I Know I'd Look Good On You
by Brangwen

Summary

Eames is shirtless. Arthur is terminally distracted.

Notes

See Note following Chapter 32 for update.
Arthur is trying to work. He's having an unexpectedly difficult time of it.

They're in Port Elizabeth, blending in with tourist crowds as they prepare to extract at the behest of the South African Rugby Union. Senior officials suspect that a member of the Southern Kings has been selling match information to some of the major sports betting franchises, and they have narrowed the potential sources down to four players. They have hired Arthur's team to extract from all four.

Johan Kluwers is the second target in the lineup. The first, Olivier Makenzie, had come up clean. Based on his research thus far, Arthur suspects the third player is the leak, but he's happy enough to get paid to extract from Makenzie and Kluwers first, so he doesn't volunteer this information to the SARU.

Their employer has generously set them up in a pair of cottages in a resort near Hobie Beach. They use one for sleeping, the other for working. Arthur would prefer to close the windows, draw the blinds, and rely on air conditioning to keep the cottages livable, but he has been voted down by Eames and their architect, Kefilwe Bakoena.

Kefilwe is a plump Tswana woman with long, catlike brown eyes, chestnut-dyed box braids, and a fondness for sweets; Arthur is pretty sure she's offered him every variation on a doughnut available in Port Elizabeth in the three weeks they've been here. Her English is heavily accented to Arthur's ear, but she has a pleasant if slightly reserved personality, and an excellent eye for textural detail in her designs. She and Eames chatter amiably in Setswana and occasionally in Swahili, and Arthur tries not to imagine that they are talking about him.

It's mid-summer. With the windows open, the cottages enjoy clean beach air, but they can get warm. Kefilwe tends to favor long sleeveless cotton dresses in the heat, and Arthur has reluctantly traded in his waistcoats and wool for corded shorts and crisp cotton shirts. What Eames will show up in on any given day is a crapshoot.

Today is particularly warm. Eames had been fully dressed when he wandered back from breakfast this morning, but it is afternoon now and Eames, as comfortable in his own skin as he has ever been in any forge, is pacing aimlessly in and out of their work cottage, shirtless and shoeless, in a pair of loose, light grey linen trousers. He speaks occasionally into a voice recorder and carries a cold bottle of Stoney's ginger beer, which he presses periodically to the back of his neck.

Eames has been out in the sun, and there is still a fine sheen of sweat clinging to his golden skin. When his pacing takes him past Arthur's desk, Arthur can see infinitesimal droplets standing out on the back of his shoulder; Eames looks as though he has walked through a mister, or a heavy fog. It should be off-putting, but Arthur wants nothing more than to bend over and lick a line up from the waist of Eames' pants to his lightly stubbled jawbone, tracing every dip and curve of muscle with his tongue. When he closes his eyes, he can feel the heat of Eames' skin on his tongue, taste the saline bitterness of sweat, smell the natural musk of a sun-warmed male body. His mouth obligingly produces saliva at the thought, and he opens his eyes again.

Eames' *trapezius* muscle is a solid, delicious bulge between his neck and the smooth, enticing roundness of his *deltoid*. It cries out, Arthur thinks, to be bitten. His *serratus anterior* is exquisitely chiseled, his *lateral obliques* flat and firm, his *pectoralis majors* taut and full, his *brachioradialis* thick and powerful. Eames could pick Arthur up, right up off the ground. Lift him up and press him against a wall while Arthur clings to those solid shoulders and wraps his long
legs around that firm waist, just above the swell of Eames' sculpted *gluteus maximus*.

Arthur is not a weight-lifter; he's a runner, lean and fit but not built. He knows what the words are for those parts of Eames' body because for the past fifteen minutes, instead of focusing on Kluwers' email archives, he has been surreptitiously eyeing Eames and searching the internet for "musculo-skeletal system," trying to put a name to each bulge and angle on display in front of him.

Arthur knows other words, too, of course, non-technical words. He admires Eames' pert pink *nipples* and the short fuzz of *hair* surrounding them, which Arthur would love to pinch and scratch his fingers through, respectively; his bare *feet* with their long *toes*, which Arthur would like to suck; the faint *happy trail* that gathers below the dip of Eames' *belly button*. And while he would never dare admit it, he yearns to run his fingers and tongue over the swirls, images, and darts of black ink that adorn Eames' arms and torso. He wonders what that ink and that golden skin would look like with fresh come splashed over it.

He wouldn't dream of saying any of this aloud, but there's no harm in looking. Or in daydreaming a little.

Eames pauses in his pacing, his back turned to Arthur, and patters rapid-fire Swahili into his recorder. A tiny trickle of sweat has gathered between his shoulders and slips, agonizingly slowly, down his spine. Arthur watches it, enthralled, and stops breathing.

From the shaded front porch, Kefilwe calls out something in Setswana, and Eames stops speaking into his recorder and replies to her. Arthur abruptly inhales, tears his gaze away from where that sweat droplet is about to soak into Eames' waistband, tabs out of the anatomy website he's been studying, and opens Johan Kluwers' email again.

Just in time, too. Out of his peripheral vision, he sees Eames ambling over toward where Arthur sits behind his desk. This close, he has a faint but detectable aura of rosemary and mint, which Arthur indignantly recognizes as his own (organic, and very expensive) sunscreen. *Once a thief...* he thinks sourly. Under the herbal aura, Eames does indeed smell detectably... hmm. It's not a stink, exactly; whatever his other flaws, and there are many, Eames is always scrupulously clean if he can help it. But it is undeniably the scent of a warm, physically active adult male. Arthur stealthily breathes him in.

"She's going to Nando's, do you want anything?" Eames inquires.

Arthur does. "Half a chicken, mild this time, and some of those spicy olives," he says. "Thanks, Kefilwe."

"We will share the olives," she says with a smile, her long plaits swinging as she dips her head slightly in acknowledgment. She swings a large, gaily bedizened shopping bag over her shoulder and heads out the door without ado.

Arthur has worked in dreamshare with Eames off and on for nearly seven years now; in the process, they've been alone in rooms together hundreds of times, but Eames' aggressively bare skin, and the sheen and scent of fresh sweat on it, are combining to make Arthur distinctly aware of their solitude right now. Eames still holds his recorder, but he seems to have been distracted from whatever he'd been narrating into it before she interrupted. He shifts his weight, still standing next to Arthur's chair, peering at Arthur's laptop screen. He takes a swig of his ginger beer and then wordlessly offers the bottle to Arthur.

Arthur is nonplussed. He and Eames are coworkers. They're not friends, they don't share food. He stares -- rather rudely, he realizes belatedly -- at the bottle in Eames' hand.
When Arthur doesn't respond immediately, Eames shrugs, withdraws the bottle, and takes another drink. Arthur resolutely does not think about the way his full, sweetly curved lips wrap around the head of the bottle as he does so, or the way Eames' tongue darts out to lick away a drop of ginger beer.

"Anything useful?" Eames asks, jutting his scruffy chin at the laptop.

Arthur shakes his head. "Not so far."

"You've been looking at that same message for quite a while," Eames observes mildly.

Arthur hasn't closed the anatomy website, he's just tabbed out of it, and he's uncomfortably aware that if Eames can read the email message, he can read the titles of the other tabs Arthur has open, including the one that says "MUSCLES OF THE UPPER BACK." He minimizes the browser and turns to fully face Eames, hoping to distract him. "How is the forge coming along?"

Eames has been tailing Kluwers' girlfriend, Supriya, an attractive young florist of Indian descent. Over the past three days, he has solemnly presented both Kefilwe and Arthur with gaudy bouquets from her shop. They don't hold up well in the heat and they are incongruous next to Arthur's regimented stacks of receipts and Kefilwe's cluttered tables of sketches and dioramas, but Eames seems to enjoy making the gifts.

The forger shifts his weight again, looks at the ceiling, and scratches the back of his neck. "I've got her physicality and mannerisms down pat, but I can't seem to make heads or tails of their relationship," he admits.

Ah. Arthur has worked with Eames often enough that he knows Eames doesn't like to ask for help outright, and he thinks he knows why Eames has come to him now.

"I'll create a digest for you with all of their texts and other private messages," he offers in a neutral voice. If Eames doesn't want to ask outright, Arthur won't embarrass him by making a big deal out of it. Of course, Eames doesn't seem to be at all concerned about embarrassing Arthur by flaunting his sweaty, impossibly attractive bare torso right there in Arthur's face.

"That would be very useful, thank you," Eames says earnestly. "But I was wondering if perhaps you had any insights off the top of your head that I might use this evening. They've a dinner planned at that Taiwanese place off Kempsten Road. I was going to wheedle Kefilwe into being my date."

Arthur loves that Taiwanese restaurant. And he doesn't have any insights, because he hasn't been doing his job, because he's been too busy staring at and daydreaming about his half-naked colleague. "I've been focusing more on his professional relationships," he extemporizes.

Eames raises an eyebrow. "He's a rugby player. What sort of professional relationships does he have?"

"And his finances," Arthur adds quickly. "They're a mess."

Eames only hums in response, sounding slightly skeptical, and Arthur is irrationally annoyed. "I'll make that file for you," he says shortly, turning away from Eames and opening his laptop up again. Happily, the Excel spreadsheet with Kluwers' major expenditures over the past five years is open on the screen, bolstering Arthur's statement. Just legitimate work here, nothing to see.

Eames doesn't need to know that Arthur hasn't looked at it since exactly 11:48 that morning, which is when Eames had stood up from his desk, un-self-consciously stretched his arms over his head.
with a faint but audible groan, and begun unbuttoning his shirt, muttering something about having a lie-down by the pool.

Arthur can see the pool from the window in front of his desk. The sight of Eames napping on a lounge, one bulky arm over his eyes, the short dark curls under his arm (which Arthur definitely does not want to nuzzle his whole face into) turning damp and matted with sweat, had proved vastly more appealing than sorting through Kluwers' payments to various escort services.

"Perhaps you and I should go instead. You can go over their chats beforehand, and we can talk about it then?" Eames suggests, apparently undeterred by Arthur's snippy tone of voice. He idly scratches his own bare belly, and Arthur tries not to think about brushing his lips over the chiseled terrain where Eames' fingers are trailing.

He can't tell if Eames is being deliberately provocative or if he is just being Eames. For as long as Arthur has known him, Eames has had a habit of touching anything and everything around him, including his own body. He chews pens, rubs his nose, strokes the stubble on his jaw, tugs his earlobes, scratches the back of his neck, and flips that damn poker chip around in his fingers. If Eames didn't slick his hair down, Arthur suspects, it would stand up at crazy angles from his fingers raking through it at regular intervals. He is also casually touchy-feely with some, but not all, of his teammates. Arthur has stopped agreeing to work with Eames and Yusuf together, in part because Eames can't not poke Yusuf's round belly or elbow him in the ribs to make a point. He can never seem to keep his hands off of Saito, either (though Arthur can't fault him for that part), and he takes a particular delight in tugging Ariadne's hair and tweaking her pert little nose.

He seems to know better than to try this with Arthur, which Arthur somewhat resents. The most intense physical interaction they'd ever had was a sparring session several months before this job came together, after Eames noted what he said were some weaknesses in Arthur's defensive technique. He might appear soft to a casual observer, but Arthur knows that under the mauve shirts, the Received Pronunciation, and the sleek hair, Eames' skills and aesthetic are pure prizefighter, and that he is lightning-fast and deadly with his feet as well as his fists. It was only practical to take his advice, Arthur had told himself, secretly relishing the bruises Eames left on his body.

"If that would help you, I wouldn't mind it," he says, abandoning his effort to be tactful, but Eames doesn't seem to notice.

"Ah, brilliant. Their reservation is at 8. Let's plan on 7:45. Bring extra rand, the bartender will seat us where we can observe them if we throw some her way."

"Fine," says Arthur, and then he can't restrain himself. "You are going to wear actual clothes, right?"

Eames deliberately looks down at his bare chest and feet, then back at Arthur, amused. "Nah," he drawls in an American accent, and gives Arthur an honest-to-God wink.

Arthur, flummoxed, opens his mouth to say something rude -- he's not sure what, but it will be cutting -- but nothing comes, and he subsides. He pointedly begins typing into the spreadsheet, ignoring a low, mirthful chuckle as the forger pads away.

Fortunately for Arthur's sanity, Eames' catlike affinity for grooming soon drives him into the shower in the other cottage. When he returns, his hair is wet and he's still barefoot, but he's wearing a shirt again. From the faint herbal scent that trails him around, it's clear that he has used more of Arthur's grooming products; but Arthur is determined to get some work done today, so he says nothing and continues scanning the instant message logs between Kluwers and Supriya.
Eames was right. There is something off about that relationship, but Arthur isn't sure what it is just yet.

He creates a new file in his directory, saves all of the IMs, emails, text logs, and other messages into it, and then prints the whole thing for Eames because Eames perversely prefers reading hard copies and creating extra mess for Arthur to shred and burn after the job is completed. He is somewhat mollified by Eames' sincere expression of appreciation when Arthur hands him the two-inch-high, warm-from-the-printer stack of paper, and then irritated all over again when Kefi returns with their food and Eames leaves greasy fingerprints and peri-peri sauce on the crisp white printouts.

By 7 p.m., Arthur himself is feeling more than a little in need of a wash. The afternoon has remained warm and his hair and clothes feel wilted from the heat and the sea air. He has thoroughly reviewed all of Kluwers and Supriya's correspondence, and the tone is just ... off ... for a couple who have been seeing each other for several months. However, Arthur is not exactly an expert on long-term relationships, and he still doesn't quite know what is striking him as wrong about it. He finds he's actually looking forward to discussing the issue and seeing if Eames can shed any light on it.

For his part, Eames has spent the afternoon sprawled on the couch and at the dining table, steadily working through the documents Arthur gave him and occasionally murmuring into his voice recorder in Swahili, which he knows Arthur doesn't speak. Arthur can't decide if Eames is trying to be thoughtful (not to distract Arthur) or maddening (because Arthur can't help listening to the dark purr of Eames' voice even if he can't understand what it's saying).

In the shower, Arthur spits into his hand and masturbates hurriedly and silently, leaning forward with his left hand braced on the shower wall and hot water running down his back. After, he slumps his forehead against the wall, trying to pant quietly. On a malicious impulse, he decides to use Eames' shampoo instead of his own. He regrets this as soon as he has dried off and dressed. It's disconcerting to smell the distinctive orange and lemongrass fragrance every time he turns his head, as if Eames is constantly hovering just over his shoulder.

When he emerges from the bathroom, he is startled to find Eames himself waiting in the hallway. The forger pointedly sniffs the steamy air wafting out of the room behind Arthur, and Arthur has a horrified moment of thinking he can smell that I jerked off before he realizes that of course Eames is recognizing the scent of his shampoo.

"Wanker," Eames scolds, clicking his tongue, but his tone is more delighted than censorious, and he gives a friendly shove to Arthur's shoulder before heading into the bathroom, where he leaves the door open while he rifles through his sponge bag. He doesn't find whatever he is looking for in there, and before Arthur knows it, Eames has nonchalantly taken Arthur's toiletries bag off the counter and is hunting through it. He plucks out a tin of pomade, uncaps it, and slicks up his fingers before it occurs to Arthur to object.

Eames has changed into fitted pinstripe trousers and a slim black t-shirt, the sleeves rolled slightly so that they hit at precisely the broadest point of his biceps. The dark fabric hugs his massive arms, his thick shoulders and chest, his trim belly, his full, firm ass. Arthur really can't formulate words right now, so he merely watches as Eames steals his hair product and runs it through his hair, which he leaves tousled and sticking up and utterly unlike his normal sleek plastered-down style. It shouldn't look nearly as gorgeous as it does; it takes five years off of his age and makes him look cocky and provocative.

Eames rinses and dries his hands, then turns his head to look at Arthur, who is still standing,
speechless, in the hallway.

"Sorry, were you finished?" he asks, when Arthur continues not saying anything.

Arthur thinks, *I want to climb you like a tree*, but he only nods, turns around, and walks down the hall to his bedroom. He closes the door, sits on the bed, and stares at the wall, confused.

He can't fathom where this overpowering, primal sort of lust has come from. With women, Arthur is attentive, appreciative, adoring. He loves silky hairless skin, the softness of breasts and belly and buttocks, gentle scratches from manicured, painted fingernails, the tickle of long hair in his face. The other men he's dated have been much like Arthur himself, slim and handsome and clever and flexible in bed, clean-shaven and more devoted to cardio than to free weights. He's always had a healthy sense of desire, has enjoyed sex and been more than satisfied with his lovers of both long and short durations.

He's never before felt this urge to bite, to mark, to lick and taste a lover's sweat; never been this keenly aroused by another person's scent. It's throwing him off, destroying his focus in a way that deeply unsettles him. He'd thought jerking off in the shower would take the edge off, but the sight of Eames in that tight shirt, his hair carelessly tumbling over his forehead, has keyed him up all over again.

There's a knock at his door. "Arthur, everything all right in there?" Eames sounds puzzled, and really, Arthur can't blame him. Ordinarily, Arthur is a badass motherfucker, stoic and unflappable, efficient and dangerous, but today he has had all the confidence and suavity of a marshmallow.

Arthur pulls himself together, or at least manages to create a convincing facade of pulled-togetherness. After a deep breath, he opens the door and says, coolly, "We'd better go, or we're going to be late." He hands Eames a wad of bills to bribe the bartender with and brushes past him and outside the cottage.
Attract Me Till It Hurts To Concentrate

Since they've been in Port Elizabeth, Arthur has been privately amused that the resort staff look at him and Eames and only see "white tourists who shouldn't be walking around by themselves after dark." Between the two of them, they're fully armed and more than capable of taking out the average street tough. He'd prefer to walk, anyway, after sitting in front of his laptop all day. But since the SARU is passing them off as auditors of some kind, they tend to allow the concierge to tuck them solicitously into cabs after 7 p.m.

Arthur internally vows to put in some time on the treadmill tomorrow to make up for the lost opportunity to stretch his legs, tells the cabbie where they're going, and spends the entire ride trying to look away from the tight band of Eames' shirt around his bicep. If Eames was a woman, Arthur's pretty sure he'd be telling Arthur that his eyes are up here, Arthur. Eames being Eames, he pretends not to notice but casually folds his arms, making the muscle bulge, and then grins smugly when Arthur quickly looks away with his ears burning.

At Far East Garden, Eames leads the way to the bar, where he leans over and has a murmured conversation with the bartender that involves some more subtle flexing on his part and a lot of giggling on her part. Arthur can't hear what they're saying, but he can hear the particular growly purr that Eames' voice gets when he's seducing someone. Arthur has heard him use it during surveillance and, infrequently, on the phone; he has never used it on Arthur.

Eames orders Arthur a dirty martini and himself a scotch and soda, and tips extravagantly, with the result that they are seated at a 4-top against the back wall looking out over the entire rest of the dining area, and are in a prime position to observe Kluwers and Supriya when they arrive ten minutes later. They can't hear their conversation, but that means they can observe the couple and discuss them freely without worrying about themselves being overheard.

Supriya is wearing a brick red linen sheath and gold sandals. Her long dark hair is carefully curled over her shoulder, and her lipstick is a few shades darker than her dress. She's pretty; Arthur hasn't actually seen her in person before, and she looks younger and more vivacious than her online profile photos had suggested. Kluwers, across from her, is a stocky man with chin-length dirty blond hair and a scruffy chin. In the pictures that have come up in his research, Arthur thinks he's going for the "Thor" look, but he's thicker in the jowls and nowhere near as attractive as Chris Hemsworth. (To be fair, Arthur has been reading the man's email for the past several hours, and what he's read has not predisposed him to be generous to Kluwers. The guy is not very bright, and kind of a dick, in a petty, uninteresting way.)

Arthur's partial to the steamed ginger fish and the soup dumplings here, and he's determined to have a good meal even if he does have to watch Eames flirt with the entire wait staff. However, Eames is polite to the young woman who takes their order, but no more than that. Arthur tries to elicit his thoughts on the correspondence they've both spent the afternoon reading, but Eames just "hmm"s and otherwise answers in monosyllables, obviously not paying Arthur much attention. He is otherwise oddly silent and somewhat fidgety.

Arthur scowls, plays with the garnish in his martini, and is glad when the food arrives and he has something to occupy himself with. He is feeling decidedly sulky by the time Eames finally relaxes and -- Arthur can see it, the moment that Eames focuses his whole attention on Arthur, his clever grey eyes swinging round to fully meet Arthur's, the entire incandescent focus of his observant mind narrowing in like a laser on Arthur's face.

"Well, he's not queer," Eames announces. "He's certainly seen us, but hasn't looked at either of us
twice.” He sounds both disappointed and intrigued, and it finally dawns on Arthur: Eames has been pulling, or trying to. He’s been subtle about it, but the signals are unmistakable. It’s there in the tilt of his head as he looks at Kluwers, the way he slowly folds those powerful arms in front of him, the way he barely licks his plush lips, pouting the lower one out just a fraction.

Arthur is a little amused at Eames' narcissism, but has to admit that he has a point. Arthur isn't a vain man, but neither is he falsely modest. He knows that his deep-set, intelligent eyes in his lean, handsome face, and his lithe runner's body in its well-tailored clothing, are attractive and appealing to both men and women. And now that he thinks about it, the picture the two of them make -- Arthur's dark hair and eyes, his slender build and high cheekbones, contrasted with Eames' blatant sensuality, his lush mouth under the cultivated stubble, the rippling muscles and slashes of black ink under his snugly fitted shirt -- would pique the interest of most of the gay men Arthur knows. But it's not drawing Kluwers.

And here's the thing: Arthur read all of the same documents Eames did, but Eames has been several steps ahead of him tonight. Probably, Arthur thinks with unreasonable irritation, he did it without even consciously planning any of it.

(Also, Arthur is honest enough to admit to himself that he's a little disappointed to realize Eames' alluring clothing and artfully disarranged hair were for Kluwers' benefit and not for Arthur himself. He admires the result of Eames' efforts, very much so, but he can't help feeling like an accessory to Eames' outfit right now: Attractive bisexual man and his + 1.)

When Arthur doesn't respond right away, Eames continues. "You get what I mean about the relationship? It's just bloody odd. The girl's lovely, and she's an extrovert -- talks my ear off in her shop every time, and she does the same to him, but he's a cold fish to her. Reading their chats I thought perhaps he was in the closet, but that's obviously not it."

"Obviously not," Arthur agrees. "Also, he spends a lot of money on escort services, and the only thing consistent about his preference there is that they're all female. Which I would have told you if I knew you were pursuing this train of thought."

"Arthur," Eames remonstrates with him. "You cannot find out everything you need to know about the subject through online research. You have to get your eyes on him, see how he reacts to various stimuli, observe his body language, listen to his voice. His escort history would be meaningless if he'd manifested a sexual response to me. Or you."

They've had this argument before. And, ok, Eames has a point, but this is why Arthur and Eames work so well together, even if they drive each other crazy in the process; Eames needs Arthur to gather the data, so that Eames can form and test his theories. On his own, Arthur can amass astounding amounts of information, but lacks the spark of intuition to fully develop the psychological theory necessary to get them fully into the mark's head, while Eames lacks the patience or know-how to do the kind of in-depth research that tells them if the mark is militarized, has a criminal background, or a history of mental illness, all things that could dramatically screw up any given job if they go into his mind without forewarning.

"All right," Arthur challenges him. "Tell me what your observation is telling you, that my research
'Right now, my observation is confirming what your paper trail told us. Look at them. She's affectionate, she wants to be close to him. She's touching her hair, squaring her body toward him, smiling when he looks at her, she's leaning in toward him. Her hand's on the table for no discernible reason, extended toward him. That's consistent with her email and instant messages; she's the one initiating contact with him, signing off with endearments. For his part, he accepts her interest and affection, but he's not returning it. His hands are folded on the table in front of him, his face is slightly turned away, he's far less animated than she is. He smiles less often, it doesn't quite touch his eyes, and it doesn't last long.'

"And that's consistent with his online communication style with her," Arthur notes. "Short, to the point, undemonstrative. It's almost as if he doesn't actually like her that much. But they've been together five months now, he's made plans with her months in advance to go to concerts she wants to see, and they're already talking about spending Christmas in Bali. It doesn't make sense."

Eames frowns and pokes at his smoked duck and noodle dish. "She's a darling girl. She deserves better treatment than that."

They've had this argument before, too. Eames has a soft spot for women in bad relationships. Arthur wonders whether there's a story there, but he doesn't feel that he knows the forger well enough to ask. "That's not what we're here for," he reminds Eames.

If he wasn't watching for it, he'd miss it, but he sees it; the infinitesimal drawing down of Eames' eyebrows and the slight steeling of his jaw, before he decides not to pursue the topic and his face relaxes. Eames' tone is light when he responds. "As you say, darling." He leans over and deftly filches one of Arthur's xiao long bao with his chopsticks and pops it whole into his mouth.

"You're supposed to dip them," Arthur informs him, waving his own sticks toward the dish of vinegar.

Eames shakes his head. "Not when I don't know why it's that unnatural color. And they're perfectly lovely without it." He leans forward as if to steal another one, and Arthur smartly raps his knuckles with a chopstick. Eames is still for a moment, his face blank. Then he plucks a plump morsel of duck off of his own plate, transfers it to Arthur's, and sits back, folds his arms, and waits.

And... well. Maybe they are close enough to share food, and Arthur just didn't know it.

He tries the duck. It's good, rich and gamy and smoky. He thinks, *Eames must taste just like this right now*, and a tremor runs up his spine. He looks up, and Eames is watching him steadily, his clear grey eyes hooded and expressionless.

