered over his own shortcomings. Memories, feelings, gains and losses… it all gathered into a deep, deep hole. He sat back in his chair. Did depression run in his family? Because this sadness seemed to follow him like a persistent shadow. How on earth had he made it this far in life when he had so little belief in himself? Arthur blinked in realization. Alfred. It was always Alfred.

In a way, it almost made Arthur feel better. But at the same time, it made him feel weaker. If everything in his career was based on Alfred’s constant encouragement, how was Arthur supposed to stand on his own? How was he supposed to grow? He couldn’t. Not without Alfred. Arthur’s roots and intertwined with Alfred’s long ago, and now they were tangled so deep in the soil, he couldn’t pull back without tearing part of himself away with them.

Again, Arthur sighed. Love was so… profound. And strange. And stupid. Some people must pull away. To tear themselves apart like Francis had when he’d walked away from Arthur, all those years ago. But Arthur… he wasn’t walking away. There was something he could do on his own. He could grow taller, even while connected with Alfred. He could grow. He just had to find a new way.

Sitting tall in his chair, Arthur put his hands back onto the keys. There was a lifetime of emotion and thought that could be contained in three months’ worth of struggle, and he was going to write it on his own. This story… his story… no, their story; his and Alistair’s alike, was going to be written by Arthur alone. This time, he didn’t need Alfred’s validation. He didn’t need the pokes and prods of Edith. This was his chance to grow. This was his small ray of sunshine in a very, very dark corner of his life.

Maybe no one would read it. Maybe he wouldn’t publish it. Hell, it didn’t matter to Arthur anymore. He simply wrote. He wrote until his fingers hurt from hitting the keys too fast. He wrote until his eyes burned from watching the monitor too long. Wrote for himself, his memory, and for Alistair. Something akin to love was filling in the cracks left in Arthur’s heart and head after the accident. It was warm, and kind… but it left its own bittersweet sting. It was love. It had to be. Something that drove him forward more than Alfred. Something that made Arthur feel brave. Love. and sorrow.

The perfect mix for a true story.

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Contrary to his belief, Arthur had to do very little to prepare for his book signing. Presentable clothing, brushed teeth and hair, and a fake smile was all he needed. There were people in a long line that lead out of the corner-street bookstore, and as he sat at a small table signing copy after copy of his novels, Arthur couldn’t help but wonder if the line was endless.

“I love all of your books,” one girl said enthusiastically. The older woman with her – her mother – smiled tiredly as Arthur nodded. “My name is Carrie. Can you make it to Carrie? I just
love fantasy stuff.”

“Of course,” Arthur said stiffly, listening as she stated the spelling of her name loudly. He paid attention, but only just so. He was distracted by Edith. She hovered in the corner of his vision, hanging in the air over his shoulder. She’d been doing it for almost two hours. Like a gnat. No, no… she was a bloodsucking parasite. A mosquito, then. He handed the copy of his third book to Carrie, and said through a tight-lipped smile, “Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoy my other stories.”

Carrie, however didn’t seem done with the conversation. People behind her gave her dark looks, but she never turned back to look at them. She leaned forward toward Arthur, tapping the cover of her book. “What was your inspiration for Stantomb? The island in the middle of the desert? I always loved that. I thought it was poetic.”

Carrie’s adult friend pat her shoulder, “Carrie, honey. People are waiting.” She looked to Arthur and rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Arthur shook his head. “Not at all.” To Carrie, he said, “I’m afraid I don’t quite remember Stantomb. After the accident I was in recently, my memory is a bit hazy on certain things,” he saw a flicker of sympathy in Carrie’s eyes, and went on, “Please, feel free to write a letter in the future, and I’ll be happy to get back to you.”

Holding her book to her chest like a treasure, Carrie smiled and nodded enthusiastically. “I will. Thank you! Thank you so much!”

And she was gone. Leading a young man up to Arthur’s table. It was exhausting. One question after another. ‘How did you come up with…’ and ‘why did you…’ and ‘how did they…’ were becoming so common, his responses were almost robotic. Always the same. “My memory is a bit hazy,” he’d always say. “Write to me, and I’ll be happy to get back to you.” Not that he knew where his fan mail was supposed to go, anyway. Edith would have to tell him.