They are both silent for a moment, studying one another. Then Arthur swallows the duck and wrenches his mind away from the topic of Eames' mouth and eyes, and back to the reason they're here in the first place.

"If he was Indian too, this might be an arranged courtship," he suggests. Eames looks thoughtful but takes another bite of noodles instead of responding; *Afrikaners* aren't known for their traditions of arranged marriage.

Arthur tries another tack. "He's not like this with female relatives. He's actually very close with his cousin Erika. Their communications are affectionate on both sides, and there are plenty of pictures of them together where he doesn't have the same stiffness he has with Supriya."
Eames nods, chews, gestures for Arthur to continue.

"They go on vacation together once a year, when his season is over. Last year was in Jamaica, year before that was Paris. It's actually one of his biggest single expenditures each year."

Eames' expression sparks with interest at this. He puts down his chopsticks and leans forward, once again startling Arthur with the intensity of his focus. "Go on."

Arthur abruptly looks away, finding it difficult to think while making actual eye contact. He takes a moment to compose his thoughts before beginning. "She's his mother's brother's daughter, an only child. They're two or three years apart, she's younger than him. They both grew up locally. She's a doctor's assistant in Mossel Bay, about four hours west of here, and she comes out here several weekends during the season when he has a game. Usually stays with him. She doesn't earn much, he ends up paying for both of them when they vacation. They fly first class, stay in five-star hotels, do a lot of touring."

"When did they start taking these vacations together?" Eames is all business now, his meal and seductive persona both put aside. "Have you gone through their correspondence?"

"No, we'd decided that he spent the most time with Supriya and she was most readily available for your study, so I didn't follow up in depth on every other potential target," Arthur says, a trifle defensively. "And while he's spending generously on these vacations, it's not out of his income range. I was seeing a lot more unusual financial activity with our next subject."

Intense grey eyes bore into his. Eames repeats, "How long have they been vacationing together?"

"I went back five years. I can look into previous years when we get back. I don't see the relevance, though."


He finally realizes what Eames is getting at. "Eames, no."

Eames drums his fingers on the table, then sits back and absentmindedly strokes his stubbled chin. "I want to look at their correspondence. Tonight. Not the tweets and social media bits, I want everything that's not public, all of their private communication. Are you finished yet?" He beckons their server over without waiting for an answer.

"But --"

Eames shakes his head. "No. We've nothing more to learn here. Supriya is a dead end, poor girl."

He looks momentarily glum, and impulsively, Arthur offers, "If you want to do something about that after we're done with the job, I can stay a few extra days and help with the logistics."

Eames' eyes soften and crinkle at the corners, and he doesn't quite smile, but his surprise and appreciation are present in his voice. "Thank you, Arthur." Then he's up and out of his seat, striding toward the exit to hail a cab while Arthur fumbles in his wallet for enough cash for the bill.
Once in the cab, Eames murmurs to Arthur in French, nodding briefly toward the cabbie, "He didn't blink when I made a pass at him. I think French is relatively safe."

Arthur has a better accent, but Eames has a more solid grip on the language itself. It takes him a few seconds to formulate a response. "Maybe you're just not his type."

Eames grins wickedly. "Arthur, even if I am not someone's type, I always get a response."

And Arthur... is not going to think about that. He changes the subject. "It'll take me a little while to get into her accounts, but I can pull all of his communications to her and print them for you while I'm doing that."

Almost sheepishly, Eames volunteers, "I do have a computer -- if you give me the login, I can open his accounts on it while you're figuring hers out."

Arthur considers lecturing him about the paper he made Arthur waste earlier today by not sharing that fact sooner, but decides it would be pointless. He nods curtly.

Eames detects his mood, nudges his arm. "Paper is always easier for me, yeah? I retain the information better that way. But we should get this sorted as soon as we can." His tone is apologetic, and Arthur does understand what he means -- he can't get a coherent grasp of a mark's credit card or bank statements, for instance, unless they're printed out.

"No, of course." He glances at Eames, but the forger is looking out the opposite window. They're both silent for the rest of the drive.

In their sleeping cottage, Kefilwe is lazing on the couch with the tv on mute, a magazine in her lap, and her husband on a video chat. Eames plops down next to her, pokes his head into the camera frame and speaks animatedly in Setswana.

Kefilwe cranes her head around the laptop screen and nods at Arthur. "Did you have a good dinner?"

"It's always good there," Arthur says, and gives her a distracted smile. He hangs up his jacket and grabs a cold bottle of water as Eames bursts out laughing, directs a complicated salute at the computer monitor, then disappears into his room.

The cottage they've designated for work is cool and dark when Arthur opens it a few minutes later. He turns on a lamp in the main room, loosens his tie and unbuttons the neck of his shirt, and stands for a moment in the doorway, looking out at the moon's reflection in the water of the swimming pool. Across the tennis courts, the resort is hosting an outdoor wedding reception, and the band, headed by a female singer with a low, smoky voice, is playing what sounds like a mixture of jazz and traditional music. It's pleasant, not too loud, and the night air drifting past the door carries the scent of the sea.

Eames joins him there a few minutes later, holding a half-full bottle of whisky and a short tumbler with a few fingers already poured. He's removed his shoes again, but is still wearing the fitted trousers and black shirt. Even in the low light, Arthur thinks he can actually see individual
muscles shift beneath the fabric as Eames raises the glass to his lips. They both listen for a moment, watching couples sway on the outdoor dance floor.

"What language is she singing in?" Arthur asks quietly.

Eames tilts his head, considering, and decides, "Tsonga."

Arthur wants to stand there for a while longer, but they have work to do. Regretfully, he turns, his elbow brushing against Eames as he re-enters the cottage. Through his thin shirt sleeve, he can feel the heat of the forger's bare arm. Eames follows him inside, sloshing another couple fingers of whisky into the glass.

At his desk again, Arthur jots down the login information for Kluwers' email and Facebook and their own secure wi-fi login. Eames shuffles through his desk and produces a battered Macbook. To Arthur's surprise, he doesn't set up at his desk, but balances the computer on the couch while he searches for an outlet. Arthur waves the paper with the information on it, and Eames approaches, but doesn't take it right away.

This time when Eames offers him a sip of his drink, Arthur accepts it. The whisky has an unusual, fruity nose to it. Arthur feels his own nose wriggle unconsciously in surprise as he breathes it in, but the first sip is buttery and rich, the familiar fire balanced by a toasty, caramel-vanilla sweetness. He makes a low, appreciative noise and takes a second sip.

Eames smiles approvingly, watching him, and answers the question before Arthur can ask it. "It's finished in rum casks."

Arthur takes another drink and hands the glass back. He is not quite in the right frame of mind for work right now, he realizes. The pleasant, low burn in his mouth and throat from the alcohol, together with the music drifting through the open door and windows, are more conducive to relaxation than to research, and the view from his desk -- Eames curled up barefoot on the couch with the sleek computer balanced on those tree-trunk thighs, his eyes intent on the screen -- is eminently distracting. Eames seems to feel his gaze and looks up, questioningly. Arthur shakes his head, looks down, and forces himself to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

The room is silent for the next hour except for the sounds of their computer keys and the occasional scratch of pen on paper. Arthur cracks Erika's passwords fairly easily. She has changed email addresses a few times in the past twenty years, but since she's forwarded old messages to her new address each time, he is able to build a comprehensive picture of the communications between her and Kluwers.

Now that Eames has clued him in on what to look for, he can see indicators that this is not just a cousinly relationship. They're both careful with anything publicly visible, and Erika doesn't mention anything untoward about their relationship when communicating with her friends or parents, but her emails to Kluwers are unusually affectionate, sprinkled with endearments and private jokes. There are a couple of selfies of her in lingerie, and there's a Facebook album locked to just the two of them, a rich cache of photos of their exotic vacations. Away from home, they are less circumspect, and in these photos -- and a couple of videos, mostly Erika mugging for the camera, kissing Kluwers on the cheek -- they are both wearing wedding rings. Their vacations, he sees, go back much further than the five years he initially researched. They've evolved from short weekends the next town over into the two-week foreign jaunts they take now.

Eames yawns suddenly, puts his computer down, and stretches. He disappears into the bathroom for a moment, and when he comes out, he's restless, animated, clearly ready to talk. He sits back down and pats the couch next to him. "Come here. Bring your laptop."
Arthur doesn't question it, just goes. Eames holds up the bottle of whisky, and Arthur nods, accepting the glass and admiring the clear, amber liquid inside before savoring another mouthful. He holds on to it and shakes his head when Eames tries to take it back, and Eames rasps out a laugh before getting back down to business. He has Kluwers' Facebook profile open to the private vacation album.

"Can you bring up her email for the week of June 21, 2009? That's the week after they return from Anguilla. See, he's got this splendid love bite on his chest, here, but he doesn't have it in this photo immediately before they leave. So he's got it on the trip, obviously."

"And this message from June 23... she's apologizing for 'that bite,'" Arthur confirms, looking at his own screen.

"Right. And you caught the wedding rings, too? Then, here, this video from Costa Rica..." Eames cues it, and they both watch as Erika coos at the camera about the gorgeous view behind them. In it, Kluwers is everything he isn't with Supriya: he looks fondly at Erika, reaches out to rumple her hair, tucks an affectionate arm around her shoulders. She kisses his cheek, and he beams into the camera. A lacy, bright teal bra strap peeks out from her tank top, and Arthur doesn't have to search long before he's matching it up with a shirtless selfie she took just days before they left on the vacation, and Kluwers' enthusiastic response ("So beautiful, liefie!") when she emails it to him. Eames nods grimly when Arthur points this out.

Arthur has more to impart. "She does date, but her relationships never seem to last long, and their communications are always stilted, the way Kluwers' are with Supriya."

"And with his exes," Eames adds.

"I didn't look as closely at his exes, but I'll take your word on that." Arthur frowns.

"He has other first cousins, both men and women. Female friends. He behaves like this with nobody else. No one piece of data is conclusive, but taken altogether, it's rather damning." There is a finality in Eames' voice; he has clearly already made his decision, his quick, intuitive mind racing ahead of Arthur's more skeptical, deliberate one.

"Is this really the best approach, Eames? Since we don't know for sure, and we don't know how far to take it? You can forge one of the assistant managers on the team instead."

The forger's eyes are sympathetic, but he shakes his head. "We need to learn more about her, but this man isn't close to very many people. He's stubborn and suspicious and, frankly, a rotter. He won't relax sufficiently with a team manager. Someone close to him, someone he's intimate with, will open his mind up and make him receptive to suggestion. It has to be her."

Because it's a legit job, with only a moderate payout, Eames is serving as the forger and extractor.
for all four subjects. It's his call, ultimately, as to who he forges and how the dream will be sequenced. Arthur and Kefilwe are there to fill in the details, cover his back, and, on Arthur's part, keep the dream stable. Arthur still isn't happy about it, but he'll defer to Eames' decision. He does want to know one thing, though.

"How are you planning to convince him?"

Eames doesn't answer right away. Instead, he slowly leans over until his face is right next to Arthur's, and takes a long, deep breath through his nose. He sits back, and without looking at Arthur, touches the back of Arthur's head, strokes lightly over his hair, trails his fingers down Arthur's neck to his shirt collar. Arthur closes his eyes. The fingers disappear. Eames' voice is low and seductive when he speaks.

"Our scents are so personal to us. The foods we eat, the products we use, the environments we live in, combine to create something unique. You walk into your house and unconsciously recognize its scent as yours, and it soothes you, just as a baby recognizes its mother's breast. Olfactory memory can be one of the most powerful triggers for a person. The very best forges incorporate scent; it's a direct line into the subject's limbic system. Get it wrong and you blow the dream sky-high. But if you get it right, they will accept you without question and open doors you didn't even know you wanted to look behind. If I can talk with Erika, get into her home, find her scent and forge her in the dream, this extraction will run seamlessly."

His voice shifts slightly, becomes lower and huskier. "And you, Arthur. You smell like me right now, and it disturbs you."

Arthur opens his eyes again. Eames is leaning slightly toward him, studying his face. His hand is still on the cushion behind Arthur's head, but he doesn't touch Arthur again, or make any move except to part his lips slightly. Eames' breath is hot and honey-sweet with whisky, his body radiating warmth in the cool room. Arthur shivers involuntarily. He knows he's revealing something to Eames, but he can't quash it in time.

"I can see it, you know," Eames murmurs. "You catch that fragrance, and you look to see where I am, wondering if you're smelling me or just my scent on yourself. You've been doing it all evening." Arthur must look stricken, because Eames smiles ruefully and admits, "I've been doing the same thing, love. I won't use your products again, unless you want me to. It's ... a rather intimate thing, isn't it?"

He wants to say something, throw the other man off balance the way he's feeling right now, but his mind is a blank. He drains the glass in his hand, stalling. Damn Eames, anyway, for being so fucking observant and then not having the tact to keep his observations to himself. Arthur feels raw, one giant exposed nerve. He's sure his body language and expression are shouting out information to the forger, and who knows what Eames will do with what he sees?

He gets his answer as the now-empty tumbler is removed from his unresponsive fingers, and then Eames' hand does return to Arthur's head, gently grasping his chin and turning Arthur's face toward his own, and Arthur closes his eyes again because he's being flooded with a dizzying mix of desire and uncertainty. He feels Eames' breath before he feels his lips, which are warm and lush and taste of vanilla and oak when Arthur opens his mouth to let Eames in. He is dimly aware that his computer is sliding off his lap, and then he is being tugged down to lie half on, half next to the forger's sturdy body, and then Eames resumes kissing him with a focus and intensity that strip away Arthur's indecision and fill him with a burning craving for more.

Arthur loves kissing; all that hot, slick, sensitive flesh, those nerve endings so close to the surface, so attuned to pleasure, the miracle of how very much sensation can be gleaned from the smallest
movement of one's lips on another's, knowing that the other is feeling this when one does that. He revels in the taste of Eames' mouth, a trace of smokiness overlain with all the fiery sweetness of the scotch. He'd thought that with all of Eames' aggressive sensuality on display tonight, the forger would be overpowering and demanding, but despite the impressive bulge Arthur can feel pressing against his hip, Eames seems perfectly content to just kiss Arthur for the time being. Their tongues flick lightly, quickly against each other, but this kiss really is about learning each other's lips and how they fit together; tongues and teeth belong in a different kiss, there will be time for them later.

Gradually, he arches himself against the other body, runs covetous hands over Eames' powerful arms and shoulders, luxuriating in the sensation of his fingers touching all those curves and planes of muscle his eyes had so greedily lingered on just hours ago. Slowly, Eames reciprocates, stroking down Arthur's back, running a proprietary hand through his hair, cupping his ass, tugging his shirt out of his waistband so that clever thieving fingers can stroke his bare skin. Clever as they are, though, they are stymied by Arthur's belt, and Eames makes a faint, muffled noise of complaint into Arthur's mouth.

And there, that does it. "We've awakened the whole zoo now," Arthur whispers. A spark flares deep in his groin, racing through his blood, and he's frantic, suddenly, working his own belt and flies open before tackling Eames', biting and sucking at Eames' plush lips and thick neck. And then they're arching and subtly grinding against one another, the tantalizing brush of bare skin electric between them as their hands find each other.

He becomes dimly aware that Eames is laughing into his neck, even as he grips Arthur tighter. "No shabby tigers here, darling," Eames murmurs, mouthing Arthur's earlobe, teeth catching in a gentle nip as his hips thrust greedily into Arthur's hot palm. Arthur pulls back momentarily in disbelief, but of course Eames understood him, and that makes him so much more impossibly attractive that Arthur's mind, frankly, is blown. He abandons himself then to the rhythm, corkscrewing his body into Eames' big hand and breathing him in, a jumbled olfactory collage of oak and smoke and musk, shuddering and gasping and losing himself, all of his senses overwhelmed with the taste and sight and feel and scent and sounds of Eames below him. He comes quickly, shaking, his teeth buried in delectable thick muscle through Eames' shirt. Eames follows a few strokes later, and they collapse against each other.

Arthur is blearily, belatedly aware that he's still wearing his shirt and tie, and that his belly is wet and sticky and his oversensitized cock is still enveloped in Eames' firm grip. But he doesn't care. He just lets himself drift blissfully until Eames shifts beneath him.

"Arthur," is all Eames says. He sounds dazed.

Arthur pushes up on one elbow and looks down into Eames' face. He isn't sure exactly where to put his other hand, or ready to think about the dilemma it presents just yet, so he leaves it where it is, burrowed into Eames' pants.

Eames is the very picture of contentment, his eyes heavy-lidded, all the lines in his face loose and relaxed, lips swollen and red. "Come with me, darling. Tomorrow."

"Yeah," Arthur hears himself saying. His voice, in his own ears, sounds as blurrily satisfied as Eames looks. "Yeah, all right."
Tigers and zoo from *Busman's Honeymoon* by Dorothy Sayers.
Every Time His Shoulders Flex

By the time they separate and reluctantly attend to cleaning up, it's late, but not so late that either of them are ready to retire for the night. Besides, Arthur wants to wait for Kefilwe to go to bed before he returns to the other cottage. Even after putting himself back together as best he can, he's well aware of how trashed he looks -- hair wild and unruly, shirt untucked to hide drying stains on the crotch of his pants, chin and cheeks pink and rashy with beard burn.

Eames looks even more debauched. He's lost his shirt again, having carelessly used it to mop up the mess on his stomach. The slim, dark trousers have obvious wet splotches around the zip, and a wicked bite mark between his neck and his shoulder is turning purple. He doesn't seem to mind, however, sprawling back down on the couch and closing his eyes under the faintly golden lamplight. He looks like a great cat dozing in the sun, his eyes heavy and sated, the muscles of his face relaxed and the corners of his mouth faintly turned up in contentment. If Arthur hadn't come twice today already, he'd want to crawl back on top of him and burrow his nose into Eames' thick neck, nuzzle down his chest and inhale the smells of fresh sweat and sex on the ridges of his belly.

But he doesn't; instead, he arranges a rental car, finds a B&B in Mossel Bay, and tells himself that he's only reserving the one room for them to share because it's more economical that way. He maps their itinerary, makes an online appointment request at Erika's clinic, pores over reviews and makes a dinner reservation at a restaurant that looks interesting, and creates a packing list of the surveillance items they'll need to bring with them, before it occurs to him that he hasn't heard any sound from Eames for some time.

When Arthur looks up, Eames is lying still, his eyes on Arthur. The faint smile on his face has grown broader, and Arthur feels his own expression answering it.

"A sleek and splendid tiger, a striped and shining tiger," Eames quotes softly. There is an obvious question in his eyes, but he's just as obviously trying to figure out how to ask it without pissing Arthur off.

Arthur laughs and lets him off easy. "Being on the run with Cobb gave me plenty of travel time for reading, and I picked up a copy of The Nine Tailors in an airport somewhere. That was it, I was hooked. You?"

"My parents had an extensive library, and I availed myself of it freely at an early age. When my mum caught me snogging the boy down the street when I was fifteen, she blamed it on E.M. Forster." There's a twinkle in his eye as he says it -- it's obviously not a painful memory at all -- and Arthur, who has half-tensed up at the word "boy," relaxes again.

Ok, if they're doing this now: "My parents are liberal Jewish academics and were too P.C. to blame anyone when I brought home my first boyfriend in college," he offers. "He stayed in touch with them for years, actually."

There is a brief, not uncomfortable silence between them. Then --

"I forged Wimsey on a job, once," Eames reminisces. "The subject was a university don writing a thesis on women in classic detective fiction. I suited up, monocle and all, wooed milady with Latin and poetry, and the projections never batted an eye."

Arthur imagines that, for a moment. There is a twitch of interest in his pants; he thinks, perhaps, he'd like to see Eames-as-Lord-Peter someday, and be wooed with a monocle and Latin and poetry
himself, never mind if he doesn't quite catch all of the allusions. Sometime when they're not working.

"The architect on that one did a brilliant Shrewsbury College, by the way," Eames adds. "Have you ever worked with Sanjay?"

Arthur hasn't, but he's heard good things, and says so.

He finds that he likes this, likes that the air is easy and casual between them, likes the delicious view of shirtless, leonine, sprawling Eames, likes that they can veer from hot and messy sex to divulging personal stories to talking shop. He hasn't entangled himself with colleagues very often, but it's happened enough that he knows how tense and awkward things can become, and how quickly. It's one of the reasons he hadn't made a move toward Eames, before. He's relieved that Eames seems to be taking it in stride.

When he looks again, the light in their other cottage has gone out; he thinks it's safe to go back there without embarrassing themselves in front of their architect. He stands, and begins stowing his laptop and notebooks in preparation for their drive tomorrow.

Eames takes his cue, yawns, stretches, rolls lazily up from his prone position, and looks ruefully at his wadded, crusty shirt. Before they close up the cottage, he swiftly curves an arm around Arthur's waist from behind, nuzzles the side of his neck, and turns Arthur's head to kiss him again, briefly but thoroughly. His face, when he pulls away, is so obviously satisfied that Arthur can't help grinning back at him.

They walk, close together but not quite touching, across the damp grass between the cottages.

Inside, Arthur lets Eames have the bathroom first, and is unsurprised and actually a little relieved when he wordlessly disappears into his own room afterward, closing the door; he isn't going to try to sleep with Arthur, at least not while they're housed with a colleague. Arthur showers quickly, pats some cream on his abraded neck and jaw, and falls asleep with unusual ease.

He wakes early the next morning, makes a pot of coffee, and heads out to pick up some supplies and the rental car. When he returns, Eames and Kefilwe have finished the coffee and are in the middle of a spirited discussion. He hears Eames say "Mossel Bay," and... well, Arthur doesn't consider himself a prude, but all the same, he's glad that Eames is the one explaining to Kefilwe that their mark is fucking his cousin.

He lets his eyes linger on Eames, who is wearing a pair of preposterous grey checked trousers with his watch chain hanging out, indigo brogues, and a short sleeved, deep blue silk shirt, open at the neck to show tantalizing bits of ink. His hair is neither the wild tousle of the previous night nor his usual sleek plastered-down style, but somewhere in between, and the stubble on his jaw is red-gold in the morning light. The look is part disco, part gangster, and unfairly gorgeous.

They're on the road by 9 a.m. He makes Eames drive. Arthur is fully capable of driving on the left, but it requires more concentration than he really wants to expend at the moment, and Eames, who lives (at least nominally) in Africa, is in much better practice. Besides, this way Arthur can spend the four-hour drive being productive.

He hadn't been able to get Eames an appointment at Erika's clinic until late in the afternoon, so they have plenty of time to strategize and theorize on the drive, and, he thinks, time for more pleasant activities after they check in to their room.

Eames is interested, now, in Kluwers' affinity for escorts, but ultimately he agrees with Arthur that
it shouldn't change their approach. They don't have enough information yet to decide whether Erika knows about it or not, or cares, but either way, the plan seems clear: Eames-as-Erika will ask Kluwers about plans for their next vacation, and thank him effusively (not too effusively, Arthur hopes, but keeps this to himself). When the topic of money is firmly engaging his subconscious, she will reveal that she's been approached by bookies wanting information about Kluwers' matches. Eames is clever enough and nimble enough to maneuver the conversation from there, to see if there is any possibility that Kluwers is their man. They'll continue to use Kluwers' apartment as the scene, since Kefilwe has already built it and Arthur, as the dreamer, is in the process of learning it.

Arthur dutifully takes notes of all of this. At that last bit, it occurs to him that he doesn't know exactly what Eames told their architect. "Did Kefilwe have any concerns about using Erika? Or... is this scenario going to bother her?"

Eames pauses a moment, weighing his words before replying. "Apparently it used to be not uncommon in rural Tswana culture for first cousins to marry, although it's fallen out of favor with urban populations." He shoots a quick look at Arthur out of the corner of his eye. "She. Well... Honestly, she would be much more uncomfortable with you and I showing a sexual interest in each other."

Oh, thinks Arthur, a little numbly. He's not sure what to say.

Being bisexual is just part of who Arthur is. He is neither a queen nor a gaybro; he doesn't perform straight identity or queer identity, he is just himself: a man who is attracted to and enjoys sex, and relationships, with both men and women. It's his norm, it's how it's always been for him, as far back as he can remember. And it still - always - pierces him to the bone to learn that someone he genuinely likes and respects can't or won't accept that.

Eames has his hand on Arthur's knee, thumb rubbing small, gentle circles on the outside of his thigh, not high enough to be indecorous, but firmly enough to let Arthur know he's there, that he wants to be touching Arthur. He looks faintly worried, a little vertical line between his eyebrows deepening, but he keeps his eyes on the road ahead of them.

Arthur takes a slow, deliberate breath. "It won't be a problem," he tells Eames. Eames gives his leg a squeeze, but doesn't remove his hand; his brow relaxes, though.

"I'd like more of what happened last night," Eames says slowly. "But..."

"But we need to sleep apart, at least there," Arthur finishes for him. "Look, it'd be the same thing if we were straight. It's close quarters for three people to live and work together even if two of them aren't hooking up. We just need to be discreet. There's always the other cottage."

"And she does tend to turn in early." Relief is evident in Eames' voice, which has resumed its usual flirtatious edge.

Arthur grins at him. "Well, we don't have to worry about that for the next two nights, anyway. The B&B is queer-friendly. We just need to get your material for the forge, and nobody will know or care what else we're up to."

"Ah... that reminds me, pet. What exactly am I to be treated for at the clinic? I hope it doesn't involve an emetic."

"I thought of that," Arthur admits. "But it didn't square with my plans for you later."
Eames' eyes light up.

Arthur continues. "There's a cheap nickel-plated watch in my bag. When we stop for lunch you should rub your skin wherever you don't mind having a rash. You'll have a small reaction by the time you go in, but it shouldn't be too bad, and you'll probably get a prescription cream for it. If not, I have an over-the-counter cream."

To be honest, Arthur is proud of this solution. He doesn't want to actually harm Eames, even for the sake of verisimilitude, and he remembers his allergy as being relatively tame. A mild rash presents a legitimate treatable condition, but won't put Eames out of commission or interfere with the job (or with Arthur's intentions for the four-poster king-sized bed in their suite) in any way. So he is taken aback when Eames withdraws his hand from his knee, the forger's big shoulders going rigid as he grips the steering wheel.

"There was no call for you to go into my medical history, Arthur," he growls, his face stony, his plump lips going thin and grim.

Arthur gapes at him. "I didn't. I wouldn't. What --"

"Then how the bloody hell would you know I'm allergic to nickel?" There is suspicion in his face and voice, and Arthur starts to get angry.

"Jesus." He shakes his head in disbelief. "I was with you on the Bernieres job in Monaco, Eames! You wore those cheap glasses when you were tailing the mark, and your whole face broke out in a rash, and you said it was from nickel. That's all. Look, I don't know what exactly you think I do, but I don't go prying into my coworkers' private lives for fun or for idle curiosity."

Eames opens his mouth to retort, then heaves an irritated sigh instead. "Fine. But - stay out of it."

The warning in his voice is clear.

Arthur keeps going anyway. "I keep working with you because I trust you, asshole. You could do the same." He leans his head against the window and glares out at the road. Eames doesn't respond.

And, crap. He doesn't want to push it further -- in his experience, Eames is slow to anger, but once he's properly furious, he's both unbearable and unsafe to be around. Arthur feels his gut clench, seeing the next three days spooling out before them filled with distrust and tense silences and Eames' own devastating brand of incessant, vicious mockery if they don't sort this out. But he kind of needs to know this. He keeps his voice level and non-judgmental.

"I'm not going to pry. We both know I could, if I wanted to, but I won't. But your reaction is telling me there's something there you don't want me to know about. And I expect you to be up front with me if there's something that would affect my decision to, you know, put your cock in my mouth. Ok?"

Eames is silent for a long minute, and Arthur can see him thinking. When he speaks, his voice is quiet and the edge of anger is gone. "There is nothing that will interfere with the job. Nothing that would interfere with putting anyone's cock in anyone's mouth, or anyone's arse, or anyone's ear, for that matter. Nothing you need to concern yourself with at all, Arthur." His eyes lock with Arthur's.

Arthur breaks eye contact, backs down. "Right. Ok." He nods slightly. Looks at his lap, the dashboard, out the window. Wonders what to do now.

Then a hand settles on his knee again, strokes it once, lightly, withdraws. When Arthur looks up,
Eames doesn't look at him and doesn't say anything, but his face is composed. He clearly doesn't want to continue this line of conversation, but he apparently isn't going to sulk about it.

Arthur decides to take Eames' demeanor at face value. "I brought the new Zeiss lens," he offers, his tone deliberately casual. "Figured we can take some photos of her house and incorporate elements into Kluwers' apartment if they seem relevant. She works from ten to five tomorrow so we'll have plenty of time to get in there."

"Does she have an alarm system?" Eames inquires. "If I'm going to have to fight off security personnel, I'd like to be prepared this time." His voice is bland, but there's a faint smirk on his face. (And, damn it, that particular fuckup wasn't Arthur's fault; the extractor hadn't told him she was planning to break into the mark's house, or Arthur would have warned her about it. They'd all been lucky that Eames had been armed, and that the private security in the mark's development was more interested in continuing to collect their paychecks than in pursuing someone who was shooting at them.)

"No," Arthur tells him, a trifle sourly. "Nothing that's registered with any of the local companies, anyway. I'll run a scanner when we get near her house to see if she has an in-home system."

They continue to firm up details of their surveillance, and begin discussing tentative plans for investigating their next subject. When they stop for lunch, Eames asks for the nickel-plated watch, and with a look of long-suffering on his face, pulls up his shirt and rubs it briskly on the beautifully chiseled side of his rib (serratus anterior muscle, Arthur remembers) as Arthur ogles him shamelessly.

Within an hour, Eames is scratching vigorously and vowing to retaliate as soon as he figures out what Arthur is allergic to. By the time they arrive in Mossel Bay, Eames has a splendid patch of red, bumpy, irritated skin and a temper to match it.

He's pacified, a bit, by the view from the windows and private balcony of their suite at the bed & breakfast. The bay is stunning, clear and blue, and the mountains lining the water in the distance are an otherworldly purple. The space has been designed with large windows, sleek white furnishings, and clean lines, and the bedroom has an enormous, inviting bed with a smooth white counterpane that's just begging to be mussed.

Eames immediately drops his bag, toes off his shoes, places his gun on the nightstand, and sprawls diagonally across the bed.

Arthur stows the PASIV and surveillance equipment in the safe, opens the sliding door to the balcony, and puts his gun on the nightstand, then stands next to the bed, eyeing Eames.

Eames moves to scratch his rib, stops himself, and scowls. He opens his mouth, presumably to complain, but Arthur stops him before he can get a word out.

"You should take the shirt off," he suggests.

Arthur doesn't wait for acquiescence, just moves toward him and begins swiftly unbuttoning the shirt, slapping Eames' hand down when he tries to help. Eames sits up obligingly to allow Arthur to draw the blue silk back over his shoulders and down his arms, then lies back, a faint, amused smile on his face, and carelessly trails his fingers down the fine line of hair that points from his chest past his navel and disappears into his trousers.

Arthur doesn't even try to hide his admiration and frank arousal this time. He nimbly straddles Eames, running his hands covetously over the sculpted torso and powerful arms, careful to avoid
the blotchy welts on his rib. He traces the tattoos that liberally cover his shoulders and belly, committing each to memory, the way the ink shifts over a protruding muscle as Eames tenses and relaxes, twisting his body to observe Arthur as he carefully inspects each and every line and curve.

Arthur doesn't ask, and Eames doesn't tell him, what they mean. In fact, neither of them speak at all, but Arthur looks up when he's finished his inspection, and Eames' gaze meets Arthur's and it's bright and burning hot. Arthur knows exactly what he wants to do.

Since they work with the PASIV, most dreamshare workers undergo a regular battery of tests to prove that they are disease-free, with clean blood -- it's a regular sideline for many chemists to provide those tests and test results. He knows as well as Eames does that Eames is fully capable of forging the relevant documents, and he's told the truth about not snooping into the forger's online medical records, but Arthur meant what he said: he may not always like Eames, but he trusts him. He trusts him not to doublecross Arthur or sell him out to Cobol, he trusts him with his sleeping body when Arthur is in the dreamspace and can't defend himself, he trusts him at his back when things go all to shit and he needs someone competently laying gunfire behind them. And he trusts him now when he recalls Eames' face when he told Arthur that he doesn't need to worry about giving a blowjob.

He has been straddling Eames' bulky thighs; he inches backward now and rests his weight just above his knees, instead. Without breaking eye contact, he puts his hands on Eames' belt, and as slowly as he can bear it, slips the tail end out of its loop, releases the metal prong from its hole, and draws the freed length of dark leather through the metal frame. He pauses there.

Eames stretches his arms up and clasps his hands behind his own head, propped on the pillow. His grey eyes, the pupils increasingly dilated, flick between Arthur's face and hands. His breathing has quickened and his full lips are flushed and parted, but his face doesn't alter its expression, which is intent and expectant. Arthur notices that the hair under his arms has been trimmed since yesterday, and his mind naturally follows that train of thought to the dark tangles he'd felt last night around Eames' hard cock.

His hands shake slightly as he unfastens the button and draws down the zipper, then opens it up into a v-shape.

He's not sure how far he thinks Eames might have taken today's disco gangster theme - he doesn't think he can handle neon mesh -- so he's gratified to discover a pair of brief black Armani trunks, the pouch in front full and straining. There's a telltale wet spot already when he lightly strokes two fingers over it, and he hears Eames inhale raggedly.

They both watch Arthur's slim hands as they continue stroking Eames through the fabric, dipping down lower to cup his balls and trace their contours, squeezing and gently rolling them, before he can't contain himself any longer. He slips smoothly off of Eames' thighs and kneels beside him, grasping the waistband of his pants and easing them down. Without moving his hands from behind his head, Eames lifts his hips slightly to assist in that endeavor, and Arthur is momentarily distracted by the sight of the sublime contraction of abdominal muscle as he does so.

Bared now to mid-thigh, he could be in a porn video. Arthur's mouth is watering just looking at him, all that ink and toned muscle, the obscene lushness of his mouth, and his thick uncut cock jutting up now toward his flat belly. Eames has been at work down here with a razor, the hair still naturally shaped but neatly trimmed. His foreskin is snug and retracted around the swollen, glistening head of his cock, a translucent drop of precum trickling from the tip.

He couldn't more perfectly embody Arthur's preferences if he'd read Arthur's mind. Arthur takes the sight of him in for a long moment before bending down to mouth at Eames' thigh, settling
himself between his spread legs, sucking a bruise into his hip, then looking back up into the grey eyes to confirm that they're on the same page, that Eames is with him.

Eames raises himself up onto his elbows and unconsciously licks his own lips, his gaze fixed hungrily on Arthur's mouth as Arthur slowly lowers it around the head of his cock. Arthur sinks halfway down, licks into Eames' foreskin and inhales, relishing the heady mixture of scents here -- the pleasant mundane smells of soap and detergent, the familiar taste of his own saliva, mingling with a sharp note of precum and Eames' own warm natural musk, increasing as the forger becomes more aroused. He firms the suction of his mouth then, stroking with his tongue, running the sensitive inner flesh of his lips along Eames' whole length, letting them drag over the head of it as his right hand encircles the shaft, enjoying the smooth, heavy weight of it in his palm. He gets fully down to business then, rotating his hand and mouth in opposite directions simultaneously, sucking and stroking and doing his best to draw gasps and muttered curses from Eames.

His own cock is a steel rod in his pants; he shifts minutely, almost unconsciously against the bedsprea. But he can wait. His focus is wholly on Eames, his ears attuned to every moan and rasped breath.

Eames has the counterpane in a death grip with one hand while the other, surprisingly gentle, cups Arthur's head as it bobs and dips. They're a mess now, saliva leaking from Arthur's mouth and coating his fist as he jacks Eames faster, the slick obscene sound of wet flesh keying them both up even further.

He feels the warning signs even before Eames abruptly pushes at his shoulder, but Arthur is stubborn and sucks him through it instead of pulling off, and Eames lets him. The hot gush over his tongue is gratifying, and without thinking, he swallows it down. Eames shudders once, twice, then his whole body relaxes at once. The hand on Arthur's shoulder returns to his head, strokes lightly a few times, and drops bonelessly to the bed.

Arthur can't resist mouthing at his softening cock for a few more seconds - he loves this part, being just a little playful with someone he's just gotten off. Eames gives a surprised, and surprisingly girlish, squeak and then abruptly, his powerful body flips Arthur over and pins him.

"Like to play dirty, do you?" he rasps, but his voice is soft and blurry and satisfied and his hands fumble with Arthur's belt. Arthur helps him, suddenly impatient for those big hands on his body, and between them they have Arthur free in no time at all. He's so hard, he won't last long, he knows.

The sight of Eames' lush lips enveloping his full length nearly brings him off immediately, and it is barely the work of a minute before he is tapping Eames on his jaw to urge him off. He does pull off, but to Arthur's astonishment, opts to take the load full on his face, and god, Arthur didn't even know he could come this hard. He is dimly aware of someone yelling, and doesn't realize it's him until he feels the vibration in his throat.

He falls back, panting, and notes hazily that Eames has rolled away and is wiping his face with a tissue. The forger strips his pants all the way off and then relaxes back down at Arthur's side and slings a heavy arm across his belly. His eyes are closed and his expression is blissed out.

He murmurs something then, and Arthur doesn't quite catch it. A little louder, Eames says, "how long have you known my name?"

It seems like a non sequitur, and Arthur can only repeat dumbly "your name?" because Eames' name... is Eames.
"You said Alex," Eames tells him drowsily. "At the end there. Or maybe you were imagining I was someone else and it's purely a coincidence. But I think not."

Arthur definitely didn't intend to do that. He's not sure exactly what he'd been saving the information for, but he hadn't planned to let Eames know he knows. He doesn't seem to mind, though.

"A couple of years," he admits.

Eames makes a noise halfway between a grunt and a laugh, and says, "I go by Alec, actually. Though not to very many people." His eyes are closed and his breathing is evening out like he might fall asleep; the lack of expression means that Arthur can't tell what he's thinking, or why he's confiding in Arthur this way.

He wishes briefly and powerfully that they could just stay here all day and be the carefree tourists they are pretending to be. But the point man in the back of his brain is shaking off the post-coital fog and making noises about appointments and deadlines and strategy, and Arthur can't turn him off.

He prods Eames, nudges him up, stands up himself and puts his clothes back together. Eames washes his face, pulls on his abandoned shirt and trousers, and seems more or less fully awake by the time his shoes are back on.

"Leave me your gun," Arthur reminds him, as he sees him start to tuck it into his back waistband. Doctors usually don't take kindly to their patients bringing in firearms, and Eames needs to look like a harmless tourist.

"Right, right," Eames mutters, and hands it over.

Before they leave the room, Arthur doublechecks that the safe is locked, resists the compulsion to straighten the rumpled bed, and pats himself to make sure he's at least triply armed.

Eames intercepts him at the door and draws him in for a surprisingly sweet kiss, then renders it filthy by declaring that Arthur tastes like come. Eames' eyes are sparkling. From the way Arthur feels right now, he thinks his must be, too.
The Way His Shirt Hangs Off His Back

Arthur is mildly startled, to say the least, when he pulls up at the clinic after Eames' appointment and the forger greets him with an affectionate peck on the lips, then directs his attention to one of the clinic windows. To his horror, Arthur recognizes the face at the window as Erika. She blows Eames a kiss and waves at him, and he returns both with a delighted grin.

"Wave to her, Arthur," Eames instructs him sternly under his breath, still grinning madly. Arthur musters up a smile and tentatively waves. She beams at him. Eames seizes his hand, brings it to his lips, tenderly kisses his knuckles, and tells him to drive.

When they're out of view of the clinic, Eames drops Arthur's hand and pre-emptively holds his own hands up in front of his face in self-defense. Arthur snorts, but the gesture is effective at disarming him, and his tone is milder than he'd originally intended it to be when he asks the forger to explain himself.

"She's a delightful woman, very much admired my ink, and was properly sympathetic about my horrid rash," Eames informs him. "I explained we were in town on vacation and asked for recommendations about where to eat, and she generously offered to show us a few places. We'll meet her at 7 for dinner and see where the evening takes us."

Arthur makes a mental note to cancel their dinner reservation and erase all of his careful research about local restaurants, not to mention his review of years of Erika's correspondence, from his memory. He's no actor, like Eames, but thinks he can manage that much. He still doesn't understand how or why Eames has set this up, though.

"I think she's rather lonely," Eames muses. "She mentioned her boyfriend but said he lives a few hours away. So that's confirmation we're on the right track."

Arthur is honestly bewildered. "Are you... were you hitting on her?" Why would a nurse just invite an unknown patient -- two strange men -- to go out with her? What the fuck is Eames up to? And why is he assuming Arthur is willing to be part of it?

Eames looks confused, as if Arthur is the one who isn't making sense here. "She thinks we're poofs, darling."

Oh. The greeting peck, the coy wave, the blown kisses; Arthur gets it now, what they're supposed to be doing. He sighs, gives in. "I assume we have a suitably twee back story."

"Indeed. We met at a bathhouse in New York--"

Arthur groans, shakes his head, waves for Eames to continue.

"-- seven years ago and have been inseparable ever since. You're a tax attorney, I'm a personal trainer. I was in a relationship when we met; I'll let you try to figure out why that's important. We have a charming little flat in San Francisco and a pair of corgis. We celebrate Pride every year and are planning our upcoming wedding so that I can become a U.S. citizen."

"Please don't say at Martha's Vineyard," Arthur begs.

Eames looks offended. "Of course not. We'll have a town hall ceremony in California, then a proper wedding on Maui, on the beach. You'd look lovely in a white ginger lei, with your hair all curly in the sea air, Arthur. We'd lie on the beach and sip terrible pineapple drinks and absolutely
wreck the honeymoon suite."

Despite his automatic, horrified rejection of such a ridiculous scenario, Arthur can kind of see it: Eames standing in the surf, tanned and dripping, in a pair of short, snug swim trunks. Eames, on a lounge near the pool, wearing a pair of aviators, with an absurdly colorful drink in his hand. Eames, in a white raw silk shirt, under an arbor on the beach, with a glint of gold in his palm.

But that's not really Eames, is it? That's not what they're doing here, that's not somewhere Arthur should let his mind go. He's making light of the entire concept, after all. There's a sudden twinge in his chest, and he takes an abrupt breath to try to clear it.

When he looks up, Eames is watching his face. Arthur can't tell what he thinks about whatever it is he sees there, but the forger's tone becomes carefully professional. "I realize there's a risk to interacting with the target, but it's too good an opportunity to pass up. Her guard is down. This kind of access will significantly improve the forge and reduce the amount of time it takes to develop it."

"Fine," Arthur agrees, shortly. He knows Eames has been face to face with his models on occasion, but Arthur has always been a long-distance surveillance kind of guy. He's not as good with small talk and he's afraid his face reveals too much of what he's actually thinking. He's also uncomfortable feeding into anyone's stereotyped idea of what a gay man, or a gay couple, is supposed to act like. But Arthur is a professional, damn it, and if this is what the job requires, this is what he'll do.

He maintains his composure through Eames overseeing his grooming ("Jeans. And no tie tonight, Arthur"), the directive to download photos of fluffy brown and white dogs to his phone ("Tiffany and... Jasper, I think"), and observing Eames moderating his mannerisms and voice in the mirror until he's satisfied with his persona for the evening. It's a little fey for Arthur's taste, honestly.

As they prepare to leave, Arthur stops Eames at the door and tells him, sincerely, that if he says the word "marvelous" at any point during the evening, Arthur will cut him. Eames knows he has a knife in a holster in his shoe and another at his back, because he watched Arthur get dressed.

Instead of protesting or lecturing Arthur about his (no doubt myriad) reasons for choosing the somewhat campy approach he's adopted, Eames just looks thoughtful. "Too much?" he asks. Arthur, surprised, only nods shortly. And then, Arthur can't tell exactly what, but something in Eames' demeanor shifts, his face becoming a trifle less open, his posture becoming stiffer and slightly more assertive. "All right," Eames says, and his voice is a note deeper, his accent less posh.

In the car, Arthur can't stop looking at Eames, trying to figure out what subtle tricks he's employed to camp and then un-camp himself. He's wearing the same clothes from this morning, he hasn't altered his grooming at all, and he doesn't employ prosthetics or makeup; it's purely an internal shift, but the outer manifestations are clear and convincing. He's seen Eames take on and shed personas, not to mention forges, before, but he's never had a chance to observe the full process from such close quarters. He's impressed.

The forger obviously notes Arthur's silent scrutiny, and after a few minutes, he says, exasperated, "Words, Arthur."

There are a million things Arthur wants to know, all along the lines of how do you do that, but what he says instead is: "You don't usually listen to me."

Eames shoots him a quick, perplexed look. "I always listen to you. I don't always agree, but I trust
your judgment and I know your reasoning is sound. Besides," he adds, "I need you to be
comfortable with me tonight, if we're to portray a long-term couple, and you obviously weren't."

He's right again, of course. Arthur isn't going to argue with that.

The outside of the restaurant, when they pull up, is unprepossessing, and Arthur steels himself for
substandard fare. But the interior is warm and tastefully decorated, and the menu he is handed is
promising. They are a few minutes early and Erika hasn't arrived yet. While they wait, Eames
busies himself with the wine list, microexpressions of pleasure, interest, and disdain playing across
his face in rapid succession. Arthur watches him, amused and charmed.

He is startled when a hand falls lightly on his shoulder from behind, and turns to find the attractive
brunette he'd last seen waving from the clinic window that afternoon smiling down at him. She's
wearing a sleeveless black dress and chunky silver jewelry, and her long brown hair is loose and
flowing over her shoulders. He notes that she isn't wearing the wedding ring he's seen in the photos
of her and Kluwers, but she does have a heavy signet ring on that finger. He wonders if she's
hiding a tan line.

He stands up, pulls out a chair for her. "Anthony Levinson," he introduces himself. "Call me
Tony."

"Tony. I'm Erika Marais," she announces, and flashes dimples at him. "It's wonderful to meet
you. And Stephen, hello again," she says to Eames. "Did the cream help at all?"

Eames stands as well, takes her hand, and drops a gallant kiss on the back of it. "Much better,
thank you."

"You didn't tell me how handsome he is," she scolds Eames lightly, dimpling at Arthur again.

"He really is, isn't he? I'm a very lucky man." The look he gives Arthur is fond, and he reaches out
to tenderly stroke Arthur's hand before turning his attention back to the wine list, engaging Erika in
an animated discussion of white vs. red and whether the local wines better compliment the local
food than an import would.

Arthur relaxes, allowing himself to be drawn into the conversation. He shows her the corgi photos
on his phone, demurs to her inquiries about his job on the grounds that his work is really too boring
to talk about, and solicits her input on which dishes are particular specialties of the house. She tells
them which bars to avoid, where to find the best pastries in the morning, which tourist activities
are worth the time and which are a ripoff. He almost forgets that they're here to steal her secrets;
this isn't nearly as difficult as he'd thought it would be. She has a pleasant, vivacious personality
and flirts lightly with them both, the way he often sees women do with gay men.

Eames continues to be affectionate with Arthur, his eyes gently fond and his gaze returning often to
Arthur's face; he holds Arthur's hand, calls Arthur "love" and "sweetheart." He asks Erika for the
Afrikaans equivalents, then solemnly addresses Arthur as "bokkie." Erika is delighted with
Arthur's resulting blush. He is surprised to find that he is enjoying himself.

Between appetizers and their entrees, Erika leans over and tells Arthur in a confidential tone, "I
hear you met in a bathhouse." She looks titillated. She is close enough that he can smell the wine
on her breath.

"Stephen likes to tell people that, but actually, it was the locker room at a health club," his mouth
says before his brain can catch up. "He was working there as a trainer, and I'd seen him around.
Well, to be honest, I couldn't take my eyes off of him," he confesses. "He had this terrible
bleached-blond hair then --" she giggles "-- and fewer tattoos, but he was so beautiful, so built, and just had this confident air about him. But we never spoke until one day he walked into the steam room, it was just the two of us in there. And he smiled and asked if I minded him intruding, and I heard the accent, and that was it, I had to get closer to him." He has no idea where all of that came from, but he can hear the ring of truth in his own voice, and it convinces her; her eyes and face go soft and happy.

Eames listens to this with a fond expression, but his grey eyes are thoughtful and sober. He reaches out to take Arthur's hand where it rests on the table, rubbing his thumb gently on Arthur's palm. Arthur can practically see his mind spinning, assimilating the information he's gleaning from Arthur's words, Arthur's face. He wishes he could read the forger as well as he is reading Arthur, because he has no idea what Eames is making of this.

He smiles at Eames, and turns back to Erika. The words seem to just keep tumbling out of him. "He was in a relationship then, but I didn't know it. And when I found out, I didn't care," he admits. "Even though they'd been together forever, and he'd come over to the States in the first place so he could be with - his ex. We just had this amazing chemistry, and I'd never felt it that strongly with anyone else. It took some convincing, but when my firm transferred me to California, he agreed to come with me. We haven't looked back since."

Maybe Arthur should have seen it coming; obviously Eames did, since he'd deliberately planted this part of their story, but then Eames has been several steps ahead of Arthur this whole game, hasn't he? Erika looks down, bites her lip, and says quietly, "Actually, my boyfriend -- Johan -- is married. That's why he's so far away, and why I don't move closer. It's hard, isn't it? To be in that position."

So that's how they explain it, he understands. A long-distance relationship with a married man, a cousin she is close to and visits often; none of her friends or family need to know that they're the same person. It doesn't make their relationship any more palatable to him, but he hears the genuine sympathy in her voice, as well as her unhappiness at having to keep her lover hidden. Kluwers doesn't deserve her, he thinks, and belatedly he remembers Eames saying the same thing about Supriya. He catches Eames' eye, trying to convey without speaking that he understands now, and he thinks Eames can tell what he's trying to say.

Eames breaks eye contact and pats Erika's hand. "Sweetheart, we do understand. It's a miserable place to be in, truly. But you can't help who you fall for, and when you find it, you mustn't let it go." He gives Arthur a meaningful look, which Arthur can't decipher. Erika doesn't see it; she squeezes Eames' hand, smiles tremulously at him, and takes another drink.

To Arthur's relief, further confidences are forestalled by the delivery of their entrees, and Eames orders a second bottle of wine. Arthur has been careful to pace himself, but Eames and Erika haven't, and it shows. Arthur guesses what the forger is doing. He attempts to ensure that he appears to be drinking as much as the two of them, but he's obviously going to have to drive later on, and he doesn't trust his ability to maintain his facade while drunk as well as Eames does. He knows Eames has a strong tolerance for alcohol -- with all the muscle he's packing, Arthur's a little surprised that it has any effect on him at all -- but Erika is slender and hasn't eaten much and is obviously feeling its effects.