“Hi,” the young man’s voice in front of him pulled Arthur from his thoughts, and Arthur smiled. The boy didn’t have a book, and he merely stood in line with a slightly uncomfortable expression. “Um… I don’t really have a book, but I just wanted to come and…” he trailed off awkwardly. Arthur’s interest was piqued, but he could only give this boy so much time before he would be pushed to the side by Edith’s lackeys.

Reaching beneath the table for the stack of extra book copies, Arthur pulled one up and set it in front of the boy. “No trouble at all. Did anything specific bring you to the signing?”

The boy fidgeted with the pockets of his hoodie. “Yeah. I just liked this one character. Parch.”

Arthur’s face twisted into an irritated expression before he could stop it, and he quickly smoothed it out. “I’m afraid I don’t remember Parch. After my accident, the memory has been a bit hazy, so –”

“Is Parch trans?” The boy said suddenly, a bit louder than he probably meant. Arthur blinked.

“Pardon?” He said slowly. The boy looked a bit flabbergasted himself, and Arthur tried again. “Come again?”

“I just… I had this idea that Parch is a transgender man.” His face was a bit red, and his
dyed-blue hair only accentuated the color. His hands fidgeted in his hoodie pockets a bit more. “Like... he doesn’t like getting undressed in front of people, even his partner, Heil. So I’m just... wondering...”

Arthur gave the young man a long look. “This must have taken a lot of courage to ask.” The boy was quiet, and Arthur opened the new book in front of him. “I don’t remember Parch, so I can’t say anything for certain,” he signed his name slowly, “But I can definitely say that if you want Parch to be transgender, then let him be transgender.” He lifted his eyes to look at the young man. “Now, who shall I make this out to?”

“Matt,” said the boy with a shy smile. It was like Arthur had opened the floodgates. Matt started talking with a passion that hadn’t been there before Arthur had allowed his hopes to flourish. “I mean, my friends call me Matt. My dad won’t call me Matt, but that’s whatever.” He shrugged nonchalantly before his smile returned full forced. “I’ve always liked Parch because I totally get him. He’s, like, my spirit animal.”

“I’m happy Parch means so much to you,” Arthur smiled and handed Matt his new book. “Well Matt, thank you very much for coming.”

Matt hesitated to take the book. “I... I don’t really have any cash to pay for a copy.”

“You can take this one,” Arthur said with a genuine smile. “You’ve brought up something no one else has told me for two hours. Now I have something very interesting to consider.”

“Thanks,” Matt grinned as he took the book. He looked at the cover of Arthur’s first book fondly. “This is the first book series I ever really liked. I would check it out of the library all the time.”

“Now you have one that you can keep at home,” Arthur said softly. “Enjoy it.”

With another smile, Matt was gone, his eyes glued to the cover of his book and a small smile on his lips. Arthur couldn’t help but feel his heart warm at the sight. Edith, however, had a different opinion. She placed a sharp, manicured hand on his shoulder and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“You can’t just give books away,” she hissed, her lipstick smacking strangely in his ear. Arthur leaned away, but Edith leaned with him. “That’s not how you make money.”

Feeling more than a bit irritated, Arthur swatted Edith away. “It’s just one book, you harpy. Let me sign in peace.”

Edith gasped melodramatically as the next pair of people stepped forward. Arthur tried to ignore her, but the couple in front of him were distracted by Edith’s performance.

“What did you call me?” She squeaked, sounding more like a star on a soap opera than a publisher.

Arthur took the books from the slightly nervous people in front of him. “You heard me, Edith. Now, please stop circling me like a vulture and let me sign these books.”

And, surprisingly, she did. There was no more constant hovering over his shoulder. No more disapproving tuts when he admitted to his memory loss. She simply left the store. Claimed she was getting coffee or some such nonsense.
Through the book signing, Arthur fumbled his words several times; how could so many people be curious about his writing? Were there so many plot holes, an entirely new story could be seen between the lines of dialogue? There were glimpses of stories in his mind, caught between speculations and theories, but they always faded out of reach as soon as the next person stepped forward in line.