It's working on her all too well. Under the guise of friendly, benignly flirtatious conversation, Eames is mining extraordinary amounts of information from Erika, about her vacation experiences and her pet names for Kluwers and the fact that they've discussed moving to some other country to get married. He even maneuvers the conversation around to shampoo by complimenting the way her hair shines, and Arthur can see him making a mental list of the products she enthuses over --
probably so he can go analyze their scent later. Arthur observes Eames observing Erika, marking her gestures, her trick of tilting her head to the left when she's considering something, the way she taps two fingers on her lower lip when she thinks she's said something flirty. On balance, he finds Eames' facility with information-gathering both disturbing and incredibly hot.

He marvels again at Erika's foolhardiness in going out with men she doesn't know at all, getting herself drunk and spilling all this detail about herself; she may believe they are safe because of their supposed orientation, but after all, they are in fact con men, and this is really an unsafe thing for her to be doing.

By the time the bill arrives, Erika is flushed and giggly, and unsteady on her feet when she gets up to use the restroom. Arthur pays it, and he and Eames chat about the food and wine, reserving meaningful discussion for later, when they can talk privately.

When Erika returns, he and Eames are waiting near the door for her. She's looking bleary and it's obvious that whatever the original plan was, they're not going anywhere else tonight. Eames takes her arm and smoothly offers "a ride home, love, you're in no condition to be driving." She puts up only token resistance, and Arthur feels a little sick at how easy this has been. He wishes he could tell her to be more careful.

He's having enough trouble driving due to being slightly tipsy and having to remember to drive on the left that he doesn't have to feign reliance on her instructions to get to her house. As Eames helps her out of the car, he hears the forger say "Darling, do you mind terribly if I use your loo?" and her cheerful acquiescence. Arthur stands politely next to the car, and is not actually very surprised when she wants to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek as she thanks him for a lovely evening. He waits as Eames follows her into the house, notes which lights go on and in which order (entryway, living room, bathroom), and watches as she gives Eames a hug and cheek kiss in the doorway before waving at Arthur one more time and closing her front door.

When he returns to the car, Eames looks like the cat who ate the fucking canary. "No alarm system, no dog. She has pictures of the two of them from the Jamaica trip in her hallway, but with the wedding rings photoshopped out. Also, she leaves the bathroom window unlocked and ajar. I may need a trip to a store to be sure, but I think I can recreate her scent from just a few products. This was tremendously useful, Arthur. And you were marvelous, truly, darling. Very well done."

Arthur ignores the "marvelous." He has other things on his mind. "She has to be more careful," he blurts out. "This was... I can't believe. She's going to get herself robbed or worse. You could have... you could have raped her, or kidnapped her, just then. We both could have. What is she thinking?"

Eames takes a deep breath, considers Arthur for a moment. "She's lonely," he says again. "And you should never, ever underestimate the amount of trust you can instill in a woman by making her believe you're queer and monogamous."

This upsets Arthur on a whole other level. "It feels like prostitution, using our sexuality for a job. It's just. Wrong. We're not... that's not us, we're not that safe, happy gay couple she thinks we are." He is frustrated that he can't articulate what about this is bothering him.

"We kind of are, Arthur," Eames points out, his voice wary.

"Tell me you weren't attracted to her," Arthur demands. "Tell me that under any other circumstances, you wouldn't have been happy to follow her in there and take her to bed."

"Of course I would," Eames says reasonably. "She's a very attractive and obviously very
affectionate woman and she should be having more and better sex than she's getting from that oaf. But right now, darling, I would rather take you to bed, or at least into that enormous decadent bathtub in our suite." He leers a little, and strokes Arthur's thigh, and Arthur thaws just a bit. He's thought about that bathtub, too. One of the walls behind it is entirely mirrored. It has great potential.

"Second," Eames continues candidly, "this is what we do, and she felt safe with us because here and now, we are safe, because it's the role we're playing. I know you're uncomfortable with it, and perhaps I shouldn't have asked you to join me in it, but you really did brilliantly. She heard your story, saw your face, and she believed. I wouldn't have been able to accomplish nearly as much as we did tonight on my own."

Arthur's been trying not to think about what Erika saw or heard from him that she found so convincing. It unnerved him to hear the little meet-cute story pour out of him, unplanned and unrehearsed, and he finds himself blushing to think that Eames heard it, heard Arthur say he was beautiful. Arthur doesn't just drop endearments and compliments like Eames does, and he knows Eames knows that. In fact, Arthur wasn't acting tonight so much as accessing feelings that were already present. He has a sinking feeling that Eames knows that, too. He still can't read Eames, can't tell what his reaction is, what he thinks about all of this information Arthur has been virtually shouting at him with his voice and words and body all night.

"You did great work," he deflects. "How much more, I mean, what else do you need to develop the forge? Do we still need to get into her house, do you need to see her again?"

"Yes," Eames says slowly. "I'd like to get in tomorrow while she's at work, then come back to the hotel and go under and work on the forge. If you're not completely averse, it would be helpful to go out with her again, and I'd like your input with the forge since you were there the whole time. There are always things I miss."

Arthur is a little surprised. "I thought you might want to go under when we get back, while it's fresh."

"No," Eames says firmly. "I've had the bulk of a bottle of wine by myself, and alcohol and Somnacin combine for a particularly nasty hangover. And further, I've been thinking about what I want to do to you, with a whole night to ourselves, and it doesn't involve sleeping." His hand is still on Arthur's thigh, and it moves higher, higher, until it is firmly palming his cock, which comes roaring to life.

"That... that would be... mmm, fuck." He shifts, his hips moving against the forger's hand.

Eames nods gravely. "That was the general idea, yes."

Arthur is in no condition to argue, nor is he inclined to. In fact, they can't get back to their room fast enough to suit him.
Masculine He Spins A Spell

It's been a while since Arthur has shared a bed with anyone. Even though this one is king-sized, two grown men who are both used to sleeping alone manage to fill it up and then some. When he cautiously cracks an eye open to the morning sun, he sees Eames, naked, starfished on his belly with his left arm hanging over the side of the bed. He notes with some dismay that the forger's right hand has a firm grip on Arthur's forearm, and that's a problem, because Arthur really needs to piss but he's not sure he's ready to deal with an awake Eames just yet. He'd like to just lie there quietly for a while and relive some of the highlights of last night, but those thoughts just get his blood stirring, and he doesn't want to pee through a hard-on, so.

He carefully disengages Eames' hand and slips into the bathroom, where he tries to pee quietly. The room still smells strongly of coconut oil -- Arthur will never be able to smell coconut after this without blushing -- and there are two parallel handprints on the mirror behind the tub. He recalls how they got there, and smiles to himself. He thinks maybe while Eames is still asleep, he'll go for a run. It's a straight shot downhill to the beach, and there's a paved jogging trail that winds along the cliffs.

He splashes water on his face, changes into running clothes, pulls a cap over his wrecked hair, and scrawls a note for Eames.

When he returns an hour later, he can hear heavy breathing even before he opens the door to the room. Mystified, and cautious, he cracks the door open and peers in. And.... oh. He's aware of his jaw dropping, and for a moment, he can't move.

Eames is doing pushups. He's wearing nothing but a pair of thin grey track pants that cling to his beautifully modeled ass and thighs. The muscles in his arms and shoulders and back rhythmically bunch, ripple, lengthen. His motions are efficient and controlled and his form excellent; he's worked up a healthy sweat and his skin is gleaming. Arthur grasps the door frame, staggers inside, collapses on the bed, and just watches. Eames shoots him a wink, but otherwise continues focusing on his workout. He shifts from doing pushups using both hands, to doing them one-handed with his feet crossed, to doing some kind of bizarre pushup on his forehead, and what is that even. Arthur has never seen this before. He is enthralled.

Eames matter-of-factly moves on to squats, and then crunches, and Arthur starts to feel silly just sitting there ogling him. He strips and pads into the bathroom, starts the shower, and stands for a long moment under the hot water not moving. He is lathering his hair, his eyes closed, when he hears the slap of bare feet on the bathroom floor. A few seconds later, a bulky, sweaty body muscles in on him in the shower enclosure, jostling him good-naturedly out of the stream and sighing with pleasure at the heat of the water.

Arthur indignantly elbows his way back under the showerhead, rinses his hair, opens his eyes again, and catches Eames gazing admiringly at his wet face.

"Good run?" Eames inquires amiably.

"Yeah, it's beautiful out there," Arthur says, distracted. "Do you - do you do that every morning?"

Eames tips back his head, pushes his wet hair off his forehead, and chuckles. "What, did you think all of this -"he waves vaguely at his torso "- just spontaneously generated itself?"

Arthur hadn't really thought about it before now. He realizes that he's been living with Eames, and
Kefilwe, for the past three weeks, and he'd never known Eames had a regimented workout program.

The unexpected intimacy of what they're doing here, not just the sex but the showering together and the early morning workout and the fact that Eames had nonchalantly wandered into the bathroom to piss last night while Arthur was brushing his teeth, hits him suddenly.

Eames, who is leisurely washing his hair, doesn't appear to be troubled by any of what's happened, and Arthur finds himself unreasonably annoyed by that. He shrugs, reaches past Eames for the soap, and concentrates on getting himself thoroughly clean.

"Hey." One deft hand seizes his chin, tips his head up, and holds it there; the other grasps the soap and stops Arthur from moving. "You've got that look on your face." Eames' clever, concerned grey eyes seek Arthur's, but he can't meet them.

Eames isn't being aggressive, but he's also not letting go of Arthur's head, and he's not letting Arthur continue washing himself, either. Arthur debates, briefly and internally, whether or not to snark at him, to make him back off, but he's honest enough with himself to realize that his discombobulation is his own issue and not Eames' fault.

He also knows that while Eames has a surprising reservoir of patience, it's not infinite. Arthur has trod close enough to that line in the past that he knows not to push his luck. He opts for honesty.

"This, with you; everything's changed. It's too sudden. I can't tell what you're thinking, about anything, but I feel like I'm an open book to you. And that puts me on edge," he says slowly.

Eames lets go of his chin, but takes his hand and twines his fingers into Arthur's. Arthur finds that he can meet his eyes, now, when he looks up. They're steady and warm.

"Well," Eames says, his voice oddly gentle. "It's different. But it's good. Really good. We're all right, yeah?"

Arthur feels a knot in his chest unwind. "It's all right," he agrees, adding candidly, "I wish I could read people as well as financial records."

"I've been trying to read you for years," Eames admits. "You're hardly an open book, darling, or I wouldn't have waited so long to try to seduce you." He plucks the soap out of Arthur's hand, runs it under his arms and over his chest.

"Is that what all of the -- the sunbathing erotica was? The parading around topless? That was a seduction? And I wasn't done with that, asshole." Arthur steals the soap back and scrubs it over his face.

"Saw you looking." He hears the satisfaction in Eames' voice, even though he can't see it. "Didn't know if muscles were your thing, or if you preferred skinny lads, but they caught your eye, didn't they?"

Arthur isn't going to dignify that with a response. (Also, he can't open his mouth right now.) He gropes helplessly for the hot water.

Eames laughs and guides Arthur under the spray, then kisses him, short and sweet, when he emerges. "Out, you," he says briskly. "We have breakfast to find and a house to burgle."
"Right," Eames says, apparently out of nowhere, and puts down his cup of tea. He looks fully into Arthur's eyes. "What do you want to know, then?"

They are camping out in a coffee shop, waiting for Erika's work shift to begin so they can break into her house. Arthur is working his way through a bowl-sized latte and a brown-butter hazelnut scone, while Eames is tucking into what he calls "a proper fry-up" (minus the mushrooms, which Arthur had appropriated. If they're in an eat-off-each-other's-plate relationship now, he's going to take full advantage of it.)

He doesn't play dumb; he knows exactly what Eames is referring to. The thing is, he doesn't exactly know how to ask. "What do you think about everything that's happened between us, and where is it going," is a large topic, while "How did you feel about me saying you were beautiful" is a little more precise than he wants to get right now.

"It's good," he says, his tone not quite a question. Eames just raises an eyebrow, nods, and takes another bite of bacon.

Arthur tries again. "You've been trying to read me for years." He pauses, realizes that wasn't a question either. "So, you've been, um, you've had ... an interest... for years?"

Eames' full lips quirk, and he tilts his head slightly. His steady grey eyes don't leave Arthur's. "Yes. I have."

"Does this interest extend beyond our coincidental immediate proximity for this job?" It sounds better in his head than it does coming out, and he winces slightly.

"If you think it's coincidental that we keep working together, Arthur, please allow me to disabuse you of that notion." Eames' tone is light and almost playful, but his expression is serious.

Arthur takes that as a yes. He suddenly feels warm all over. "How much of that happy-couple act last night was for my benefit, and how much was for Erika's?"

Eames smiles suddenly, impishly, all the lines at the corners of his eyes crinkling, too-British teeth flashing for a split second between those gorgeous lips of his. "All of it, and some of it, in that order. At the same time. I enjoy touching you," he adds in a stage whisper, his knee jostling against Arthur's under the table.

"I've noticed," Arthur tells him dryly. They grin a little stupidly at each other. Arthur nudges one foot alongside Eames' and leaves it there.

"What are you doing after the job?" Arthur thinks this question should be the easiest yet, but surprisingly, for the first time, Eames appears uncomfortable; he blinks rapidly a few times, inhales through his nose, and his jaw tightens. Arthur immediately curses himself for pushing too far, presuming too much, but Eames seems to see this in his face and hastens to reassure him.

"No, no, pet, it's a perfectly appropriate question. I just don't know... Er." He looks down, then seems to come to a decision, and takes a deep breath. "I'll be in London."

Arthur squints at him doubtfully. "You never go to London."

"I never work in London," Eames corrects him. He puts down his fork and folds his arms on the
table in front of him, obviously ill at ease. It's a rare tell from the overcautious thief and forger.

The followup question is obvious, but Arthur is a little wary of asking it, now. He steels himself, opening his mouth, but Eames beats him to it, his gaze flicking up to meet Arthur's, then away.

"Look, I promised my mum I'd keep any unsavory activities out of the city proper, keep the family respectable, you see? So I won't do a job there. But I, ah, I do have a two-month engagement that will keep me there through May. You could join me, if you'd like? I've a cozy little flat near Russell Square. Or rather, I don't, Jonathan Kent does." This all comes out in a rush, without Eames' customary self-possession. The poker chip has come out of his pocket, his fingers almost unconsciously flipping and revolving it.

This is more information about Eames' personal history than Arthur has gleaned in the entire time he's known the forger, and it's a bit dizzying. Honestly bewildered, he seizes on the last item. "Who's Jonathan Kent?"

Eames looks down. The poker chip stills. "A respected and very reclusive member of the Royal Shakespeare Company."

Arthur still isn't following. "Is he -- are you in a relationship?" He has a sinking feeling, thinking maybe that should have been the first question he asked.

"Oh, no, love. No. He's, that is, I'm, er, doing Petruchio. At the Globe. It's a four-week run, with four weeks of fittings and publicity and rehearsal beforehand." Almost as an afterthought, he adds, "I'm not in a relationship, with anyone. Haven't been since before the Fischer business." He reaches out tentatively and runs his thumb along the back of Arthur's hand.

Inception was more than two years ago, Arthur's mind recites automatically, before he can consider the other, more startling news Eames has just imparted. The skeptical, point man part of Arthur's brain tries to pick apart what he's learned, to try to figure out if Eames is fucking with him for some reason, but the latent, intuitive part -- his gut sense -- can see it all too clearly, the forger's innate talent for shape shifting and characterization, his intelligent eyes and rich expressive voice perfectly suited to breathe life into the clever, manipulative lover.

"I would love to see that," he says honestly, turning his palm up and grasping Eames' hand.

Relief is evident on Eames' features. "Front row tickets, love. Just say when. And, Arthur... literally no-one outside the two people sitting at this table knows there's any connection between Kent and Alexander Eames."

Arthur hears the unspoken warning. "No-one else will know," he assures him. "Make up whatever story you want and I'll stick to it. Just, not a tax attorney again. Please."

Eames nods agreeably, but his eyes gleam with devilry, and Arthur wonders uneasily whether he is going to have to study up on goat farming or mortuary science in order to fit whatever backstory he comes up with. Then something Eames said earlier comes back to him. "What does your family think you do?"

"A lot of touring shows," Eames admits. "It's easy enough to create playbills for obscure plays in small theatres in godforsaken parts of the world. She's not exactly delighted with my choice of career, so we don't discuss it much. I take roles in London when I can drop off the dreamwork radar." His smile is faint and fleeting and doesn't touch his eyes.

Arthur doesn't miss the singular feminine pronoun, or that smile, but he's feeling suddenly
overwhelmed and a bit shy about pursuing it further, so he changes the subject.

"Mine think I'm a courier for the Department of State," he offers.

Eames looks impressed, and Arthur feels gratified. He worked for a long time to develop his "job." He knows his parents are proud of his high-security-clearance position, and he feels bad about that, but it was the best way he could think of to explain both his travel and his inability to discuss what he does for a living.

A discreet alarm pings on Arthur's phone, and he sits up straighter. "It's ten fifteen," he tells Eames. "She should be at work by now, why don't you call?" He polishes off his scone and steals the last piece of bacon while Eames phones Erika's clinic and asks to speak to her about his skin condition. He quickly nods at Arthur, indicating that she's at work and that he's being connected. They both stand and prepare to leave as Eames greets Erika and explains that his rash is perfectly fine, actually, but that he is calling to see if she wants to join the two of them for drinks that evening. He concludes with "splendid, Cafe Havana then. We'll see you at eight. Ta, love," and hangs up.

"Oh, Arthur." Eames' eyes have lit up, and his voice is rapturous. "It has a cigar lounge. How lovely."

Arthur reflexively makes his most ferocious scowly face. He hopes Eames won't make him actively forbid cigars, but Arthur will not sleep in the same room with him if he persists in smoking or even standing near one of the vile things. Arthur will put up with a lot for the sake of his jobs, but he is inflexible on this point.

Eames heaves a disappointed sigh as they get into the car, but doesn't pursue the topic. However, he's unusually quiet as he drives, and Arthur tries to sneak a few peeks at his face to see if he can tell what's going through his mind. Eames doesn't look entirely happy, and Arthur doesn't think it's about the cigars. He hopes Eames isn't regretting taking Arthur into his confidence about the Royal Shakespeare.

Before he has finished running through the various possibilities in his head, Eames speaks up. "If I were in a relationship, I wouldn't have asked you to come out here with me, savvy?" His voice is clipped, but level; he's not trying to start a fight, but he's offended.

As an out bisexual, Arthur has been on the receiving end of similar assumptions more often than he likes. He frames his response carefully. "I didn't mean to imply that you would have. I was a little ... overwhelmed. And you should know, I don't fuck around either." He doesn't say, I apologize, but it's in his voice.

Eames glances at him and his face softens. "It was a lot to throw at you at once. I've been sitting on that for some time. Didn't know how you'd take it."

Arthur nods. "I meant what I said. I'd love to see the production, and see your place." It's not something he's used to doing, but he lets the warmth he's feeling bleed out into his words, and he's rewarded by the look on Eames' face. He doesn't meet Arthur's eyes, but he ducks his head briefly, pleased, as the corners of his mouth slowly curve up. He looks like a cat having its ears scratched. It's a good look on him, and Arthur resolves to try to elicit it more often.

They park around the corner from Erika's house, and casually amble down the sidewalk and up to her house, engaged in an amiable argument about whether to plan a safari or play golf the next day. It's academic, since they'll be heading back to Port Elizabeth instead, but it's what they would be doing if they were the tourists they are pretending to be. (The argument, not the golf; Arthur
has never seen the point of golf.) At the door, Eames politely rings the bell, using his broad body to shield Arthur's quick work with the locks -- they're laughably easy, and Arthur is concerned all over again for Erika's lack of attention to safety -- and they slip inside.

Arthur pulls out his camera and begins rapidly documenting each room in detail, moving from overall views down to details of the photos on the wall and the open magazine articles on the nightstand, while Eames wanders through the house and gathers a more impressionistic sense of the place and its inhabitant. He has his voice recorder out and narrates a steady flow of information, in English this time, the deep purr of his voice moving through the house oddly soothing to Arthur.

Arthur usually prefers his solitary, online information-gathering to this more risky, hands-on approach, but he finds that his companion's absolute competence and the seamless way their skills complement each other are making this outing surprisingly enjoyable.

He has just finished photographing the contents of her medicine cabinet when Eames glides silently into the bathroom behind him and places a warning finger over Arthur's lips. Arthur freezes, barely even breathing, and then he hears it too: a perfunctory knock at the front door. Eames breathes almost imperceptibly into his ear, "through the bedroom," and is off, moving quickly and stealthily. Arthur is briefly, fervently grateful that they are in the back of the house and not trapped in the kitchen or living room, and then he is following him noiselessly through the short hall, into Erika's bedroom, and out the open sliding door into the backyard.

Eames is crouched next to the door, and Arthur kneels behind him. They don't speak, both listening intently for any sound from inside the house. They have no way of knowing who has a key. To Arthur's extreme disappointment, he can hear multiple female voices in a language he doesn't recognize, and then the unmistakable sound of the front door opening.

Eames reaches forward and slowly, subtly, eases the sliding door mostly closed, then turns around and hisses, "house cleaners."

This is good news in the sense that the cleaners will presumably tidy away any traces of Arthur and Eames' presence. Arthur was careful not to disarrange anything, but he knows Eames had been prowling through her closet and her makeup drawer, and the cleaners will be less likely to notice anything out of place than Erika herself might. It's bad news in the sense that they may need to come back, and risk drawing any nosy neighbors' attention when they do.

He nudges Eames and nods toward the front gate. They shuffle, still crouched, below the living room windows and out the gate one at a time, then walk briskly in opposite directions around the block and meet back at the car.

Eames arrives first, and is pacing, flipping his poker chip, when Arthur gets there. His face is dark and malcontent, his eyes stormy. He drives just this side of recklessly until Arthur puts a firm hand on his knee and warns that they're attracting attention. Eames slows down, but remains silent and broody until they reach the hotel.

"Look," he finally says to Arthur. "Can you... will you fuck off for a while, come back in an hour or so? I'm not fit to be around."

Arthur considers this. "Are you asking for my sake or yours?"

"Mine," he admits, after a moment.

"Then yes. Will you be in the room?" Eames nods, and Arthur holds out his hand for the car
keys. The B&B is in a residential area, and it's warm enough out that he wants to sit in an air-conditioned cafe instead of walking around.

Eames drops them into his palm, and then abruptly grabs Arthur's arm and pulls him in for a rough, brief kiss. He still looks sullen and his body language remains angry and aggressive when he pulls away, but there's a sheepish, grateful twist to his lips when he looks at Arthur. Arthur squeezes his shoulder, says gently, "I'll see you in an hour," and opens the car door.

Arthur's not angry. He's an introvert, and his best relationships have been with partners who he can periodically ask to please go away and leave him alone and not take it personally. He knows Eames is upset with the circumstances, not with him, and if he can get that out of his system without taking it out on Arthur, so much the better for both of them.

He finds the cafe he was thinking of, splurges on a half dozen oysters and a glass of local wine, and gets a solid forty minutes of work done organizing and categorizing the photos of Erika's house. He emails them in a zip file to Kefilwe with some thoughts about particular products and textures she might include in her designs for Kluwers' apartment, subject to Eames' input. After a few minutes' deliberation, he adds that they won't be back until the evening tomorrow and they'll plan to regroup the morning after that, if she wants to take some time off for herself.

It's not lying, really; he and Eames haven't discussed plans for tomorrow at all, but he suspects that if he makes plans, Eames will go along with them. And Arthur wants to get some more of this newfound, primitive, lick-your-sweat-and-bite-your-neck lust out of his system before they have to be discreet around their architect.

Back at the B&B, when he opens the door to their room, Eames has the PASIV open and is running routine diagnostics. Two cannulas have been cleaned and set aside and a bottle of Somnacin is ready to tap. The forger has changed his clothes and his hair is damp. His hand weights are out again, and Arthur infers that he has worked out and showered. He looks much calmer, and his face is apologetic when he glances at Arthur.

Feeling bold, he crosses the room, stands behind Eames, puts his hands on those bulky shoulders, and draws them back against him. The muscles under his hands relax at the contact, and Eames tilts his head back into Arthur's hip. "You want to work on the forge?" Arthur asks him.

"That, and also my bollocks are feeling a bit flattened from yesterday and the day before, but I want to do bad things to you," Eames tells him candidly.

Huh. Arthur hasn't had much dream sex, but Eames is right; there's not only no refractory period in dreams, but there will be no chafing, no staining the sheets, no difficulty walking afterward. They'll probably both wake up with real-world erections, but this way they can have all the fun of a prolonged, decadent session in the dream and a quick, inartful orgasm up top afterward.

He lets his face light up, leans over, mouths at Eames' neck, breathes into his ear. "Yes, yes and oh yes," he murmurs.
Arthur volunteers to be the dreamer -- sometimes Eames' dreamscapes, the ones that haven't been meticulously planned by an architect beforehand, are a little too vivid and saturated, making him dizzy and overstimulated. Eames will also, at some point, be working on his forge and not focusing on maintaining the dreamscape, so it just makes sense.

Besides, Arthur has an idea.

They lock all of the doors and windows, set up the PASIV in the middle of the bed, and lie down on either side of it. There's something incongruent to Arthur in the way they are arranging themselves so deliberately, so decorously, for the purpose of going under to have a private orgy. He feels absurdly expectant and nervous, the way he used to feel in junior high when someone at a party would inevitably propose a game of Spin the Bottle. He hasn't felt that way in years, the pleasant frisson of knowing that something is going to happen, anxiety and anticipation all knotted together.