In a way, Arthur didn’t mind the inconsistency. It was a refreshing change of pace. For once, hearing about his own life -- or stories, as it were -- didn’t bother him in the slightest. It was invigorating. He liked the validation of so many people’s kind words, even if it came with a few criticisms on the way.

“It’s too generic,” one man had said to him as Arthur signed the inside cover. By this time, his hand was cramping, but he didn’t have much time to give the pain any thought. The man tapped the edge of the book under his hands. The second book in the trilogy. “The fantasy storyline… the characters… it’s all too generic. It’s a real letdown after your first book.”

He remembered looking up at the stranger. His face was so calm as he looked at Arthur. Distant and unbothered by what he had said. He didn’t know how much that statement could burn a young writer. If this man had been speaking to any young person, they would be discouraged beyond belief. It stung. Something twisted in Arthur’s chest, but he didn’t snap. He bit his tongue and smiled hollowly at the man.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he’d said quietly. He remembered when he gave the book one last glance. “Just out of curiosity, if you disliked this book so much, why did you bring it in to be signed?”

His answer was ingrained in Arthur’s brain: “Well, I figured since no one really liked this book, they wouldn’t bring it in.” His eyes were still so damn distant. Like he was there, but only just. “If no one brings them in,” he had said, “It’s rare to have a signed copy. That makes it valuable.”

And he remembered that statement long after the book signing was over. He remembered that comment more than any of the compliments and praise. He remembered it just as vividly as his conversation with the young and soft-spoken Matt. It tore at the inside of his skull and left marks along his chest. Too… generic. Like any other story out there. Like any other dramatic tale. Arthur frowned to himself. Generic, eh? What a thing to say.

“Arthur, why are you hiding back here?” Edith said from the doorway of the stockroom. Arthur had been allowed in back to sit and breathe for a moment. The signing was over, but people still stood in the bookstore, eager to ask questions. Unfortunately, that gave Arthur little to no time to speak to Edith privately. She gave him a sharp, unhappy look as she leaned against the doorframe. “Hiding from people is going to give you a bad rep.”

Arthur pushed his hair back from his eyes, the heel of his hand pressing against the line of his scar as he did so. “I’m just taking a moment.”

There was an obnoxious sigh from Edith before she checked her phone. “You’ve already taken… what? Three months? I think that’s more than enough time.”

Glaring at the stacks of books around him, Arthur grumbled, “I was recovering from a car accident.”

Another heaving sigh. “Honey, that was forever ago. The doctors said you only needed a few weeks to recover from the surgery, so really, you took two extra months of vacation.”
Arthur’s eyes snapped up from the books. “You… you spoke to my doctors?”

“Of course, honey,” she didn’t look up from her phone as she tapped out a message quickly. “I needed to know how long you’d be out of commission.”

“Ah,” Arthur’s expression drooped. “For a moment, I thought you might’ve been worried about me.” Edith didn’t look up from her phone, and Arthur shook his head with a smile. “I… I really shouldn’t be surprised. Alfred keeps telling me I need a better editor and publisher.”

There was one quick, lightning-flash glance up from Edith’s phone, then back to the screen as she quickly tapped another message. “Arthur, sweetie, you and your husband are really cute, but I think he’s holding you back.” Arthur felt a twinge in his stomach as Edith continued. “He keeps saying you need a ‘better publisher,’ but I’m the one that’s made you this successful. I’m the one that’s given you all your popularity. If he’s knows better than me, why haven’t you found a better publisher yet?”

Arthur hesitated. “I… I don’t know.” He glanced to the side to avoid Edith’s sharp eyes. “I don’t remember if there was a reason.”

“Then why are you so upset about this?” Edith put her left hand on her hip while her other hand held up her phone. “While you were so busy worrying about who your publisher is, I was making you money. But,” she narrowed her eyes. “This kind of success can’t hinge on those books. You need to making something new.”