He may not know exactly what will happen down there, but he knows it will be hot. Arthur has Eames' measure now, knows that he needs to hear verbal confirmation of the effect he's having on Arthur, that he wants his painstakingly crafted physique to be ogled and admired, that he enjoys biting and leaving marks, that he likes to see his come on Arthur's face, watch his fingers and his cock in Arthur's mouth, Arthur's ass. Sex with Eames is just a little dirtier, a little more raunchy, more jaw-droppingly lewd than Arthur has had in a while with anyone, man or woman. It may make him blush, but he finds himself craving it.

Eames clears his throat, and Arthur realizes his finger has been hovering over the PASIV button for several seconds now. He pushes it.

It takes a moment for their surroundings to sink in, but when they do, he hears the laughter in Eames' voice, even though he can't quite see his face. "Cheeky, darling!" His voice echoes slightly off of the tiles.

Arthur allows himself what he admits is probably a smirk. It's okay, Eames can't quite see his face, either. But then Eames is up and moving closer to him, emerging out of the clouds of steam. He's already abandoned the towel Arthur had dreamed him into, and is delectably naked. Tiny droplets of water are already settling on his skin and hair, and Arthur is reminded of the beaded sweat on Eames' shirtless form that had so galvanized him just two days previous.

He walks straight up to Arthur, crowding into his space where he sits on the lower of the two tiled bench formations. Arthur leans back against the upper tier, looking up into Eames' face, which is still broadly grinning down at him. He has intentionally made the seating extra deep, so when he leans back, there is room for Eames to do precisely what he does, which is sink down and straddle Arthur's lap. From this vantage point, Arthur gets an up close view of deliciously articulated chest and abdominal muscles, and his hands move of their own accord to curve around and cup Eames' exquisitely molded ass.

Eames loses his smile, his lips taking on a fuller, more sensual shape, as he studies Arthur's face and naked chest. His pupils visibly dilate, and his hands stray to Arthur's hair, then wrap themselves carefully around Arthur's neck, before he leans down and brushes Arthur's lips with that beautifully shaped mouth of his. And now, oh, it's on.

The tiny room is hot and moist, the steam billowing around them lending an exotic, languorous
quality to their kiss. Eames likes to hold Arthur's face with one hand, keeping him there, immobile, prey for his sultry lips and teasing tongue while his other hand strokes Arthur's arm, skates across his nipple. His cock stirs against Arthur's belly, tentative flickers at first, then stronger, more insistent surges as the kiss deepens. Arthur's own cock, still concealed beneath his towel, responds in kind. He tilts his head back, resting it on the tile behind him, as Eames mouths and nips at his neck, his breath hot momentarily in Arthur's ear before his tongue trails lightly along its whorls and crevices.

At the same time, Arthur's own hands are busy, gripping Eames' rock-solid bicep, scratching through his hair and down his neck, stroking feather-light over the curve of his cheekbone and jaw, before Eames dips his head and captures Arthur's fingers in his mouth. He settles his teeth just hard enough to leave a mark, then soothes with his lips, suckling contentedly while his eyes bore into Arthur's and his hips nudge forward. Arthur's other hand settles on Eames' flank, encouraging him to rock closer as Eames continues mouthing at Arthur's fingers, making deep, wordless hums of appreciation and hunger.

Arthur can't sit still beneath him. His own hips shift up against Eames' naked thighs, a pleasantly anticipatory ache settling into his balls. He leans forward slightly, tongue flicking out at the perfectly round, pink nipple in front of him before his lips settle around it, teeth just touching it. He is gratified when Eames shudders and arches slightly.

He pulls his fingers from Eames' mouth, tilting his head up, and Eames takes the hint, hungrily bending to seal their lips together again. His tongue flickers into Arthur's mouth, hot and silky, one hand cupping Arthur's jaw almost delicately, the other flat against Arthur's chest just over his heart.

Eames' mouth -- that mouth -- has left Arthur's fingers are slick and wet, and he has a destination in mind. The kiss breaks momentarily as Eames takes a sharp breath, Arthur's finger teasing the tight puckered flesh. Arthur takes his time, gently stroking, encouraging the muscle to relax and all the sensitive nerve endings there to wake up, before pressing in.

He licks Eames' neck, tasting salt and the condensed steam, and burrows his finger deeper inside as Eames writhes and whispers how fucking fit Arthur is, what a filthy slag he will be for Arthur, how long he's been waiting for Arthur to bend him over. How he wants Arthur to fuck him for hours until they're both raw and can't come any more.

The spit on Arthur's finger isn't quite enough to slick the way, and it's a tight fit and must be hurting Eames a little, but he doesn't appear to care. He can't seem to decide whether to press forward against Eames' belly, or back against his hand, and they rock together a little arrhythmically, panting, biting and licking anywhere their mouths can find purchase on each other. Eames balances one hand on the tile behind Arthur's head, and the other slips down between them and pulls Arthur's erect length up to rub against his own, wrapping his big hand around both of them as best he can.

Arthur doesn't know whether to believe the words that are still tumbling from Eames' mouth, about how he's fucked his own hand imagining it was Arthur's, how he adores watching Arthur bite his beautiful crooked upper lip, how he's wanted to get his hands and mouth on Arthur's lovely little arse for years now. Arthur knows very well that what comes out of peoples' mouths in bed isn't necessarily true or intentional. And he's been in dreamscapes where Eames has seduced the mark, not to mention been the target of Eames' hyperbolic flirtation and condescension a number of times himself. He thinks by now he can recognize the subtle tells that indicate Eames is putting on an act: his eyes go a shade too wide, his brow lifts just a fraction, something about his lips gets artificial, and his voice gets a particular tone in it.
But Arthur's not seeing or hearing any of those telltale signs now; all he sees when he looks up into Eames' eyes is truth, and hunger, and his deep gravelly voice is increasingly wrecked and unmodulated.

Eames' upper hand abruptly reaches, and he holds a bottle of oil that hadn't existed five seconds before, fumbling at it one-handed until the top pops open, and then he pours it generously onto both of them. Arthur withdraws his finger, laughing a little at Eames' whine as he does so. He liberally coats his hand in the oil, and returns to his previous occupation, slipping in a second finger, and oh, this is better, this is fucking ecstatic now, their heated skin slick against each other, the tight ring of flesh slippery and alive as it clutches at his fingers.

Eames doesn't wait for Arthur to open him fully, but lifts up and holds Arthur's cock steady as he lines up and writhes his way slowly down until Arthur's bottomed out in him. God, he's tight, slick and hot and close around Arthur. As Eames moves on him, Arthur becomes aware of his own voice, raspy and breathless, saying "god" and "Alec" and "fuck" and "yes, YES."

Eames balances himself again on the upper tier of tile and locks his eyes with Arthur's again. Maddeningly slowly, he lifts and drops his hips, over and over, Arthur's slick cock gliding in him, his other hand pulling at his own hard length at the same pace.

Arthur loses track of time entirely.

With the steam all around them, all he can see and hear is Eames. He feels amazingly connected to Eames this way, in the intense privacy where literally no-one exists but the two of them. He doesn't want to come, wants to prolong the searing pleasure and the intimacy of this moment. His mind flies, unbidden, to the story he'd told Erika, of being Tony Levinson and in love with Stephen Lange. How they met in a room just like this, how they live together and adore each other and wake up every day together, how they're planning their wedding. For a few seconds he lets himself just be that man, pretending that's who they are and what they are doing here.

As an orgasm delay technique, it is a spectacular failure. He feels abruptly like his body is on a freight train hurtling toward the edge of a cliff, and there are no brakes on this thing.

Eames looks surprised as Arthur surges up into him, gripping his hips and forcing him down, as fast and brutal as Arthur can make it from his seated position, but he smoothly adapts his own pace to keep up. Arthur feels abruptly half-suffocated with the steam and the heat and Eames' mouth coming down hard on his, claiming it and bruising it. He strains to last but it's only minutes before he's burrying his teeth in a thick bicep with a deep primal groan, as his whole body shudders and his mind empties along with his cock.

Eames waits until Arthur is finished and then jerks his own orgasm out in hot spurts onto Arthur's chest before collapsing his full weight onto Arthur's lap.

Arthur lets out a startled, inarticulate "ooof" and shoves halfheartedly and ineffectually at the heavy, inert body above him. The shove turns into a caress, though, and Eames nuzzles at Arthur's neck before withdrawing with a grunt. He slowly maneuvers himself onto the floor at Arthur's feet, his heavy head resting contentedly on Arthur's knee. Arthur drowsily combs his fingers through Eames' hair, his elevated heartbeat gradually slowing, and then he remembers.

"Through the door," he murmurs. "Private room, 's a hot tub and a shower, and a lounge to lie on."

Eames cranes his head backward and looks up at him, delighted and fond. "You think of everything, darling," he says approvingly.
Inertia is strong, but Arthur is starting to feel overcooked in the relentless steam. The thought of a cool shower and the soft cushion waiting for them is enough to get him unsteadily to his feet and moving into the other room. When he opens the door, the draft of cooler air on his oversensitive penis wakes him up again, and he rinses quickly in lukewarm water before wrapping himself in an enormous fluffy towel and reclining on the lounge. He knows his skin is pink and blotchy with heat and that his hair is clumped and straggly, but Eames doesn't seem to mind.

Eames looks unfairly gorgeous this way, Arthur thinks, flushed and sensual and loose-limbed and dreamy-eyed, with a clear impression of Arthur's teeth demarcated in red on his arm, an erotic pop of color against the black ink. He lies next to Arthur with one arm behind his head, presses his nose into Arthur's shoulder, pokes a finger into Arthur's bellybutton, trails a hand over Arthur's hip bones. Eames' skin is hot and moist, the hair on his chest and legs and groin wiry and delightfully scratchy against Arthur's bare flesh; Arthur slowly rakes his fingers through it, relishing the texture.

As they'd planned, the dream refractory period is brief, and their casual petting and nuzzling evolves into Eames rolling Arthur over and surprising him into coming again with nothing more than his skillful pickpocket's hand wrapped around Arthur's cock and his equally talented tongue lapping hot and velvety at Arthur's asshole. Eames wants his cock sucked afterward, and to come in long white-hot spatters all over Arthur's face and neck, and Arthur is perfectly okay with both of those things.

And then they have to abandon the sticky, besmeared lounge to soak in the hot tub, only to begin all over again, their shared gaze open and awed and ardent, unable to stop touching each other, moving inexorably from sated relaxation to urgent hunger.

After minutes or hours or possibly days, Arthur finds himself floating on his back with his toes in Eames' mouth and three thick, oiled fingers curling expertly inside him. He writhes and shudders blissfully in the hot water, watching Eames' face crinkle into an affectionate smile as he drops a kiss on the top of Arthur's foot. When Eames tugs him down into his lap and kisses him deep and yearning, his thick cock-head pressing at Arthur's hole, Arthur is more than ready to take him in.

He bottoms out in a slow easy glide, luxuriating in the stretch and then the exquisite sensation of being completely filled. He closes his eyes and fucks down onto Eames' hard shaft again and again, savoring the sublimity of their most intimate flesh joining and parting and slip-sliding together. When he opens his eyes again, Eames' head is thrown back, the thick column of his throat working and his lips trembling as he pants out soft agonized breaths, Arthur's name, and half-vocalized obscenities. His big hands cradle Arthur's hips, urging him faster and harder.

Arthur leans forward to kiss his neck and suddenly oh god, here it is, that perfect synchrony of their thrusting bodies, a cascading, accelerating ecstasy of motion. They rock together blindly, urgently, riding the wave of escalating sensation together, Arthur's cock pressed between their bellies, Eames balls-deep and hard as steel inside him. Arthur comes with Eames' tongue in his mouth, Eames' powerful arms supporting him and cradling him; Eames' whole body shuddering and contracting under him as if he's being torn apart.

After, he feels utterly at peace, his body relaxed and fucked-out and glowing, even as he craves more contact with Eames' skin, Eames' mouth, Eames' warm bulky body. Pain may be in the mind, but so is pleasure, and Arthur thinks possibly he has never experienced so much of it with a single person.

(Somehow, they never do get around to working on the forge.)
I'll Let You Know When You Should Stop

When they wake, Arthur sends Eames back under again, alone. He knows they won't get anything done if he goes back under with him; he can check on the forge later.

He sighs when he discovers that one of his dream orgasms has triggered the real thing -- it's happened before, and surely won't be the last time -- and hurries to clean himself up before he has to face the forger's amused commentary. He's coming to accept that there is no malice behind Eames' habitual teasing, but Eames is too quick with a quip most of the time, and too observant all of the time, and Arthur doesn't want to be surprised in the middle of a job or in mixed company some day with a veiled reference to coming in his pants.

Fifteen minutes later, Eames, who has not suffered the same indignity, is thoroughly delighted to receive a quick hand job as his kick. He doesn't comment on Arthur's change of clothes, and he reports that he's pleased with the progress of the forge.

Kefilwe has responded to Arthur's email to let him know that she will take some time off and see them the day after tomorrow, and Arthur relates this to Eames, trying not to let his excitement (another night they can sleep together) show on his face.

Eames is not so reticent, and the glee on his face and in his voice when he leans in to nip at Arthur's ear and promise "something special for you then, pet" makes Arthur glad.

He spends the afternoon finishing his financial research and analysis of Kluwers. As he thought, there's nothing that indicates he's the leak their employer is looking for.

Eames takes the car and visits several shops to track down the products Erika uses, as well as a late lunch. He's happy and outrageously handsy and affectionate when he returns, but agreeably redirects his energy into researching the publicly available information about their next mark.

The Kings' goalie, Matheiu du Toit, is a tall, dark, muscular twenty-three year old of Samoan and Afrikaans heritage. He is much more attractive than Kluwers. Arthur is surprised to feel a twinge of jealousy when he hears Eames purr, "Well, hello there" into his laptop screen. He looks up, and the appreciative look on Eames' face as he flips through du Toit's Facebook page deepens the twinge into a pang.

"He's a thief," Arthur reminds Eames shortly.

Eames turns a level gaze on Arthur. "So are you. And I could look at you all day, but you asked me to do this instead."

Oh. Well, Arthur doesn't have a response to that. He returns to his own work, and is grateful that if Eames continues to admire du Toit's impressive musculature and gorgeous dark eyes, he has enough tact to do so silently.

Eames is less bossy this time as they prepare to meet Erika; he lets Arthur dress himself without interference, and he only takes a few minutes in front of the mirror to settle into his Stephen Lange persona.

Arthur uses the same time to sit on the bed, close his eyes, and try to refresh his mental sense of Tony Levinson: his dull but lucrative job, his upcoming wedding, his carefree urban lifestyle, his handsome and infuriating fiance. When he opens them again, Eames doesn't bother trying to hide his expression of approval. He laughs and holds his hand out to help Arthur up.
"There you are, my love. Te adoro, Anton."

It takes Arthur a minute to place the reference, then he snorts. "Doesn't she say that over his dead body at the end? Should I be concerned?"

"I'm marrying a cynic," Eames complains, but his eyes are twinkling and he wraps his arms around Arthur and gently nips at his neck. He's wearing that black t-shirt and tight pinstriped pants again, and Arthur cops a feel of his ass, because he can.

Erika is waiting at the bar when they arrive, and greets them both with a hug. She badgers them good-naturedly into trying the prawns in chocolate sauce, and makes fun of "Stephen" for ordering a dry sherry instead of the appallingly fruity rum concoction she's already halfway through.

Arthur thinks unhappily of the Somnacin still clearing from his system, but it's his turn to get Erika drunk tonight. He exchanges glances with Eames, steels himself, and orders what she's having. It's surprisingly tasty, and hits him like a brick wall.

The prawns are exactly as bizarre as he suspected they would be, but the steak is excellent, and so is the bite of chicken Eames offers from his plate. Erika beams at them as Arthur gamely feeds him a bite of steak in return, and Eames grins slyly at her.

Arthur tells her how beautiful the coastline was this morning, and how much he enjoyed the restaurants she had recommended for breakfast and dinner. She is pleased, and tells them stories about some of her patients, employing amusing pseudonyms.

She is on her third drink, with Arthur matching her, when she suddenly picks up Eames' right hand and holds it in front of her consideringly. And then she asks him a question, and Arthur shakes his head, because he can't possibly have heard right. Did she just call Eames a pterodactyl?

Eames seems to understand her, however. His face goes wooden, but he responds, "Yes, post-axial, as a child. You can see," his voice takes on a bitter tone, "that the surgery had some unfortunate complications." He indicates his crooked pinky finger.

"I thought that might be it," she says complacently, oblivious to his change in demeanor. "It's too bad, the scar itself is barely noticeable."

His face is a welter of emotions. Arthur thinks that shame, and an odd defiance, are predominant. Eames' voice is a little thick as he asks Erika how she knows so much about it. He studiously avoids looking at Arthur.

Arthur may be accused of being an emotionless robot at times, but he's not stupid; he reaches out under the table and squeezes Eames' knee, leaving his hand there. He's relieved to see his face relax slightly at the touch.

"I did a volunteer rotation at a clinic in Cameroon when I was just out of nursing school. It's actually much more common in ethnic blacks than it is in Caucasians," she says brightly. "We did quite a few of them in the six months I was there."

Arthur has no idea what they're talking about. They've worked together so often that of course he's noticed Eames' gimpy little finger, despite his trick of holding his whole hand half-closed most of the time, but it has never seemed to inhibit his dexterity and he'd just always assumed it was an injury from the job. Eames has never asked Arthur about the burn mark below his ear, or the scar that runs out his right sleeve down to the tip of his thumb, and likewise, Arthur hasn't asked Eames about the source of his damaged finger or the scar in his eyebrow.
His consternation must show on his face, or else Erika is finally picking up on Eames' uneasiness, or both, because she abruptly stops talking and gives Eames a questioning look.

Eames shakes his head, answers her silent inquiry. "He doesn't know." He doesn't look too eager to enlighten Arthur, either.

"Your Stephen was born with an extra finger," Erika explains. "It's called polydactyly."

Eames still refuses to meet his eyes, but he mutters, "It's common in cats."


Eames does look at him now, and so does Erika. They have identical expressions of confusion on their faces.

"My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die?" Arthur tries. They exchange glances that seem to say that Arthur is talking gibberish. Abruptly he remembers that neither of them grew up in America in the 1980's. "It's a movie," he says, a little lamely. "Never mind."

Eames seizes on this chance to change the subject. "What movie is that, darling?" The expression on his face is still that strange mixture of shame and defiance, but his hand has slipped under the table to twine through Arthur's.

Arthur can feel his ears burning. "The Princess Bride. Cary Elwes and Robin Wright and Fred Savage before he got funny-looking. We'll have to watch it, back home," he tells Eames. He can almost see the two of them in their non-existent San Francisco condo, curled up on a cream leather sofa with two fluffy dogs drowsing at their feet.

"Robin Wright," Eames muses. "Now there is a lovely woman."

Erika nods agreement. "She is beautiful, isn't she? And Cary Elwes, he was in that Saw movie. Johan loves it, but I couldn't watch it. You Americans and your torture movies," she frowns at Arthur.

He shakes his head. "I don't watch them and I don't make them! And," he points at Eames, "Stephen will be American too pretty soon, and then you can blame him as well."

Eames is more than happy to take that topic and run with it, waxing rhapsodic about their upcoming nuptials, and what he will wear, and where they ordered their rings from. Arthur smiles and nods and laughs, and holds Eames' hand, and tries not to look gobsmacked at the sheer amount of detail unfolding in front of him. Eames sounds like he goes to exotic beach weddings every other weekend and moonlights as a wedding planner in his spare time.

Erika eats it all up, making all of the appropriate "aww" and "oooh" noises, asking after their music arrangements and attendants and if they are writing their own vows. She gets a glum little look on her face after a bit, though, and Eames neatly turns the conversation to her own relationship again.

He won't leave his wife to live with her, she tells them. She wants children, a family life, but doesn't know when or if it will ever happen for her. She's sick thinking of him with -- his wife, other women, but what can she do? She loves him.

She spills it all before them, unselfconsciously, and Eames pats her arm and makes sympathetic faces and shakes his head sorrowfully at the right times.

Arthur lets his mind wander. He wonders briefly if he should stop doing extractions and just hire
himself out as a queer detective. Eames can come with him and between the two of them they can ferret out any secret from almost any woman, just by being adorably gay! He's not too old to twinkle it up a little, he thinks.

He realizes he's a bit drunk.

Erika doesn't seem to have noticed his lapse in concentration, but Eames squeezes his hand just short of painfully, and when Arthur looks at him, he raises a meaningful eyebrow. The directive is clear, and Arthur forces himself to shake off his reverie and participate in the conversation.

Erika is being coy about what Kluwers' job is, and since Eames hasn't pushed her for specifics, Arthur doesn't either, but he's finding it harder tonight to pretend that his knowledge of her situation is limited to what she's told them. He declines a fourth round when the server inquires, but Erika accepts, and it looks like they will be driving her home again.

It's obvious that last night wasn't a one-time bender for her. She drinks steadily, clearly uncomfortable when her glass is empty. Their server, dollar signs in his eyes, hovers nearby to refill it. She's soon on her fifth cocktail, and Arthur can't keep up. The sweet fruit juices and the strong rum are making him feel dizzy and a little ill, but she keeps going. Her mascara is starting to smear, and she rests her head on Eames' shoulder more and more often.

He drinks several glasses of water, and orders dessert, even though he's not particularly hungry anymore, to try to give himself some time to sober up. Eames declines, but Erika orders a rum cake, and Arthur starts to feel bad again about what they are doing. He keeps a friendly, cheerful demeanor up, though, and allows himself to freely touch and nuzzle and ogle Eames, and doesn't let his discomfort show on his face.

They argue amiably with Erika about the bill, and about letting them drive her home, and she lets them win with barely a struggle. She throws an arm around each of them as they leave, and they both support her, exchanging glances (troubled on Arthur's part, thoughtful on Eames') over her head.

Outside, Eames helps her into the backseat of the car, and then nuzzles Arthur's ear, whispering "Did you bring the camera?" Arthur nods silently and allows himself to be tucked into the passenger seat. Eames asks politely for directions, but Erika is rapidly becoming monosyllabic, and so he and Arthur pretend to reconstruct the route to her house from the previous night. By the time they arrive, she is very nearly passed out.

Eames searches her tiny purse for a key, then gently maneuvers her out of the car and up to her door. He insists that she unlock the door herself, and after a few tries, she manages to do so. He helps her down the hall and into the bathroom, sending Arthur an urgent look that Arthur is not too inebriated to interpret. He whips out the camera and silently, rapidly finishes his inventory of her kitchen, her bookshelves, the opened mail on her counter. He can hear her throwing up into the toilet, and Eames in the room with her, soothing her.

He hears the toilet flush, and then Eames' deep voice calling for "Tony." He tucks the camera away and goes to see what Eames wants.

Eames is holding Erika's hair back from her face as she kneels on the bathroom floor, and the smell of vomit in the room is overpowering. "Get us a glass of water, love, and some aspirin. I'm going to help her to bed."

Arthur fills a glass in the kitchen sink, and after a moment's thought, finds a carafe and fills that up too. He pauses on the way back to open the bathroom window and search her cabinets for aspirin.
and incidentally, to take a few more quick photos of her shower products, in case Eames needs them later.

In the bedroom, Eames has Erika stretched out on the bed. He has taken her shoes off, and is studying her, obviously trying to decide what to do about her dress. Her eyes are closed and she is whimpering softly.

"Here, sweetheart, have some water," he urges her. "Sit up for me, yeah?" She does, and drinks about half a glass. "Now, do you want to sleep in your clothes?" She shakes her head, her eyes closed, and makes a fumbling attempt at the zipper in the back of her dress.

Eames meets Arthur's eyes. He looks both concerned and resigned, and Arthur knows he is thinking of potential repercussions from helping her like this. It's not an ideal situation for either of them to be in, if she wakes tomorrow and decides that, queer or not, their intentions were less than pure with regard to her person.

Ironically, she's safer from him, at least, than she has ever been. Although he agrees with Eames that she's an attractive woman, he feels exactly zero desire for her in this condition. He can tell that Eames doesn't either. Eames mulls it over for another moment, then shrugs.

"All right, I'm going to unzip you halfway down, and you can go ahead and finish up when Tony and I leave, all right?" She nods, barely, and he carefully unzips down to the small of her back. "There's water and painkillers on the bedstand next to you." She nods again and begins to slip the sleeves of her dress off her shoulders. Arthur tactfully withdraws to her living room.

He hears Eames asking if she wants a nightdress, and drawers opening and closing (clever Eames, he's multitasking), then the light in her room switches off, and a gentler, dimmer light comes on; her bedside lamp, he thinks. Eames follows him a moment later, and they pause, listening, but there is no further sound from her room.

He leans in close to Eames, breathes into his ear, "I have what I need from here. Are we done?" Eames thinks for a second, heaves a small regretful sigh, and decides he has enough information. They leave a light on in her entry, and close the door behind them.

In the car, Eames is quiet. Arthur guesses what is on his mind. "You can't save them all," he tells him gently.

"I don't suppose they'd miss him much if he were to disappear suddenly," Eames says darkly.

Arthur snorts. "At least wait until after the job is over."

"What they all see in him..." Eames shakes his head, his brows drawing down and his jaw steeling.

"Look," Arthur reminds him. "You still have to go under and seduce him, ok? Don't ruminate on it. It won't help you."

Eames bites his lip. "She --"

"Deserves better," Arthur finishes for him. "I agree. They both do. I hate seeing her drink like that as much as you do."

"Do you? I wonder," Eames says bitterly.

Arthur isn't sure how to respond to that. He sidetracks instead. "You were good with her in
Eames sighs and drums his fingers on the steering wheel. He doesn't look at Arthur, and for a while Arthur doesn't think he's going to say anything.

When he speaks, his eyes remain on the road, and his voice is flat and empty. "My mother drinks. To excess. Always has done. I took care of her, mostly. My father is verbally abusive, and mum put up with it for too many years, and I never understood why. We... pretended, all of us. That everything was fine. When I was seventeen, he went after her again. I broke his nose and his collarbone, and left the house. I haven't seen him since."

Arthur is struck dumb momentarily, not by the content of the revelation -- he's suspected that something like this underlies his fixation on bad relationships -- but by the fact that Eames is letting his guard down, letting Arthur see into his past. And that's on top of the unwilling disclosure of his pterodactyl-whatever, too, he realizes.

Impulsively, he takes Eames' left hand, brings it to his mouth, bites it gently, holds it to his cheek, and presses his lips to it. He doesn't want to say anything, for fear it would be the wrong thing, but the gesture seems to be sufficient.

"Thank you, darling," Eames says softly.

"Yeah." Arthur's voice is a bit rough, and he clears his throat. "I'm sorry."

"Long time ago." He shrugs faintly. "I just -- it's hard to see young, lovely women with so much to offer, wasting their lives with blokes like that."

Arthur nods silent agreement. He doesn't let go of Eames' hand. They pull up to the B&B, and Eames turns off the car, but doesn't move to get out of it. He turns to Arthur, his handsome features shadowed in the dim illumination from the streetlight.

"I haven't made the best partner myself, Arthur," he confesses, his voice low and husky. "This work... it's... Well. Doesn't lend itself to relationships, what with the odd hours and the travel and the secrecy. You know it. I've made some bad choices, trying to have the work and a lover too. There's things I regret doing. Saying."

He's not sure exactly what Eames is trying to tell him, under the surface words, but he can definitely relate to the dilemma. "I haven't had much success with that, either," he admits. "A couple of friends with benefits situations, and then those years on the run with Cobb, there wasn't really an opportunity to get close to anyone. It's been a long time since I've had an actual relationship and not just a fuckbuddy during a job."

Eames looks pensive. "I'd still like you to come stay with me, after," he says tentatively.

"I want that, too," Arthur reassures him immediately. "I really do."

Eames' face brightens, and he leans over and kisses Arthur, long and slow and sweet, until Arthur pulls back breathlessly. "Why don't we take this upstairs, where there's no gear shift in the way," he suggests.

"Righto," Eames agrees, and strokes his hand quickly up Arthur's thigh to his groin, giving a wicked chuckle when Arthur reaches over and socks him lightly on his bicep. "Oi, watch it," he protests, but he's smiling, and his eyes are relaxed and happy again.

Arthur can't wait to get him upstairs.
"Do you ever..." Arthur trails off.

They are sprawled on their gargantuan bed in the B&B, the room dark except for moonlight flooding through the open windows. Arthur has had the presence of mind to drop a towel over the wet spot so they don't have to avoid it all night, and he is on his back, long legs crossed, his hands behind his head, staring at the shadows on the ceiling.

Eames is curled on his left side, facing Arthur. His eyes are closed, and his left hand is tucked under his cheek on the pillow. His right hand is idly stroking Arthur's chest and belly, ruffling the hair there. It's not a sexual touch, just a soothing animal contact.

He looks mostly asleep, but the rhythm of his breathing and an indefinable aura of energy thrumming through his body tells Arthur that he is wide awake, his quick, labyrinthine mind at work on something -- he can't tell what about; Eames could be composing a song, or plotting an assassination.

"Hmm?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

Eames opens one eye, regards him. "You'll have to pardon me for not believing that," he says dryly.

Arthur regrets bringing it up. "It wasn't anything, really."

"Don't make me torture it out of you, darling," Eames warns him lightly. His fingers trail down Arthur's side and up toward his underarm, and Arthur flinches reflexively. He hates being tickled; it's so undignified.

"I just --" The fingers stop moving. He sighs and goes all in before they can resume. "Tony, and Stephen. What they have, you know? The condo, and the dogs, and the not living out of suitcases. Do you ever want that?"

He's half afraid he's revealing too much, and half hopeful that Eames' response will put them on the same page. He doesn't know exactly what page he's on himself, only that he wants to know he's not on it alone.

Eames is silent, thinking, for a moment. Then he shakes his head slowly. "The love? The trust they have in each other? Yes, I want that. But the stability, the dogs..." He pauses. "Well, no, dogs would be brilliant. I adore dogs. Big strong lovely dogs who like to wrestle." The half-smile that has crept onto his lips fades with his next words. "The house, the jobs, the mortgage, living in the same city year in and year out, though -- no. It's not for me. The default world moves too slowly. I get too restless, indulge in destructive behaviors."

It's about what Arthur expected, even if -- he realizes suddenly -- it's not what he wanted to hear.

"You don't want it either, darling, even if you think you do," Eames says shrewdly, watching him. "You love the flexibility, the possibility the work offers, and you'll take all the inconvenience, the nomadic lifestyle, if you can just keep dreaming. Dreamshare gives you an outlet for your latent creativity, Arthur, that you aren't comfortable expressing while you're awake. It fascinates you, inspires you, like nothing else you've experienced. You couldn't just walk away from that. You'd
be desperately unhappy in no time at all if you tried."

"Don't -- I'm not one of your marks, don't psychoanalyze me," Arthur says sharply, sitting up. A misplaced burst of modesty makes him pull the blanket up over his hips, and he pulls his knees up, wrapping his arms around them.


Arthur holds up a hand, and Eames stops there. "I'm drunk," he responds in a low voice. "Just, forget I said anything. Please."

Eames is silent, and Arthur risks a look out of the corner of his eye. He hasn't moved, his face still pillowed easily on his hand, but both eyes are open and his gaze is steady on Arthur's face. After a moment, the hand that had been stroking Arthur reaches out, tugs insistently until he lies spooned with his back to Eames' front, and pulls the blanket up over both of them. A heavy arm wraps itself around Arthur's chest, a thick hand twines into his own, and a soft pair of lips brush the back of his neck.

"You can have both, you know," Eames' deep, husky voice rumbles into his ear. "You don't need the nine-to-five or the mortgage to have... a lover. A partner."

"I already have a mortgage, actually," Arthur says defensively. He does. It's on a small, modern townhouse in southern California. It's where he stores his car and it's helping one of his identities establish a credit history. He also has a flat in Dublin where he keeps most of his clothes and books, and a tiny, anonymous apartment in Tokyo where he keeps almost nothing at all, but he doesn't know if Eames knows about those.

The warm body nestled behind him quakes a few times in a silent chuckle. "And you secretly yearn to be a tax lawyer? Go to work in the same place at the same time every day, come home, make dinner, watch tv, wither away inside?"

He's right, although Arthur is too stubborn to admit it to him. He arches his neck back and up, and Eames huffs another laugh out, obediently pressing his lips to the top of Arthur's spine and the nape of his neck. Arthur melts into the touch and closes his eyes. He can tell, though, that Eames is still waiting for a response, and regretfully he opens them again.

"I don't know how," he admits in a low voice. It's not a complete thought, but he knows Eames will know what he means. I don't know how to do this with you, I don't know how to have a partner, I don't know how to make things work between two people who are on opposite sides of the globe more often than not.

"Nor I, pet," Eames whispers. "...You said you trust me."

"I do trust you," Arthur confirms.

"And I you. That's a start."

They lie quietly, feeling each other breathe, enjoying the warmth where their bare skin touches, a contrast to the cool night air around them.

A thought occurs to Arthur. He rubs his thumb along Eames' crooked little finger where it's clasped to Arthur's chest. "The medical thing. Your history. Is that what you didn't want me to know?"

Eames takes a deep breath, nodding into the back of Arthur's neck. "It's a deformity," he says
bitterly. "My great-gran's aunt was burned for it, for a witch. They removed the sixth finger, but
damaged this one in the process."

"It's just you," Arthur shrugs. "No more deformed than my weird ears."

"I like your ears," Eames protests. "They're so... delicate and incongruous and uncontrollable."

Arthur frowns and elbows him gently in mock anger. It's true; that's exactly what has always
bothered him about his ears. He can gel down his curls and wax his chest and run until his suits fit
the way he wants them to, but his ears defy intervention.

"I always thought your hand had some particularly badass story behind it," he tells Eames. "From
when Molinari caught you after the Williams job, or something like that."

"She surprised me," Eames admits. "Nobody's ever figured it out before."

"You should come up with a story," Arthur says, and yawns before he can catch himself. "Siberian
electro-magnetic nerve torture that you heroically withstood until the rest of your team escaped to
safety."

This time the laugh is more of a snort. "And I told Cobb that you lacked imagination." Eames'
tone is warm and fond, and Arthur can feel his smile against Arthur's neck.

"I do," he says sleepily. "'S part of why I keep calling you. We balance each other."

The arm around his chest tightens briefly. "Yes, we do. Now go to sleep, Arthur."

He drifts off, his last waking sensation Eames' warm breath gentle on his neck.
Arthur can't breathe. There's a weight on his chest, pressing down, down, and his lungs can't inflate, his breath catches in his throat. He can't see anything. It's hot, too, he realizes; sweat prickles painfully on his brow, under his arms, drips down his neck. He's being pinned down, held in place in some lightless, timeless place of torture, and can't free himself.

Panic and adrenaline flood him and he heaves and thrashes, trying miserably to escape the suffocating weight.

All of a sudden it's gone, he's free, he's made it, and -- "Sodding hell, Arthur," a familiar voice grumbles, groggily, and the surface he's lying on quakes as the warm sleepy weight next to him disappears, resettling itself back down again a few feet away.

The world spins alarmingly and then abruptly resolves itself. It's barely light out, and he can dimly make out Eames, cocooning himself in blankets and irritably burrowing into the other pillow before stilling and beginning to breathe deeply and regularly again.

The sweat on Arthur's skin begins cooling rapidly and uncomfortably away from the warmth of another body, and he inches closer to Eames again and pulls the blanket over himself, careful not to disarrange the pile Eames has twisted around himself.

"Sorry," he whispers, although he knows Eames can't hear him. And it was his fault, anyway, snuggling up to Arthur like that with his furnace heat and his heavy arms.

He manages to doze off again briefly, but the sun is coming up and Arthur's mind, once roused, has never been very good at remaining still. Against his will, it starts ticking off to-do items, reviewing the material they've gathered on Kluwers and Erika, running over options for scheduling the extraction, debating methods for surveilling du Toit, wondering if the coffee pot is on downstairs yet. His head aches dully, an artifact of the Somnacin and alcohol from yesterday, and he decides against a run this morning.

He eases himself quietly out of the bed and into a scalding hot shower, then heads downstairs with his laptop. His hosts are nowhere to be found, but they have left a tray of warm croissants, local berries, and creme fraiche next to the coffeepot, and he happily fixes himself a plate and a mug of coffee and settles into a burst of productivity at one of the wooden tables on the deck outside as the sun rises.

Three cups of coffee later, his head is more or less back to normal, and he's feeling good about what he's been able to accomplish. Other guests are starting to wake up, wandering bleary-eyed and tousle-headed out to the deck to eat and make plans for the day, and he slips back up to their room to continue working rather than engaging in small talk. He thinks Eames would have stayed, absorbed the various accents and personalities and facial expressions, storing them away like a squirrel with nuts, but Arthur is neither an actor nor a forger and besides, maybe he can catch Eames doing his workout again if he hurries.

Eames, however, is still sound asleep, his lips barely open, face relaxed and surprisingly youthful against the pillow. He's pushed the blankets back down to his waist, and his naked skin is faintly golden against the white sheets, the black of his tattoos a stark and exotic accent. All thoughts of the job fly out of Arthur's mind, and he puts down his laptop, nudges off his shoes, and slips back into the bed, curling up against the warm body there.
"Eames," he says softly. He doesn't respond. "Alec," he tries, experimentally, and that does it, Eames is awake all at once. He doesn't speak or open his eyes, but Arthur can feel the sudden alertness in his body, a second of tension that dissolves as he registers Arthur's presence and turns toward him, an arm stealing over Arthur's middle, his stubbly chin nestling into Arthur's shoulder.

His eyes are still closed but his nose twitches faintly as he rubs it against Arthur's upper arm, inhaling, and Arthur realizes he's being ... huffed. He hadn't thought about Eames reacting to Arthur's scent the way Arthur craves his, although given Eames' little speech the other night, the calculated way he stole Arthur's hair and body products, he probably should have guessed it.


He sheds his clothes quickly, Eames' hands running busily all over him, hindering more than helping. He has appalling morning breath, but then, Arthur has appalling coffee breath; they considerately exchange brief, closed-mouth kisses, groping for each other's cocks, finding a lazy rhythm into one another's fist, before Eames' other hand strays further, brushes Arthur's asshole, and pauses there.

Arthur has to roll over him to hunt for the lube on the nightstand. The little bottle is there, but he can't find a condom. "God damn it," he mutters, his hips pausing against Eames' hand; he remembers using the last one last night, Eames' gorgeous ass pushed up against him, encouraging Arthur to "fucking do it, harder, deeper, yes" as Arthur fucked him sweet and filthy up against the headboard.

He suddenly, stubbornly, doesn't want a blowjob or handjob, he wants Eames to turn him over and claim him, their last time in this huge fantastic bed, their mini-working-vacation over with already.

"I trust you," Eames mutters, pausing as he sucks a purple mark into Arthur's collarbone. "C'n trust me... Seen my papers... you lovely beast, Arthur, oh God, your tight little arse..."

"I... yeah, please," Arthur decides, "yes," because he has seen those papers, and he's already thought this through on a subconscious level. He can't work himself open fast enough, Eames' mouth whispering lewd and wonderful promises into his ear, that strong hand tugging and twisting him, Eames' own cock hard and silky and amazing in Arthur's fist.

He turns onto his side when he's ready, rolls his ass back and up and finds Eames, lets him press into Arthur and hold his hips tight, his teeth catching Arthur's shoulder, and then Arthur can focus on nothing but the delicious friction and fullness filling him, all of that bare skin hot against his back, his legs. They rock together slowly, lazily, murmuring curses and endearments and appreciation, half-stifling their groans, until Eames begins quickening his hand on Arthur's cock, his hips against Arthur's ass.

"No, you do it, you first," Arthur pants, and braces himself against the mattress. When Eames is finished, he pulls off and pushes Eames down on his back, straddles his hips, and jerks off onto his broad chest.

He'd been right: all those chiseled muscles, the black ink, look fucking amazing with Arthur's come all over them. He's entranced.

Eames interrupts his reverie with a raspy chuckle. "Deviant," he says fondly.

"Why didn't I do this sooner?" Arthur wonders aloud. "You look great like this."
Eames' response is to flip Arthur onto his back, hold him down, and rub the mess on his chest all over Arthur, who squawks in an embarrassingly undignified way while Eames rumbles with laughter above him. He gives Arthur a terrible open-mouth morning-breath kiss for good measure, then pushes back and off and ambles into the bathroom to piss noisily.

"You up, then? No run this morning?" Eames calls out. The shower starts, and apparently Eames is skipping his workout today as well.

Arthur squelches himself out of the bed -- he hasn't barebacked in years and years, he's forgotten what a mess it can be, never mind the drying come all over his chest, what the fuck, Eames -- and joins him in the shower.

"No, had a hangover," he admits. "All that damned rum."

"My poor bokkie," Eames coos at him. "His ickle head hurts?"

In the midst of discovering Eames-as-sex-god, Eames-as-midnight-cuddler, Eames-as-a-real-person-with-a-real-and-painful-past, Arthur has almost forgotten how amazingly aggravating he can be. It's all in good humor, he knows -- at least, this time -- but Arthur is still a little achy, a little irritable, and not in the mood for mockery.

"Knock it off," he warns.

Eames' mouth twists in an acknowledging smile before he drops a kiss on Arthur's wet shoulder, and then his mouth, in apology. He refrains from pushing any further buttons as they dress and pack up their clothes and surveillance gear and discuss the Kluwers extraction in light of the additional information they learned from Erika last night.

Eames wants "a real breakfast, not a poncey croissant," and they continue the discussion over eggs and boerewors and Arthur's fourth cup of coffee at a cafe on the way out of town.

They both need more time in the dreamspace, Arthur to work on building the dream and Eames to polish his forge of Erika, but they could be ready as soon as the day after tomorrow, Arthur thinks.

The SARU will obviate the most dangerous, waking-world part of the job by simply scheduling each player to come in for a physical exam whenever Arthur reports that they're ready for the extraction. A "vitamin shot" in the thigh, and then a SARU official and Kefilwe, posing as a nurse, will watch over them while they go under. It went smoothly with Makenzie, and they have no reason to think it will be any different with Kluwers.

They both know that their time alone together is coming to an end; living and working with a third person is a far cry from the privacy and intimacy of their shared room these past few days. It's a long drive, and they have nothing to do but talk. They're both skilled at questioning, and they have both let their guard down (and one of them has had four cups of coffee now), and so information that would otherwise have remained bottled up flows freely between them.

Arthur tells Eames his middle name and its origin (Neal, and the lead counsel in the Scopes trial, and yes, he's glad they'd decided against "Clarence"), how he got into dreamshare (stalking Dom after reading an article he wrote on lucid dreaming), the time he'd allowed Mal to dress him in drag (one time, Eames, and no, he won't do it again), what her funeral had been like (surreal and dreary and he had had a weird ten minutes or so of complete dissociation, which still freaks him out when he thinks about it), how he hates lying to his family about his job, his conflicting feelings toward Dom after spending almost three years on the run with him.
He learns the following: Eames has two psychology degrees, one of them a Master's from Cornell; he learned French from Mal, going under with her for several three-to-four-hour marathon sessions after the course of his first dreamshare job; his first tattoo was an homage to a friend's father, a petty crook who took him in when he left home and taught him how to pick locks and pockets, forge documents, and buy and sell contraband; and he is, as Jonathan Kent, an alumnus of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where he'd studied theatre with Joseph Fiennes and Damian Lewis.

Arthur had known Eames was intelligent, of course, but he'd had no idea he was so educated.

"Well..." Eames demurs, when Arthur says as much.

"You have at least three degrees," Arthur points out.

"The first one was a kind of a forgery," Eames admits. "Funny story, that."

"I have time." They are only a little more than halfway back to Port Elizabeth.

"Well, my mates and I broke into this bloke's house, a professor of behavioral psychology, going after some paintings he was rumored to keep. We found more than we'd bargained for -- he had them, all right, but he had a private photography collection as well, and it was all kiddies."

Arthur blanches; this is not what he'd expected.

Eames nods emphatically. "Yeah. Really terrible stuff. The lads had a laugh, took what we'd come for, and that was that as far as they were concerned, but I went back the next night when I knew he'd be home. Told him he was going to destroy all that rot and not touch the stuff again, and he was going to personally tutor me up to the equivalent of an undergraduate degree in psychology, or I'd expose him and inflict grievous bodily harm, as well. Roughed him up a bit so he got my point. I made him burn it all in front of me, and then I surprised him over the next several weeks, waking him in the middle of the night, strolling into his office hours, and making him go into dreamspace with me for four or five hour stretches until I'd got a full course of study. I did all the readings, had him question me, learned enough to apply to the graduate program and know what was what."

Arthur is sickly fascinated. "How do you know he didn't just go right back to his old habits when you'd left off?"

He shrugs. "Paid a scary-looking mate of mine to keep up the surprise inspections. Besides, if he did, he wasn't at it very long. Heard he topped himself the very next year."

He's pretty sure Eames isn't talking about a variant of anal sex, but -- "Topped himself?"

"Took a long bath with a razor blade," Eames specifies. "Do you know, if you leave the water barely on and the drain just cracked, most of the blood drains by the time you're found?"

Arthur had always thought that was an urban legend, but he refuses to be sidetracked. "So you completed an undergraduate major in, what, three months?"

If he's going to be honest, he's a little envious -- he put in the requisite four years to get his computer science degree. Of course, he hadn't known about dreamshare back then, and he's not sure he would have had the chutzpah to blackmail an education out of a pedophile. Or been able to get over his distaste for such a man. And speaking of that --

Eames seems to be able to tell what he's thinking; he doesn't bother answering the question Arthur
asked, but he does answer the one Arthur didn't. "He never looked at another child while he was tutoring me. I was in his head daily, I'd have known, and I would have done as I'd said."

It's still not quite sitting right with Arthur, but he's not in a position to judge, not really. Not with what he does every day, spying and hacking and drugging people for a living, prying into their minds, stealing secrets from their dreams. "There's that," he allows.

"Very gracious of you, Arthur, thank you," Eames says drily, and Arthur flushes.

"That sounded pretty assy, didn't it," he admits.

Eames gives him a side-eye. "Blackmailing a kiddie-fiddler is hardly the worst thing I've done in my career."

Arthur is not getting into this contest with him. He knows they've both killed men, at least seven between the two of them, and three of those were on the same job. (Arthur doesn't count Nash in his tally. That's Saito's lookout, not Arthur's.) They've both taken jobs for people and corporations who are rotten at the core, took their money and never looked back.

Eames has seduced marks, both up above and in dreamspace -- he'll be doing it again with Kluwers, in just a day or two.

For Arthur's part, his skill at surveillance means he's observed men and women without their knowledge or consent in some of their most intimate moments, read their email and text messages, heard their private conversations, reviewed their spending habits and their photographs without shame or remorse.

When Arthur doesn't say anything, Eames continues. "I'm not a good man, Arthur, by any measure. I lie and cheat and steal for a living and I have done ever since I left home. I deal in other peoples' secrets and I employ whatever means I have to in order to learn them." He stops, and grimaces unattractively. "I took advantage of an alcoholic, intentionally got her drunk, and helped you do it again the very next night, in order to get into her head and into her home. I did it deliberately so that I could pull out of her all her deepest, most intimate fears and sorrows, in order that some tatty sports club can pay me to go into her boyfriend's head and root around, all because they're bothered by a bit of gambling."

"Yes," says Arthur, "and I help you do all those things. You didn't make me drink with her. You didn't make me take out Tomasz after he sold us out last year, either, I did that on my own. I hack into top secret databases, I bribe government officials in every country I set foot in. I break into peoples' houses and plant bugs and intercept their phone calls and read their email, and watch and listen to them when they think they're alone, and that's all for money too."

"Money and dreaming, with you," Eames corrects him. "You wouldn't do all this, live like this, just for a paycheck."

"Neither do you, you asshole," Arthur tells him, exasperated. "You do it for the challenge. Yes, you're manipulative and nosy and way too observant, you don't seem to have any concept of personal property, and you can be incredibly fucking irritating without even trying. You break the law every day and you barely remember your own real name, and you'd have sold Dom to Cobol in a second if he hadn't said the word 'inception,' wouldn't you?"

Eames snorts, but doesn't deny it, and Arthur goes on. "But you have gifts, you have this... this incredible body, and face, and voice, and you're brilliant and insightful and so absolutely fucking talented, and I love watching you work because you're so good at what you do, all of it. There's
nothing else in the world that would use you to your full potential this way..."

He stops. Eames is staring at him, his mouth agape. It's the first time Arthur has ever seen him look shellshocked.

"What," he mutters uneasily. "You know you're hot, I'm not telling you anyth -- watch the road, Jesus!" The road along the coast twists and winds, what is Eames thinking, staring at Arthur like that? Maybe Arthur should drive (but Arthur doesn't want to drive; that's why Eames is driving).

Eames' mouth snaps shut, his eyes return to the road in front of them. After a moment, he says quietly, "Arthur. That was quite the nicest thing, by far, that anyone has said to me in a very long time."


Eames, unexpectedly, doesn't poke at his discomfort, just changes the subject. "You know, being on stage, it's like forging, but nothing is really quite like forging."

"Nothing is really quite like dreaming," Arthur corrects him. "You were right, I'd hate nine-to-five life. I could get a license, sell my skills as an investigator, and never go into the dreamspace again, but I wouldn't be satisfied. We're just -- this is what we do. We're good at it. I don't apologize for that, and I don't judge you for it, either."

"We're quite the pair," Eames murmurs, and doesn't say anything else for a while. When he does, his tone is somber. "Do -- do you understand why I feel so rotten about getting her drunk? Objectively it's a little low on the scale of bad things I've done to people, but it sticks with me. Will stick with me."

Arthur struggles to frame his response correctly. "I do understand why," he says finally. "I don't really feel the same way, but I don't have a history in my family, either." He adds, "if you've ever tried Manischewitz, you'd know why."

To Arthur's relief, Eames takes the bait. "Darling, are you kosher? You do know that was pork sausage that you had this morning?"

Arthur grins and shakes his head. "I haven't been kosher since I left for college, except when I visit my parents. I know some Jews manage to stick it out, but once I was out of the house I was done with it. I've never been all that religious anyway -- it was more something I did for my family."

"So that's why you're..." Eames makes a scissors motion with his left hand.


"I should love to see you in your little yarmy-hat someday," Eames tells him solemnly, but he can't keep his face straight. Arthur socks him in the arm, and he actually giggles.

Arthur rolls his eyes. "Yeah, mom would love it if I brought home a hulking, tattooed British gangsta for a Pesach Seder."

"Please, love. I am a posh, educated, gentleman actor," he protests, his tone wounded. "And I'd lay odds I could charm the pants off your mum in a jiffy."

"I'm not going to gamble with you about getting into my mom's pants," Arthur retorts, but they are both laughing now.
And Arthur likes this. A lot. More than he wants to admit. The ease of it, their growing certainty of one another, the joy of fencing with another intelligent mind, the powerful, primitive chemistry zinging between them, the soft expression on Eames' face as he looks at Arthur, all of it.