“I’ve been working on something,” Arthur said carefully. “But it’s outside of the fantasy genre.”

Edith made a strange face at that as she turned her phone over and over in her hand. “Why? This is what’s popular right now. I’m not sure anyone would go out of their way for something else,” she paused, then said, “Unless it’s a murder-mystery?”

“It’s… really not.” Arthur crossed his arms and leaned his hip against the side of an empty bookshelf. “It’s more of a biography. A documentation of what’s happened to my family and I since the accident.”

Edith said something under her breath before she muttered, “You have got to be kidding me, Kirkland. Everyone knows what happened. I’ve been dealing with magazines and papers for weeks. They don’t need a book about it.” She gave him a sharp look. “They need something fresh.”

Something stung in Arthur’s chest. Pride, maybe? Nonetheless, he huffed indignantly. “It’s a true story, there’s the death of my older brother, the turmoil in my marriage, and there’s the mystery of what I’ve yet to remember,” he said carefully. “There’s plenty of people who would read something with all of those points.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Edith sighed. “Do you really want to risk your reputation by letting people in on your gay, failing marriage?”

And that was it. The final straw. Arthur opened his mouth and said, “You’re fired.” The words escape his mouth before he could stop them. Edith blinked slowly, obviously trying to process the statement. And, for a moment, Arthur thought he saw a flicker of fear in her dark eyes.

Slowly, she slipped her phone into her coal-black purse. “Excuse… me?”

Arthur didn’t hesitate. “You’re fired. I want a new publisher and editor.”
Edith’s expression turned cold and steely. “That’s… not how it works, honey.” She raised her chin and crossed her arms. “We have a contract. It’s not up until the 31st of March, next year.”

Ah, a businesswoman to the end. Arthur could play this game just as well. “What are the terms of my contract?”

Edith quirked an eyebrow at that. “You don’t remember?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” He threw his arms into the air and shouted, “I have been suffering from amnesia, you narrow-minded witch!”

Arthur swore he saw Edith’s iron expression fracture as she took a deep, hissing breath. “Shut your mouth you little –”

“No!” Arthur barked. Then he took a breath, calmed himself a bit, and tried again. “No. You’re not worth the trouble.” He smoothed the front of his shirt, straightened his shoulders, and smiled. “I have confidence that this new book will be greatly successful. And if you’ll excuse me,” he stepped toward the door, holding Edith hostage in the doorway as he did so. Their eyes leveled. She glowered. He smiled just a bit softer. “I’ll be going home to review my contract.”

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Arthur laid back against the sofa with both arms covering his face. Alfred sat in his armchair, hardly trying to smother his smile as Arthur lay distraught and frustrated before him.

“One more time,” Alfred whispered, barely managing to keep down a laugh. “Tell me what you said? What was it?”

“Fired,” Arthur groaned. “I fired my publisher.” For the umpteenth time, he faced his decision. It still felt a little stupid to reject her the way that he did, but it was done. No turning back.

He’d checked the contract – thankfully marked in his laptop – and he realized his contract was up for renewal at the end of the month. Edith must’ve been keeping that information to herself, as it were. Now, with one quick, bitter conversation, it was over. He was free.

Also, he was completely stupid. He had no representative. He’d made plenty in royalties for his books, but publishing his own story? That would be difficult for anyone, let alone Arthur.

Groaning again, Arthur rolled lazily on the sofa. “She’s gone. I fired my publisher.” He kicked his legs like a child having a tantrum, reveling in his own stupidity. “I. Have. No. Publisher!”

“Beautiful,” said Alfred with a full-blown grin. “Music to my freakin’ ears, baby!”

Sitting up, Arthur grimaced at his husband. “You could, I don’t know, try to comfort me in this most troubling time.”

Giving Arthur a strange look, Alfred crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head to the side. “‘Troubling time?’” He echoed. “What’s that supposed to mean? Edith drove you crazy,” he stood from his chair to join Arthur on the sofa, effectively laying atop him. Arthur swore he was going to be crushed, but Alfred’s voice covered his complaints as he said, “You can have a good person now. Someone who respects the writer.”

“I –” Arthur wheezed in a way that wasn’t entirely melodramatic. “Alfred, you’re
Alfred didn’t move. “Writing isn’t easy. And the way you do it… it’s not easy on the writer, either.”

Having his face pressed to the sofa cushion, Arthur flailed his arms wildly, slapping at Alfred as he started to laugh. “Alfred! Alfred – ha! Ah, get off me, you oaf!”

After a few minutes of struggling, Alfred was thrown onto the floor in a tumbling heap of American clumsiness. Arthur remained on the sofa, gasping for breath between laughs. Alfred sat on the ground with a smile that would put the sun to shame. His glasses were lopsided on his face, but he didn’t move to fix them. He simply sat and watched Arthur laugh as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

When Arthur had caught his breath, he gave Alfred a curious smile. “What? Am I really so interesting?”

“Yeah,” Alfred smiled. “You’re gonna find a publisher, no problem. I bet everyone from California to New York would want to take on the famous Arthur Kirkland.”

Arthur snorted. “Fat chance of that. Who would come all the way to –” He paused when something clicked. California? No, no… New York. A publisher in New York. That rang a bell, but… but what was it? Arthur sat up slowly, trying to weed out the memory that was stuck beneath a thick layer of cobwebs.


“No, no,” Arthur mumbled as he stood. “It’s something… I just can’t quite remember who said it to me. A publisher in New York… do we know anyone in New York?”

Alfred pursed his lips and thought for a moment, but shook his head. “Nah. No one we knew moved out there. The only person who went far away from Washington is Seamus. He moved to –”

“Virginia, I know… then who…” Arthur wandered into the kitchen with Alfred on his heels. His cell phone sat on the table. Snatching it up, he scrolled through his contacts, hoping a name would possibly jog his memory. His finger stopped and hovered over Dr. Vargas.

He couldn’t remember all their conversations, but he remembered something. A fragment of something. Dr. Vargas had a twin. A twin in New York. Was that the publisher he was thinking of? Even if it was small, it was a lead. An opportunity for a fresh start. Arthur smiled.

Alfred loomed over his shoulder, squinting at the screen under the lenses of his glasses. His arms wrapped around Arthur protectively, and Arthur leaned back without a thought. “Dr. Vargas? Do you need a check-up? You feelin’ okay?”

“I’m fine,” Arthur said softly. “And I think… I think I may be onto something.”

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“This is the most emotional thing I’ve ever read!” Dr. Vargas breathed heavily into the phone as she spoke to Arthur. He held the receiver away from his ear, letting her chatter in Italian for a moment before she could reign herself in again. “It’s beautiful, passerotto,” she gushed. “Just
beautiful! I wish you’d let me read the rest, hmm?”

“Perhaps, but not yet.” Arthur said as he pressed his phone to his ear again. He sat on the sofa, quietly mending a hole in one of Alfred’s socks. “Dr. Vargas, you never answered my question; what did your sister think of the first few chapters?”

“She peeped, causing Arthur to flinch and lean away from the phone. “Call me Feli, no? And Lovi thought it was wonderful. She said she’d call you when she’s back in New York.”

Arthur paused mid-stitch, his heart thudding a bit harder in his chest. “She… she liked it? Even the point of view? Even the character details? And the --”

“Unique!” Feliciana interrupted. “That’s what she called it. Unique and… ravita rova…”

“Ridiculous?” Arthur asked quietly, bracing himself for an insult. “Roundabout?”

“No, no…” Feliciana struggled for a minute before gasping, “Riveting! That’s what it was. Ah, such a word, no? She only uses it for very interesting books.”

Arthur could’ve shoved his sewing needle through his finger and not noticed it. His mind was stuck on the word. Riveting. She wanted to speak to him. A well-to-do publisher in New York wanted to speak with him about a transcript he sent to her… via her sister.

“I’m… I’m flattered,” he managed to sputter before saying, “I’m surprised she actually agreed to read it after I brought it up to you.”

Dr. Vargas hummed. “I was surprised when you called and asked about her… part of me wondered if you were straying from your handsome man.”