He reaches out impulsively and wraps his right hand around the back of Eames' neck, stroking his thumb along the hairline. Eames tilts his chin downward slightly, still watching the road, but pushing his neck against Arthur's hand, giving Arthur's fingers more room to touch him.

There's a faint smile on his lips, and the tiny laugh lines at the corners of his eyes are visible. He'd be purring if he could, Arthur knows; he's never been with a man who luxuriates in small physical attentions the way this one does.

Then Eames actually does make a deep rumbly sound low in his throat, and Arthur can't control himself. He leans over and presses his lips swiftly to his cheek, just above the stubble.

"What was that for?" Eames wants to know. He looks pleased, if slightly baffled.


"I am," he agrees, and suddenly his whole face breaks into a grin, snaggletooth and all. Goofy is the only word for it, Arthur thinks, delightedly, and he feels what's probably a similarly goofy smile lighting up his own face in response. He's not used to seeing Eames off his guard, allowing genuine expression in his face. He's one of the most careful people Arthur has ever worked with, in terms of disclosing his true thoughts and feelings. Even when he's furious, or honestly exhilarated, there's a sense of withholding, of watchfulness, of playing a part.

He thinks it must come of being an actor, of being conscious at all times of other peoples' eyes on your face, your body language, coupled with the dangerous nature of the work they do. It must get tiring, he realizes, being hyper-aware of and controlling your own reactions, keeping everything buttoned tight inside except what you consciously choose to show people.

Arthur tries, and he's getting better at it, but he's still the hacker, the man who does most of his work through an anonymous computer terminal; he simply doesn't have to interact with other people face to face the way Eames does, and he hasn't built that skill set.

They are both quiet for a few minutes, and then Eames eyes him, and says, as if he had read Arthur's mind, "You're different, out here."

Arthur automatically opens his mouth to protest, because he is not, and then stops. "What do you mean?"

Eames shakes his head slightly. "Dunno, more open? Less tense. You're a person, not just a point man." He must see Arthur's expression, because he quickly adds, "That's not a criticism, Arthur."

"Well, you're not questioning every other word out of my mouth," he responds, a trace defensively.

"No. Much more pleasant this way, hmm? Much better things to do with your mouth."

Arthur's phone buzzes before he can address that, or the leer accompanying it. He squints, and spends the next few minutes texting furiously. Eames glances over, but doesn't interrupt.

Arthur finally looks up. "Karenna has a quick job in the States next month. Two weeks, no more. That won't interfere, will it?"
Eames looks a bit alarmed at this. "You don't have to ask my permission, darling. We're not, er..."

Arthur cuts him off, impatient. "No, I mean, when is your opening night? I want to be there."

"It's May 2, but really, Arthur, it's not worth turning down a job for."

Arthur ignores everything after hearing the date. He taps swiftly into his screen, makes disgusted sounds at the response he gets, taps again more insistently, and repeats the cycle until he gets the commitment he wants.

"It'll be done by April 30, Karena will take care of the cleanup, I'll join you in London on May 1," he reports eventually, satisfaction evident in his tone. "Oh -- and she wants a forger, she may be contacting you, I said I didn't know whether you had anything else lined up."

"Good," Eames nods. "Perhaps you could help me plant a few false rumors, though? I was thinking some deep undercover operation for Her Majesty, something to justify me dropping off the radar for a few months."

"Indulge your James Bond fantasies? Sure. Just tell me what you want me to plant, I probably wouldn't be able to come up with anything appropriately outrageous on my own," Arthur agrees, a bit tartly, but he brushes his thumb over Eames' jaw and smiles at him before busying himself again with his phone.

The rest of the drive passes quickly. Arthur scans the dossier that arrives in his inbox about the new job, and begins compiling lists of his research topics and to-dos (find a base, reserve a block of hotel rooms nearby, run an asset search for the mark's financial information, check in with other forgers to see who's available...).

Eames' eyes stray to his screen from time to time, but he doesn't say anything. He twitches the radio dial, hopping from station to station, humming snatches of music before flipping stations again, talking back to what sounds like a sports broadcast in Afrikaans, snorting in irritation at a talk show, drumming on the steering wheel, scratching his head, nibbling his fingernails.

It's hard for Arthur to concentrate with all this activity, but Eames isn't being deliberately irritating, or at least Arthur doesn't think so; he doesn't think he could handle being in a relationship, even a vague, amorphous, multi-continental relationship, with someone who is evaluating and manipulating him all the time. (Occasionally is ok. Arthur, like Eames, enjoys a challenge).

If a relationship is even what they're doing. He thinks maybe that's what they're doing. Or starting to do. He's not sure how to tell, exactly.

He wishes he had a little more experience with this.

They're back at the resort all too quickly, and he leaves Eames with the PASIV while he returns the car and picks up some supplies. To his dismay, Kefilwe has returned by the time he gets back to the cottage. Eames' face is smooth and bland as ever, but Arthur is getting better at reading him now and can detect a flicker of unhappiness, resignation, in his handsome features as he banter with her.

He's sure his own consternation is even more apparent; he'd been counting on this additional night together to bolster him through the next few weeks of pretending, and now that it's abruptly been taken away, the rest of the job seems interminable. He schools his face, greets Kefilwe quietly, and grimly settles himself in to his work.
Distract Me, Stops Me Doing Work I Hate

Chapter Notes

Kefilwe, a native Setswana speaker, here speaks English somewhat better than I speak Spanish. There may be some vocabulary missing, but that's a reflection of disuse rather than a reflection on the intelligence of the speaker.

By unspoken agreement, they refrain from going under together again while they finish preparing for the extraction on Kluwers. It's been scheduled for the following afternoon, and they both have their own tasks to complete.

Arthur is abruptly tired of this job, anxious for it to be over so that he can begin readying himself for the next one, and after that -- London, and Eames, and a few weeks at least of no sneaking around, and no heists. It's been a while since he's been in London, even longer since he took any time off, and he's looking forward to it more the more he thinks about it.

He focuses on memorizing Kefilwe's layouts, going under and creating them again and again. The apartment itself is simple and with luck, they won't have to venture outside, but it's always hard to predict what the mark will do, so there is an elaborate system of fire escapes surrounding the building, and the streets outside incorporate dead ends and blind alleys. There's actually a lot for him to build and hold steady while he deals with Kluwers' projections, and it's a good distraction from his disappointment.

The three of them have gone through Arthur's photographs from Erika's house and debated the inclusion of some of her framed photos of her and Kluwers together, which Kluwers doesn't have displayed anywhere. Arthur is concerned about injecting that note of unreality into what is otherwise a perfect replica of Kluwers' living space, but Eames thinks it will help trigger positive memories for the man and make him more receptive to 'Erika' in the dream. Kefilwe is happy to build whatever they decide on, so ultimately they agree to include them, and Arthur adds them to his mental design.

While he's up top poring over the diagrams and models, Eames goes under to perfect his forge of Erika. Arthur helps him fit the cannula out of habit, feels a spark of desire as his fingers brush Eames' warm skin and linger on his pulse. He holds on a fraction of a second longer than he needs to, staring at his hand on Eames' wrist, before tucking it gently down at his side.

"Painless, as ever," Eames murmurs, his grey eyes hot and bright as they fix on Arthur's, and Arthur pulls away abruptly, too aware of Kefilwe sitting just outside the door of the dreamshare room.

He doesn't like this, the concealment and strictures they've imposed on themselves -- it's hard enough, being a man, being in this business, to be genuine and vulnerable and open up to someone else. They're only in the tentative first stages of doing that, and now they have this extra layer of concealment and lies in their very living space, slamming down between them like a steel door.

Arthur shakes his head at this fanciful imagery, but his glum mood remains through the afternoon and over dinner. He's able to dispel some of it with a good, long session on the treadmill that evening, endorphins flooding as his mind goes blissfully blank and his focus moves entirely into
his body, the repetition soothing him. However, the nagging sense of separation and falsity lingers, its sharp edges scratching at his mind whenever he's near Eames.

It's almost a relief to retire to his own room and close the door, turn off the light, finally free to let his frustration and longing show openly in his face and body without worrying what either colleague will see in him.

He can still hear Eames and Kefilwe moving around: the faint sound of the t.v. in the front room, the refrigerator door opening, and then footsteps in the short hall, the bathroom door closing, a toilet flushing, a shower starting. He will not think about Eames naked and slippery under the hot water. It's probably Kefilwe in there, anyway, he tells himself, ignoring the fact that she prefers to soak in a bath. (There have been a number of times he's been grateful they have the other cottage, with its own bathroom; her record in the tub so far is one hour and fifty-six minutes.) Then he hears her voice, low and melodic, in the living room -- Skyping her husband again, most likely -- and the tension of the long day catches up with him all at once.

Resolutely ignoring the sound of the running water, he puts in earbuds, finds an ambient chillout mix on his tablet, and settles in stubbornly with his book open to the last page he remembers reading and the music cranked up enough that he can't hear anything else. Somehow, he manages to drift off.

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The next thing he is aware of, the room is fully dark, and his tablet is somehow levitating, sliding through his fingers, as his earbuds pop out of his ears one by one. He has a moment of panic disorientation before he realizes they're not actually moving on their own.

"Couldn't sleep," a husky male voice murmurs, "Shove over, you."

"What time is it?" Arthur whispers, as though it matters. He can tell that the rest of the cottage and the night outside are both silent and dark. He shifts closer to the far side of the bed, making room.

The bed creaks slightly as Eames lowers himself into it, snuggling the full length of his body all along Arthur's. He's wearing a pair of soft long pants, but his torso is bare. Arthur groggily burrows against a warm, broad shoulder and breathes in the woodsy, familiar scent of Eames' skin.

"Just after one. I set an alarm for six-thirty, she doesn't need to ever know I was here."

"Don't wake me," Arthur orders him, half-asleep again already.

"You're more likely to wake me before that, the way you thrash around." He presses his lips gently to Arthur's forehead. "Sleep, love."

Arthur does.

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Eames obeys, or maybe Arthur did wake him up early, because he's gone by the time Arthur's alarm goes off at seven. He showers on auto-pilot, only coming fully awake when he drifts into their kitchenette and finds a blissfully full pot of still-hot coffee, with two clean mugs and the little shaker bottle of cinnamon sitting on the counter next to it.

Kefilwe joins him there ten minutes later, her generous curves wrapped in a voluminous and eye-searing magenta-and-chartreuse kimono, and sinks into one of the kitchen chairs.
"Dumela mma," he says politely -- Eames made sure he learned that much Setswana -- and she smiles, as she always does, and says "dumela rra." He fills the second mug for her, leaving plenty of room for cream, the way she prefers it. They sit companionably for a few minutes, silently communing with their caffeine.

Heavy breathing and footsteps outside the door of the cottage herald the return of their coffee benefactor. He's wearing track pants and trainers and a snug grey t-shirt, visibly damp under the arms and across his chest and back. His biceps are bulging, the veins in his forearms more prominent than usual, and his hair is a sweaty disaster.

He is utterly desirable, and Arthur has to forcibly stop himself from getting up and pinning him against the nearest convenient wall.

Eames and Kefilwe go through their own dumela exchange, and she holds up her mug and says something Arthur doesn't understand. Eames mock-bows to her, says something similarly incomprehensible, and then chugs a full glass of water from the tap before pouring a cup of coffee and joining them at the table. Arthur can smell him, fresh sweat and sandalwood, his skin still warm from his exertions.

"We should try the dream again," Kefilwe tells Arthur in her pleasant, lyrical accent, and he nods. He does need to go through the design with her one last time, run a details check on the proportions, textures, and colors before they pull Kluwers in for his "physical" and run the extraction on him.

"In ten minutes?" he suggests, and she is agreeable. She disappears into her room, closing the door behind her. Arthur rubs his eyes and hopes she will find something less garish to wear.

"How are you set for the forge?" he asks Eames, who shrugs.

"I'd like to go down for another two hours, maybe, but it's pretty fine-tuned by now." He looks toward Kefilwe's closed door before lightning-quick reaching out and stroking his thumb down Arthur's jaw, his eyes catching and holding Arthur's.

Arthur allows himself five seconds of reveling in the touch, and the wolfish way Eames is looking at him, before tearing his eyes away and rising.

"I'm going to prepare the PASIV," he says quietly.

Eames stands too. "I'll clean up, then. I'll be ready to come down and finish the forge when you two are done."

Kefilwe, wearing a dress no less jangling in design, but more somber in color, meets Arthur in the bedroom they've designated as the dreaming room in the other cottage. She cleans and preps the cannulas while he recalculates Somnacin dosages. (Arthur is extremely careful -- you could say paranoid -- about proper dosing, after an early incident with Mal, who had lied about how many times she'd been under already that day and then collapsed the dream when her unconscious body began seizing due to overdose.) He makes the necessary adjustments to the machine, fixes the needle into his wrist, and lies back, tucking his reaction to Eames' sweaty, gorgeous body into a safe compartment of his mind where he can take it back out later and examine it without it interfering with his work or revealing anything to the woman next to him.

They walk through the mazes, confirming the escape hatches and weapons caches are where they're supposed to be. There is only one entrance to Kluwers' apartment, and it's not the door. However, anyone leaving through the door will find themselves exiting normally to the internal
stairwell and street. The one-way door is Eames' contribution, and Arthur has to admit it's a stroke of brilliance. They'll be able to leave quickly and easily if they need to, but any projections trying to make their way into the apartment will have to navigate a complicated route along the fire escapes and in through the living room window.

He and Kefilwe make their way through this route now, and pause in the living room to catch their breath. He is trying to figure out where to fit the photographs of Erika and Kluwers on the wall when Kefilwe says his name. He turns around.

"I see you looking at him," she tells him unexpectedly, and he knows she's not referring to Kluwers.

He would pretend not to know what she's talking about, but she's watching him steadily, a sly look in her catlike eyes and a knowing smile on her full lips. He can feel the dumbfounded expression on his face already; it's too late for pretense.

Arthur really doesn't want to talk about this, but it's happening, so. "He likes to be looked at," he says carefully. Let her read into that what she wants to.

"Yes," she agrees, nodding once. Then: "He spoke of you. Into his..." she holds her hand up in a loose fist in front of her face and waggles her thumb up and down. It's so accurate a recreation of Eames with his voice recorder that he has to laugh.

"His recorder."

"Yes. The morning you went to Mossel Bay, he said, 'Kijana mwenye sura nzuri' -- handsome man -- and 'I want to kiss his crooked mouth.'" Her accent with the English words is appealing, lingering over the vowels and m's in a slightly offbeat but attractive way.

Arthur blushes, at that, but -- he knows Eames, and her translation sounds a little, well, prim. "He said handsome?"

Kefilwe thinks for a moment. "No. Like handsome. Fit? No."

He can't believe he's having this conversation. "Um. Sexy? Fine, maybe."

That must be it, or close to it, because she nods emphatically. "Yes, fine. He... did not know I heard him say it. He knows you do not speak Swahili, so he said it in front of you, a secret." She is obviously amused at Eames' (failed) subterfuge, and doesn't seem angry or disgusted, so Arthur decides to venture a little further.

"He thought you wouldn't like it, because of your country's laws."

She says, slowly, "It... can happen. We know it happens, in the cities. But it is taboo in the villages. It is taboo to me, and my family."

"That's not true here," he reminds her. "Or where we're from."

Kefilwe shrugs. "I am here now. I am not in my village. You are kwa Amerika, he is kwa Britis. You are not Batswana, either of you. You do not have to hide from me, but please be -- careful. No, that is the wrong word." She makes a small moue of frustration.

Arthur considers this; he doesn't think she's advising him to practice safe sex. "Discreet? Tactful?" he suggests, and her face clears.
"Yes, thank you. Discreet. Please."

It still rankles, but he's relieved that it won't present a problem, and anyway, the job will likely be over as soon as they extract from du Toit; he can be discreet and tactful for a few more weeks. "We would be, anyway," he says. "Or at least, I would. He'd probably invite the whole resort to watch," and she flashes him a grin.

"You are both handsome; no, fine men. Maybe they would want to see," she tells him, her tone demure but her eyes sparkling with mischief, and he has to laugh. The mischief must be catching, because he has a thought, then.

"Tell me again, the words he used. Teach me?"

She laughs, too, at the idea, and goes over them with him until he has the pronunciation right.

When they have completed the review, and are both satisfied that Arthur has the dreamscape down, they prepare for the kick. As they pause on the top of the building’s roof, she puts her hand on his arm to restrain him briefly, and tells him: "The bakery has fresh Koeksisters at noon. I will buy some. Say it to him when I go."

Then she's off, plummeting to the ground. He steps out into thin air and follows her.
Kefilwe is as good as her word, disappearing just after eleven. Eames is still under, and Arthur busies himself with a final check into Kluwers' online communications while he waits for him to wake up.

He's intrigued and a little abashed to read a chat log between Kluwers and Erika about the "nice gay tourist couple" she met; she comments wistfully about how "deeply in love" they were, and it takes him back, suddenly, into Tony Levinson's head, so certain of his Stephen, their engagement, their life together. There's an odd pang in his chest, and he scrolls down, hoping to dispel it.

She doesn't mention passing out, or them helping her into bed, and he wonders how much Kluwers knows about her day to day life in between their occasional weekends and vacations together; if he knows about her drinking. If he cares. Kluwers seems uninterested in Erika's new friends, wanting to follow up with her about their next weekend together instead, and that's just fine from Arthur's point of view.

He makes a mental note to ask Eames if he's been in touch with Erika again, or if the intention was for the two of them to just disappear forever off her radar. He suspects the latter, but it would be nice to know; he'd liked her, for all that he felt sorry for her and for what they were doing to her.

He hears movement in the other room, and gets up, pokes his head around the door. Eames is sitting on the edge of the bed, carefully removing the cannula from his wrist. Arthur goes over to flush the line and disconnect the tubing for him.

"Good to go?" he asks.

Eames nods, giving Arthur a weirdly apologetic look. Arthur's mind is too busy with details to really register it; he will regret this inattention, later.

"We'll leave here at two, be in place well before he arrives at three. Kefilwe's just gone out to pick up lunch and some more of those coke-sister doughnut things." He never can remember how to pronounce them; spoken languages aren't his strong suit. (His Golang is coming along nicely, though).

"Good Lord," Eames groans, "they're going to have to carry me onstage in a cart if she keeps this up."

"Hardly." Arthur rolls his eyes. "You just turn them into extra traps and deltoids, or something."

He chuckles. "What do you know about traps and deltoids, darling?"

"I researched them," Arthur says dryly. "Oh, and -- Kijana mwenye sura nzuri."

Eames has been looking at his own wrist, blotting the drop of blood there, but at this, his head snaps up, and he stares at Arthur.

"Also, I'm told I have a kissable mouth." Arthur smiles sweetly.

Eames gets it, groans, covers his eyes with one hand. "That minx. So she's put it together, has she?"

"She asked us to be tactful about it, but we don't have to go sneaking around like teenagers"
"Did she hear me, or has she been in my tapes? Arthur, it's important." He looks uneasy now.

"Why, what else did you say about me," Arthur wonders aloud. "Do I need to have them translated?" He sees Eames' eyes widen fractionally in alarm at the thought, and shakes his head. "I wouldn't," Arthur tells him (he hopes) unnecessarily. "She heard you talking. Thought it was a good joke that you were saying those things right in front of my face while I sat there like an asshole not knowing."

"You do have kissable lips," Eames tells him. It's a transparent distraction attempt, but Arthur plays along.

"Crooked lips."

"Crooked and kissable," and he suits deed to word. Arthur fends him off gently after a few seconds.

"Work," he says apologetically. Eames sighs and nods. "We'll regroup and plan our approach toward du Toit afterward. And then, maybe, the two of us can go out tonight?"

Eames perks up at this. "Wherever you like."

When Kefilwe returns, Eames scolds her briefly in Setswana. She just laughs at him and answers in English. "I am just making it fair between you. You think you are clever, talking where he can hear you."

Arthur pretends not to hear this exchange. He's fidgety, as he always is before a job; he cycles rapidly through his notes, the designs, Kluwers' calendars and emails. Kluwers has been with an escort again, just two nights ago, while Eames and Arthur were chastely putting a sad and thoroughly sozzled Erika to bed. The thought makes Arthur frown. He doesn't deserve either of them, he thinks again.

They eat -- stewed goat over cornmeal porridge, which Arthur has become surprisingly fond of during their stay here -- and Kefilwe goes to change into her nurse's outfit. Arthur specifically orders Eames to dress professionally this time. (The SARU rep at their last extraction, a slender, immaculately dressed German, couldn't stop staring, with horrified fascination, at Eames' purple unicorn tie, which Arthur had never seen before, hasn't seen since, and suspects had been procured for the sole purpose of embarrassing him personally.)

Arthur himself is wearing a slim, blue seersucker suit; it's still a bit too warm for the weather, but it will do. He's gratified to see that Eames steps out of his room in a well-cut, pale yellow linen suit and crisp moss-green shirt, looking utterly dapper and like a man who's never heard of purple unicorns in his life.

"Very nice," Kefilwe comments unexpectedly from her doorway, looking at Eames, and Arthur has to agree. She is neatly attired, her long braids rolled into a bun and her generous curves poured into an off-white, buttoned shirt and pleated skirt, with a pair of sensible low heels. She looks like a school nurse, perhaps, more than one hired by a professional sports organization, but it's adequate for their purposes.

They share a cab to the SARU facility, where they are met by the same thin, dandyish representative as the last time. He greets Kefilwe with a polite bow and Arthur and Eames with brisk handshakes, then leads them to the medical offices. Arthur hands over the syringe with the
initial sedative, but keeps the PASIV in his possession. They wait in a small room adjoining the exam room.

Just after 3 p.m., Kefilwe is summoned by an attendant, signalling that Kluwers has arrived. Ten minutes later, the same attendant knocks again, and Arthur and Eames follow her to the other room, where Kluwers is sedated and snoring gently. His tubing is twice as long as theirs, so that they will have a precious few seconds topside, and several minutes below, to get themselves into place and fix the forge before Kluwers arrives in the dream.

They position themselves in chairs next to the exam table, hook themselves to the PASIV, and wait for Kefilwe's nod. Under their light suits, they are both fully armed, and she is too; she is also in position to administer a kick, if anything makes her uneasy during the extraction.

She solemnly dips her head, and Arthur presses the button.

He blinks, and he's in the living room of Kluwers' apartment, Eames standing next to him.

Eames gives him one silent, almost pleading look, and then he's turned around and headed to the bathroom, where the mirrors will give him the feedback he needs to focus himself into his forge of Erika.

Arthur is briefly troubled by that look, but he has his own tasks to complete; he steps into the first room off the hallway, into the closet, and up the concealed staircase into the apartment above. It's enormous, wrapping fully around Kluwers' apartment above, below, and to both sides, and has access to the roof. Arthur will have a full, clear shot to any projections approaching the apartment long before they get near enough to do any damage.

He checks his watch; they have thirty seconds before Kluwers is due to show up, and then it's on Eames to get the extraction done.

"All set?" he murmurs into his headset. Eames is supposed to have a wire sewn into his bra strap; it's not ideal, but it should pick up their voices clearly enough for Arthur to tell if there's trouble or not. A tiny, flesh colored hearing aid device will transmit Arthur's voice to him.

Eames sounds oddly subdued. "Ready to go," he affirms in Erika's mellow contralto.

Arthur leans out the window and waits. He can tell when Kluwers has arrived; the park across the street abruptly becomes populated with children on the play equipment, young couples walking their dogs. Cars and pedestrians begin to make their way through the formerly empty streets, and a bike messenger pulls up to the building, signs a package over to the doorman. So far, there is no sign that Kluwers' subconscious is registering anything amiss.

"Oh, Johan," Eames says breathlessly. "It's so good to see you, it's been too many weeks away from you." The wire is muffled momentarily; an embrace, Arthur thinks, and then a soft plosion of air that must be a kiss.

"Liefie, what are you doing here?" Kluwers asks, sounding startled.

"You asked me to come, silly!" Eames says warmly, with Erika's infectious throaty laugh. "You said there was something we needed to talk about."

There is a brief silence, then -- "No, I'm sorry, but you can't be here. There's a meeting tonight I have to be at. You need to go back home."

Erika sounds wounded and aggrieved. "It's a four hour drive, Johan. Can't I just stay here tonight?"
Even if you need to go out?"

This is already deviating substantially from the script; their assumption was that he would be happy to see her. Arthur shifts uneasily. The projections seem unconcerned, but they may have to get out early if Kluwers insists that Erika leave right away.

Kluwers is impatient. "Erika, I told you, you have to check with me before you come here. It's not a good time for you to be here."

"But you asked me to. You said there was something that would change things for us. That I needed to know about it." Arthur can hear impending tears thickening her voice, and is impressed, as he always is, with Eames' skill.

"I don't remember that," Kluwers says, but he sounds a little less certain of himself now.

"Please," she pleads, her voice even more choked now. "Please at least tell me what it is. ...Is it those men? The ones who wanted to get the match lineups from you? I told them, I didn't have the information they wanted. Not even for all the money they were offering."

Arthur breathes a little easier; they are back on script now, and Kluwers seems to be softening.

"No! God, no. I told them to shove off, too. Bastards, thinking I'd sell out my team like that," Kluwers tells her, and Arthur relaxes. The projections don't falter or still; there's no sensitivity in his mind on this topic, and this is probably good enough for them to take back to the SARU.

But Eames isn't done.

"Then is it that girl? The one you went to Bali with? You're seeing her tonight, aren't you. That's why you don't want me here." She begins to weep softly, her breath hitching quietly.