Arthur made a face. “You think I wanted to have an affair… with a woman… I’ve never met?”

“Ah, the heart is a strange thing, passerotto.” There was the rustling of pages while Feliciana flipped through the manuscript again. “But I’m glad she read this… it’s touching. From the heart. I can tell.”

“Thank you, Dr. Vargas.”

“Feli. And you’re welcome.”

Arthur rolled his eyes with a smile. “Writing this book… it’s really been a journey. Actually,” Arthur relaxed against the decorative pillows he’d placed on the sofa. “The last few months have been a journey. All of it, really.”

Feliciana sighed into the phone. “How romantic.”

Arthur pulled the needle through fabric and pulled the string taut. “I’d suppose. Though… after all I’ve been through… getting out of my old contract and working on this new manuscript… time seems to flash faster than before.” The hole was nearly fixed when he heard the front door open and slam shut. “Ah… Alfred’s home. But, as I was saying, it’s like… the days pass in a blur. Like my life is… so normal that nothing sticks out anymore.”

“Ah, life goes many ways, passerotto,” Feliciana said gently. If Arthur closed his eyes,
he could almost feel her cheek resting on his shoulder, and her hand patting his own comfortingly. “As we grow older, time goes faster… it is the way of life. It is up to us to choose our paths and notice the best of moments as they come to us.”

Arthur chuckled. “I’m probably missing all of the best moments,” he paused when he felt Alfred lean over the edge of the sofa and press a kiss to his cheek. He gave Alfred a wink before turning back to the sewing task at hand. “I hardly pay attention to these things.”

“But these things are always right in front of us!” Feliciana chirped. “You just need to look.”

Pulling the needle through one last time, Arthur pulled the rest of the hole together and smiled. “You’re right.” He set the sock aside and glanced at the calendar on the wall. February had come too soon, but at the same time, not soon enough. He sighed, “I’ve already missed so much… It’s about time I opened my eyes.”

Feliciana yawned. “That’s all it takes.”

Arthur smiled and switched the phone to his other ear. “You’ve worked another long day. Go on. Get some sleep. Tell your sister I look forward to speaking with her.”

With a soft laugh, Feliciana said, “I will, I will. I cannot wait for the rest of the book. You’ll tell me the day it’s released, hmm? The exact day. I want the first copy.”

Shaking his head, Arthur stood from the couch and walked into the kitchen. “I’ll tell you,” he said softly, watching Alfred reheat leftovers from an old dinner. Alfred glanced back at him and smiled. Arthur felt his chest warm at the sight. “But Alfred will probably beat you to that first copy.”

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Smoothing his hand over the freshly printed cover of his book, Arthur couldn’t help but smile. There were a range of emotions swirling through his mind, but his heart couldn’t seem to settle on one. Melancholy sat side-by-side with joy, and Arthur didn’t have the strength to set either aside. So he sat back in the passenger seat of the car with Alfred, holding Alfred’s hand and smiling sadly at the book.

“I think it’s a really touching gesture,” Alfred said through a yawn. He’d been working too hard recently. A drug trial could do that to a person. Looking for a cure for Alzheimer’s was not an easy feat. Arthur hummed thoughtfully, opening the book to reveal the dedications page. He sighed, and Alfred pat his shoulder. “Took a while to get here… but we got here.”

Arthur nodded. “You could say that again.”

“ Took us a while to get here, but we got here.” Alfred repeated obediently. Arthur rolled his eyes as the car pulled up to a curb and came to a stop.

“Smartass,” Arthur muttered under his breath as he unbuckled the seatbelt and climbed out of the car. Alfred only chuckled.

Standing quietly on the pavement, Arthur’s eyes scanned their destination. Rows of gravestones greeted him, jutting out of the earth like fingers through the dirt, reaching, reaching… for heaven, or an escape? He didn’t want to know. Arthur let out a breath.

Alfred came to stand next to him, his hands stuffed into his pockets and eyes staring
straight ahead. “You ready?”

“Just about,” Arthur nearly whispered. Which gravestone was Alistair’s? Was it nice? Did it stick out from the others? Or was he simply another name added to a long, long list of lives that were over? He held his book to his chest with his left hand, reaching out for Alfred with his other. “You know where he is?”

Alfred didn’t say anything, but he took Arthur’s hand as they walked through the gates of the cemetery. Inside the small stone borders of the graveyard, the sounds of the city faded away, revealing nothing but discomforting quiet. Through the gates, they’d been transported to a new place. One that Arthur both feared and loved.

They walked for a few minutes, stepping over gravestones that were fitted into the ground and passing large, stone slabs with ornate decorations. There was a large rotunda on the far-right side of the cemetery, surrounded by angels that were carved into each pillar. The angels were reaching for the tombstones, as if to shelter them. Arthur looked away.

The grass crunched beneath their shoes; fall had arrived, even in this world away from the world. Arthur held Alfred’s hand a bit tighter as they walked, catching glimpses of names that were strange and familiar alike. When they finally stopped, Arthur was standing before a large, smooth slab.

It was probably granite. A fine stone. Fitting for Alistair. His name was carved into the stone in bold print. **Alistair James Kirkland**, it read, **1979-2016. A son, a brother, and a loving husband**. Arthur agreed wholeheartedly. Glancing to the right, Arthur saw Marie’s gravestone. Husband and wife… reunited in the most sweetly-tragic way.

Without thinking, Arthur took his hand from Alfred’s and lightly touched the stone. Cold and smooth in the brisk air, Arthur felt the rough outer edge of the gravestone before letting his fingertips slide over the polished front. Some strange, lurking emotion washed over him, but he couldn’t quite give it a name. He simply knelt in front of the stone and smiled.

“Hello Alistair,” he breathed. His book felt heavy in his hands, like a weight that he’d been carrying in his chest for over a year. Arthur felt his eyes grow heavy with tears, but he didn’t let them fall. He sighed. “You damn codger… it’s been a while.”

“Hey buddy,” Alfred greeted fondly. “I told you I’d bring Artie to visit eventually.”

Arthur smiled at that, but didn’t look away from the stone. “I’ve been working on remembering myself,” he paused, “And others. I’m… I’m finally starting to feel like myself again. I just –” Arthur stopped to clear his throat and wipe at the corner of his eyes. “I just wish you were here to see it.

“I wrote a new book,” Arthur continued. “You’re in it. So is Marie. I remember her, now,” he glanced at her gravestone. “It was back in April, but I remembered her. A wonderful woman, from all I remember.” He turned his gaze back to his book. “A lot has changed since… since you were here, but… I think it’s for the best.”

The air around them was quiet. No visions of his brother appeared. Those dreams had ended long ago. Now, all Arthur had of his brother were memories. Each one as clear as the last. The amnesia had faded, but the scar remained. Alistair was still gone. Arthur smiled forlornly and took the book up in his hands.

“It’s… it’s not enough to show how much I miss you, but… it’s on paper. This will live
on longer than me or Alfred… or anyone…” he opened the book to the dedications, and took a small stone that had chipped from another grave, using it as a weight to hold open the book. There, in front of Alistair’s grave, he left his book.

Standing shakily, Arthur took Alfred’s hand again, smiling down at his brother’s name. “I miss you, you old sod.”

“We both do.” Alfred squeezed his hand.

Taking a deep breath, Arthur clenched his teeth. There was so much more he could say. So much more he could express. But none of it seemed adequate. The anniversary of his brother’s death… it required more, didn’t it? He sniffed and wiped at his eyes again.

“I think… that’s all I can take for today,” he murmured to Alfred, and without a word, the two of them turned and left the cemetery. Hand in hand, broken and repaired all over again.

Arthur would return another day. A better day. A day where he would have more he could say and do. But this… this was all he had. This was what he could do for his brother. A dedication that would live down as long as the words were there to be read.

-- In loving memory of my brother, Alistair Kirkland --

You carried me when we were younger,

Now it’s my turn to carry you.

END

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading. This story has been a journey. I know this took a very long time to finish, but to all of you who stuck with me from the beginning, thank you so, so much.

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