"Look, liefie, we went over this -- she doesn't mean anything, she's just for appearances. And it's not her, anyway. Please don't worry about it, ok?" Kluwers sounds defensive and the impatience is back in his voice, but Arthur doesn't detect any artifice in it either. Whatever is bothering him about her presence here, it's not Supriya.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this, Johan," Erika says wearily, and now they are totally off script. Arthur presses the heel of his hand to his forehead and closes his eyes. "I'm alone all the time, except when you call me to come here. I can't, I don't want to be with someone else like you are with -- with her. I just want you, want to be with you. Really with you. Have your babies. Live with you, together. Have a home together."

Arthur's no relationship expert, but he can almost sympathize with the panicky tone in Kluwers' voice when he answers. "Dearest, we have been over this! We have an agreement. I love you, I do. But we can't leave our lives, I can't leave the team, and we can't be openly together here. We'd be disowned, it would be a scandal."

"They do it in Botswana," she says defiantly.

"Erika. No. That is the end of it."

Her voice is impassioned, painful. Despite his mounting irritation, Arthur aches, hearing it. "Maybe I won't be here waiting for you forever, Johan. I want a child. I can't wait too many more years."

"What, are you going to do it without me? Get knocked up by a one night stand? Be a single
"mother?" he asks harshly.

The projections are beginning to still, to turn their heads toward the building.

"They're alert now," he whispers to Eames, who is awash in tears. "Finish this and let's get out, and then you and I are going to have a long talk."

Eames ignores him. "If I have to," Erika says, all wounded dignity and dainty sniffles. "It isn't fair to ask me to do this, to put my life on hold and wait for your attention a few times a year while you sleep with that girl. With your prostitutes!"

Arthur can hear Kluwers' sharp intake of breath even through the poor wire. "How do you know about that? Did you -- were you spying on me?" he demands incredulously, and the projections begin marching toward the building en masse.

"Eames!" he hisses into the wire. "They're moving. End it. Now!"

"No!" Erika says, ambiguously. "I need more.... more than I'm getting from you, Johan."

Kluwers sounds near the end of his rope. Arthur can sympathize. "We've been over this, Erika. I can't just be celibate and wait for you every other month. It's a biological fact, that's all. And you have to go, now. Go home, honey. We'll see each other in two weeks, like we planned. Please, go."

She inhales deeply. "I won't. I won't until I get an answer from you, Johan. I don't want you seeing escorts anymore. Or that girl. I want you to myself." Erika's voice is thready but proud, and Arthur can almost see her little chin tilting up as she says it.

"Eames," he warns again.

Kluwers huffs an irritated sigh. His mounting exasperation is evident as he tells her, "We are not discussing this anymore. I have to leave. Go home, Érika. We'll talk in two weeks."

"Maybe I won't be there in two weeks, did you think of that?"

The projections are starting to climb the fire escapes. Arthur leans out, aims, and picks off the few who have made it to the second floor. One of them tries to shoot back, and that's it; he's done. He crouches next to the window. "Alexander Percival Eames Braithwaite, leave right now or I'm going to blow this building up with you in it."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." Kluwers is obviously angry now. "Go. Don't make me say it again."

Eames finally capitulates. "I need to think about this," Erika says, her voice quavering. "This is not ok, to treat me like this." Arthur hears the door to the apartment open and close, and then a resounding thump on the wall next to it. Kluwers' fist, he decides. Arthur almost can't blame him.

When Eames speaks again a minute later, his voice is his own. He sounds tired. "Are you really going to blow it up, or ought I take a header out the window?"

"Fuck you. You don't do this." Arthur is incandescent with fury. He pops his head out the window and takes out two more projections. "You know what, why don't you just walk out the front door and let the goddamn mob have at you. I'll be waiting to finish off whatever they leave behind."
Eames doesn't respond directly. Arthur hears a window open and two more shots fired from the other side of the building. "Ah -- they are a bit tetchy out there."

The next sound Arthur hears is a muffled, crunching thud, and then shouts and blows as a mob of projections falls upon the body. He winces and hopes the impact with the ground was enough to wake Eames up; as angry as he is, he never likes seeing or hearing Eames die. He turns his Glock to his own temple, and the dream goes black.

When he opens his eyes again, he has to fight to control his temper. He doesn't look at Eames, and his voice is clipped and cold when he speaks to the SARU official, who is anxiously watching him.

"We have concluded that he's clean. His response when the subject was introduced was extremely negative, and none of the usual manifestations of guilt or anxiety were present in the environment. He praised his girlfriend for refusing to speak with the betting organizations, and was very indignant at the idea of selling out his team. We believe that your leak will be one of the other two players."

Eames contributes, "I was speaking with him directly on this topic, and his face had none of the typical indicators of someone who is lying. His anger at the organizations was honest, as was his approval when she said she had turned them down. I agree, this man is not your leak."

Kefilwe's face is impassive. She holds one of Kluwers' wrists in her hand, and Arthur knows she will have detected his heightened emotions in the dream, but she says nothing as she helps Arthur pack up the PASIV. She has to remain through the conclusion of Kluwers' physical exam, and Arthur and Eames are led back to the small room next door again.

Once they are alone, Eames begins, in a low tone, "Arthur..." and Arthur rounds on him, fuming.

"No. Not here. Don't -- not another word, Eames. I mean it." He pulls out his Moleskine, begins noting the events of the dream, the behavior of the projections. He keeps a database; it's come in handy surprisingly often, helping them plot likely triggers, gambits that frequently succeed versus those that frequently fail. More importantly, now, his notes give him something to focus on that's not his anger.

Eames, wisely, sits back and says nothing more. His eyes are steady on Arthur, his expression contrite. When Kefilwe fetches them, he trails a few paces behind Arthur as they make their way to the front of the facility and hail a cab. All three of them are silent for the duration of the drive back to the resort.

Back at the cottage, Kefilwe doesn't ask questions, but goes straight into her room to change out of her nurse's outfit. Arthur glares and holds up a hand before Eames can even open his mouth again.

"You tell her exactly what happened. All of it. Including what you did. I'm going to change, and then I'm going out, and I don't want to hear from you for the next couple of hours."

Eames nods, silently. His characteristic energy and quick wit are nowhere to be seen; he looks chastened, even worried, about how Arthur is responding. And frankly, Arthur is pleased to see that.

He needs time to figure out how he is going to address this problem. He has been in the business too long to not have teammates go rogue on him from time to time (Exhibit A: Dominic Fucking Cobb), and he knows, despite his anger, that they were in no real danger from Eames' actions today. Kluwers isn't militarized, he has no underworld connections, he never saw Arthur's face, and
he has no idea what Eames really looks like. At the same time, though, Eames had no right to make a unilateral decision to pursue his personal agenda. Arthur might even have agreed to this little side excursion, but Eames should have asked him ahead of time instead of taking matters into his own hands, and they both know that.

He changes into linen shorts and a polo shirt, grabs his tablet and a pair of sunglasses, and walks to the Boardwalk complex. It's only a fifteen minute walk, but it's enough to cool his temper to the point where he can think clearly again. He finds a bar there, orders a couple of appetizers and a beer, opens his book app again and tries to distract himself. Between the book and the people-watching, he should be able to kill a few hours.

It's a very good book, and there are very attractive men and women on the beach, but eventually, he has to admit that it's not going to work. He wants to dissect this with someone, with an experienced dreamshare worker, but he's mindful of Eames' reputation and doesn't want to expose his behavior to anyone else in the business. What he really wants, he realizes glumly, is to talk this over with Eames.

Well, fuck.

He pays his tab and walks back to the resort. In their living cottage, Kefilwe is on Skype with her husband again, and Eames is absent. She pauses her conversation long enough to tell Arthur, "He is in the other," and points to the working cottage.

Arthur squares his shoulders and marches over to the other cottage. He's surprised to find the battered Macbook out again, open to Mathieu du Toit's Facebook page. Eames has put the whiteboard up and is busy listing names, relationships, and home towns, preparing to choose a subject for his forge. He has a separate list going of du Toit's frequent hangouts, for possible surveillance. He's lost his suit jacket, but is still wearing the green shirt, now open at the neck, and the light yellow pants.

Eames obviously hears Arthur come in; he stops writing, but doesn't turn around. Apprehension is clear in his posture, the tension in his bulky shoulders, the slight downward droop of his head. Arthur deliberately doesn't say anything for several seconds. Eames' head droops even lower, and he finally gives in, turns around, meets Arthur's gaze.

"Arthur," he says quietly. "I apologize."

Arthur blinks. This is a first, in his experience. He puts his hands in his pockets and looks steadily at Eames. "If you ever, ever, do that to me again, this thing, whatever it is, is finished."

Eames opens his mouth, but Arthur cuts him off. "I told you I trust you. I can't trust you if you hide shit like this from me. You could have asked, or at least warned me. It was reckless and stupid and Not. Fucking. Ok."

"You're right. It won't happen again."

They regard each other across the space of the room. Finally Arthur sighs, walks to the couch, and sits with his knees spread. "Come here." He pats the couch between his legs.

Eames obediently sinks to the floor between Arthur's feet and drops his head down. Arthur digs his long fingers into the knotted muscles, gently at first, then with more force.

Eames' breath slows and deepens, and eventually he makes that low purring noise in his throat.

"I said I would help you with Supriya, after the job," Arthur tells him.
Eames hums assent.

"I meant it." He digs into a particularly stiff knot. Eames' shirt is a wrinkled mess, but they're both relaxing at the contact. "And I meant the after part."

"Mm hmm."

Arthur cards his fingers through Eames' hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. "If Erika is coming up in two weeks, maybe a few photos are all it would take."

Eames takes Arthur's hand, breathes into the palm, and presses his lips to his wrist. "You going to let me play with your new lens, maybe?"

"Oh, I didn't sign myself up for any additional surveillance," Arthur says smugly. "That part's all you."

Eames "hmph"s at this, but doesn't object. He leans his head back on Arthur's knee, and Arthur's hands still. "Arthur."

"Yes?"

"Please don't ever call me by my full name again."

"Don't ever make me do it again. And don't ignore me when I'm talking to you." He flicks Eames lightly on one ear.

The quiet room and the close contact have lulled him into forgetting who he's dealing with. He's more surprised than hurt when his arm is seized and locked, and then he's somehow flat on his back on the floor, Eames pinning him with a knee in his gut and a meaty hand around his throat, and no expression at all on his face.

It's a vulnerable position, and Eames has a good forty pounds of muscle on him, but Arthur's not afraid. "Fuck you. That's no way to treat someone who just gave you a back rub."

He scowls, and Eames scowls back, but relents and releases him. They sit up, leaning back against the couch, panting slightly. Arthur stretches his arms out along the cushion.

"I do like it when you call me Alec," Eames admits after a moment, turning his head so it rests on Arthur's arm, looking directly at him. His deep grey eyes peer up at Arthur under long lashes, and there's a tiny smile on his plump lips. It's impossible to stay mad at him when he looks this good, Arthur realizes, and he gives up; he's said his piece, got his apology, he doesn't need to belabor the point.

"Alec," he says with exaggerated courtesy. "How about that dinner we talked about earlier."

Eames bounces to his feet, pulling Arthur up after him. "You're buying."
"Have you ever scened?" Eames asks, out of nowhere.

Arthur looks up, confused. He's just written a program compiling du Toit's phone records to script patterns of calls shortly before Kings matches, and his head is full of jumbled numbers and not really taking in anything around him. "Seen what?"

"Done a scene. Had one. Is that even a verb?" Eames wonders, unhelpfully.

"Specificity, Eames." He checks to see if Kefilwe is in earshot; she may be surprisingly open-minded about their relationship, but he doesn't think Eames wants her knowing about his second career. He's fairly sure she's gone; it's noon, and she's pretty punctual about heading out for lunch. Besides, Eames wouldn't have brought it up if he thought she was nearby. "You... want me to rehearse the play with you, or something?" He's never done it before, but he thinks it can't be that hard to just read lines off a page, if that's what he wants.

Eames ducks his head, scratches the back of his neck, in a gesture Arthur has come to recognize as discomfort with the subject matter. (True, sometimes it's disingenuous, a calculated means of putting other people at ease; but Arthur's getting better at telling the difference, at least when it's directed at him.) "A scene in, you know, dominance, submission, that sort of thing."

Oh. "No, the idea never really did anything for me. I mean," he adds candidly, turning away from his computer, "if you want to, we can try, I guess. I do like it when you hold me down sometimes, especially since you're so big right now. The humiliation, pain stuff, though, that's a turnoff, I'm not interested."

Eames nods absently, not looking directly at him. "No, I was just wondering if you knew anything about it."

It feels like he's pulling teeth here; Eames is not usually so reticent about what's on his mind. "Yeah, no. You gonna tell me why?"

"Right, well, it's a problematic play, isn't it?" Eames launches in without preamble. "Misogynistic and patriarchal are about the nicest words used for it. Not just my role, but the whole family structure, the permissions involved, the whole notion of 'taming.' He does some really abusive things to her, you follow?"

He does, kind of, although he's not so sure how Eames segued from BDSM to Shakespeare. He gestures at him to go on.

"So, a straightforward production, it's problematic, everyone's very unpleasant, critics hate it, women picket it, you get a lot of mouth-breathers in the audience. Also, needless to say, I wouldn't have taken on the role, since I've absolutely no interest in portraying an abuser."

Arthur certainly gets that, given Eames' family history.

Eames continues. "So that's out. Now, play it as a farce instead, and it's just tired, not very interesting. But recently, several companies have been doing productions that put a dominant-submissive spin on it, make out that this is a, you know, mutually satisfying relationship, all with Katharina's consent, and that it has a healthy sexuality to it. I saw it done quite well in Melbourne several years ago, but most of the time, these productions, especially the modern day ones, come out terribly campy, low budget, whips and chains everywhere."
He grimaces, and Arthur nods.

"We're not going the leather and gimp masks route; this production is set in the present, but takes a more subtle tone. Focusing fully on the sexual subtext and power dynamics, but keeping it more psychological, more intellectual. We're trying to make it not a specifically feminine submission, but a less gendered, more universal form, to see if and how it resonates with each of the audience members. There's an exaltation Katharina experiences, in her subspace, that the director thinks could spark something for people who may not know or understand their own predilections." His tone is earnest, thoughtful, just short of scholarly. Arthur is reminded again that this is a man who may enjoy playing dumb, but manifestly isn't.

"That's fascinating, and I'm looking forward to seeing it, but why are you bringing it up right now?" Arthur asks bluntly.

And he is -- he was telling the truth, bondage and sadism don't do anything for him personally, but the thought of seeing Eames, dominant, the way Arthur has occasionally seen him in dreams: the drawling, menacing edge his voice takes on, the predatory intensity of his gaze, the way he can control a situation with his mere presence, saying nothing at all... well, he'd like to see that. See what Eames does with it when it's being narrowly channeled into a prescribed role. See how other people react to it. And then take Eames back to his flat near Russell Square, which Arthur is very much looking forward to seeing, and let him have his way with him.

Eames looks uncomfortable again and shifts his weight to the other hip. "Well, I don't know anything about it, do I? They've asked me to do some research, get some training, during the rehearsal period. From both sides, the dominant and the submissive. Go to some clubs, take some lessons."

Arthur gets it, now. It hits him unexpectedly in the gut, the thought of Eames engaging in power play, perhaps sexual play, with someone else, and Arthur won't be there. He'll be a whole ocean and most of a continent away, helping a very unsavory organization extract casino blueprints from an architect's head.

His expression must betray him; Eames suddenly kneels in front of Arthur, folds his arms over Arthur's lap, and looks up at him seriously.

"Darling, I told you, I don't screw around, and I won't. No... body fluid exchange, all right? But I need to do this, learn it, be able to portray it, and that probably means some, ah, situations you might not want to see."

He's touched, actually, that Eames is telling him this, putting it out there, when it would have been so simple for him to just say nothing. Apparently Eames has taken Arthur's little speech yesterday about secrets to heart, and that makes this easier for Arthur to tolerate.

"Look, I'm not exactly happy to hear that you need to do that, and I don't really want to think about it too much -- and I'm not sure I'll want to hear about it at all -- but I'm glad you told me," he says slowly. "It's like another job, I guess. If you need to... kiss, or, I don't even know what happens in there, get pissed on or something, don't not do it because of me. But ideally I'd want you to keep your cock in your pants, and keep your pants on." He takes a deep breath. "So, tell me what you end up doing, and if you do something unsafe we'll have to adjust accordingly, ok?"

Eames strokes a hand down Arthur's jawline where it's tightened, cups his chin, looks up at him from where he's still kneeling on the floor. "More than fair, love. Thank you."

Arthur can't resist. "Weren't you the one who said we weren't -- dot dot dot -- and we didn't need to
"ask permission of each other?"

"Did you just spell out punctuation, Arthur?"

Arthur kicks his leg, though not very hard. "Answer the question."

"Ah." Eames sits back on his heels. He seems a bit abashed. "You didn't hear me asking, did you."

He rehashes the conversation in his head. Eames has a point. "You could have kept quiet. I might not have thought to ask when or where you'd learned those things."

"I know," -- candidly.

"Then, thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome." Eames peers at him, seems satisfied that the conversation is finished, and stands again. Before he can walk away, Arthur grabs his hand.

"Hey. If you decide you like parts of it, or one of the places you go, maybe you can show me when I get there."

A slow smile curves Eames' lush mouth. "I'll keep that in mind, pet. There are other things I want to show you there, too. When were you last in London?"

Arthur thinks. "Four years, give or take. It's always been for work, I've never seen much of the city."

"I'll be tied up most evenings with the production, but the pubs are open after, and I'll have until about 5 p.m. each day free if you want to play tourist or go exploring. The flat's walking distance from the BM and from a Tube station, and quite close to King's Cross and St. Pancras if you want to leave the city at all." He pauses. "And it's far enough away from my mum that you needn't worry about her stopping in unexpectedly. I've told her I'll have a houseguest. She'll likely want to meet you, but she won't intrude." He pauses again. "Probably."

Arthur takes a minute to assimilate this. Somehow he hadn't put two and two together about Eames' family asking him to stay respectable in London, and Eames' family actually being present in London and possibly wanting to meet someone who was in a -- dot dot dot -- with their son. Or rather, her son.

"That's fine," he says cautiously. "Is she still, um, ..."

A shadow clouds Eames' face; it's not anger so much as resignation. "Yes. You won't have to deal with any, er, behaviors -- if she acts up, I walk away, and she knows that. She's usually all right in the early afternoons."

"Just tell me what you need me to do," Arthur assures him. "I'm not coming to make more problems for you."

"No, love, you're not the problem." He runs his hand through his hair; he's been wearing it looser, lately, since Arthur makes sure to tell him every day how hot he looks with it that way. "I just, I know you haven't taken any time off for a long time, and I don't want my messy life to become your mess when you're trying to relax." It's half protection of Arthur, and half a warning off: I want you there, but let's not get too enmeshed just yet.
Eames nods past him, then. "Something's popped up on your monitor, there." He's obviously ready to be finished with this conversation, and Arthur lets him go, turns back to his computer. His program's finished compiling, and he has some nice tasty data sets to manipulate and several numbers to trace.
"Oh my God," Arthur whispers, rising balefully out of what had been a sound sleep. "Get the ever-loving fuck away from me, Eames."

He can barely make out Eames' features, but he can clearly see the hurt and surprise there at his words. He steels himself. Eames has to learn; this is non-negotiable. "One inch closer and I will punch you in the dick. Not joking. Get out."

"Arthur," Eames tries, also in a whisper. He doesn't come any nearer, but he doesn't retreat either.


Eames takes one wobbly step backward. "I changed my clothes," he pleads, his voice low.

"You still smell like Satan's armpit. I don't know what you were smoking..."

"A Cohiba 1966," Eames tells him dreamily, as if that should mean anything to Arthur.

He's drunk, too, Arthur realizes, and gives him a death glare. "...but it is absolutely foul."

"Don't you want to know what I discovered, darling?"

He shakes his head, scowling. "No. Tomorrow. After you've showered and brushed your teeth a couple times and burned the clothes you were wearing. Now go sleep in your own room."

Eames pouts his full lips a little, gives Arthur That Look from under his lashes. It's effective even in the dim light, and even though Arthur is expecting it, and he softens.

"Look," he starts. "Most of the time I love the way you smell, you know that. That's not an invitation!" he adds hastily, seeing Eames' face light up and his hand reach out almost imperceptibly. "But right now you're a giant walking cigar ashtray, and I don't know what they put in those things, but I really just can't stand it. Please.

Eames tries the Look again, but he's lost already, and they both know it. Sighing just a bit over-dramatically, he shuffles out of Arthur's room, closes the door, leaving Arthur wide awake and irritable.

Alone at last, he's free to allow his face to twist into a grimace of disgust. He can still smell traces of the cigar in the air. He's grateful that Eames took the surveillance initiative -- Mathieu du Toit favors so-called "gentlemen's clubs," which Arthur has never felt comfortable in -- but wishes he'd stuck to a pipe, if he had to smoke something to fit in there. For some reason, pipe smoke has never bothered Arthur, and he can tolerate cigarettes if he has to, but cigars are beyond the pale and always have been.

He looks at the clock; it's almost 2 a.m. He tosses and turns for several minutes, and tries his book again, but it's no use; he's awake, and his point-man brain has engaged. There are a number of small items on his to-do list that he thinks he can polish off quickly, and then try to sleep again. He can't hear any more sounds from Eames, so he supposes it's safe enough now to go and try to get some additional work done without further argument and/or interruption. He quietly pulls on a pair of jeans and a sweater and slips his gun into his waistband, not bothering to cover his bare feet, and pads silently down the hall and into the main room of their sleeping cottage, wrinkling his nose again at the lingering foul traces of cigar there.
They've found enough evidence (well, Arthur has) of suspicious influxes of cash into du Toit's accounts around the time of the games that were tampered with to go to the SARU right now and end the job early. Arthur has halfway considered it; he has a job lined up and waiting in the States that he could use a jumpstart on. But Eames is here, and Eames won't be in the States, and Arthur is enjoying their newfound intimacy enough to stick out the remainder of the job for that reason alone. Besides, it's a low-risk job, and Arthur has always loved dreaming for dreaming's sake.

In their working cottage, he turns on a solitary lamp and settles in, taking a moment to savor the quiet. He enjoys Eames' company when he doesn't reek of stale cigars, and Kefilwe has a sly, deadpan sense of humor and appealing accent that make even her stilted-English jokes delightful, but Arthur has always appreciated the focus and concentration he can apply when he can work alone. He goes over his mental to-do list, taking stock.

Mathieu du Toit is younger than Kluwers, more image-conscious and media-savvy; he's lined up sponsorship deals, posed for sports magazines, has a fan website. There's plenty of surface-level information about him readily available, but he's more circumspect than Kluwers or Makenzie had been about his private correspondence, perhaps having a better idea than they do about just how private such communications aren't.

Arthur has been chagrined to find that he's coming up short in his online research, and having to fall back on actual in-person surveillance. Luckily, Eames is (a) willing to do the grimmer aspects of said surveillance, including sitting in smoke-filled strip clubs, and (b) extremely skilled at changing his appearance, his voice, even his gait, to avoid standing out as the sudden ubiquitous presence he has suddenly become in du Toit's life. Arthur picks up the slack with a series of rental cars and his beloved long-range lens, as well as some bugs he planted in du Toit's car. He's been unable to get into du Toit's home because his wife, Diane, a hard-faced, hard-bodied blonde, seemingly never leaves it. She's less guarded in her online interactions, but Arthur has been over them repeatedly and she has yet to reveal anything that would help him find an in for this job.

There are a few things that make his task easier. du Toit's penchant for self-promotion, as well as his obsessive fan club, means that his personal history is fairly public; Arthur knows he hasn't changed his name, for example, and where he attended high school, and who the groomsmen at his wedding were. He's had one arrest for drunk and disorderly conduct, which he's been open about and publicly apologized for. Nothing that sets off Arthur's finely honed internal alarms.

First item on his agenda is a search for any criminal history or known alias for Diane. She and du Toit are both South African natives, which will make the search simpler. Arthur doesn't have the ability to crack into those systems on his own, but he has a long list of contacts who do and who are willing to accept cash, no questions asked, so he sends out a coded inquiry along those lines now. He pulls up and prints Diane's bank statements, making notes of all irregular deposits; sets his compiler running on her cell phone records; and reviews the prior day's recordings from du Toit's car for any usable chatter. The latter yields nothing but a frankly astounding belch and snippets of du Toit singing along with his CD player, and he rolls his eyes.

SARU has provided him with du Toit's medical records, and here he finally finds something interesting. The SARU wouldn't allow du Toit to play with any communicable disease, but they don't have any guidelines on genetic or incidental conditions, and du Toit has been treated several times for a recurring Mycobacterium marinum infection. When Arthur runs a web search on this, it appears to be a type of fish tuberculosis, which doesn't make any sense. He squints at the screen for a few moments wondering if he's reading it right before he decides to follow up in the morning.

When he finally sits back, rubbing bleary eyes, it's almost four a.m. He's tired enough now that he
thinks he'll be able to snatch a few hours of sleep, and hopefully the smell of stale cigar will have cleared from his room. He feels a little guilty for how harsh he was with Eames, but that particular scent just overwhelms him, brings up bile in his throat, and he gets frantic to escape it; he's done and said far worse to partners and colleagues who've defied his ban on the foul things. He'll explain it in the morning, make it right.

The grass is chill and wet from the sea air, crisp under his bare feet as he moves from one cottage to the other. It's a clear night, still very dark, and the sound of the waves from the beach nearby is a soothing murmur all around him. He stands for a moment to take it in, and then, conscious of his cold feet, crosses the remaining distance to their sleeping cottage.

A window is open in the front room, and he frowns; it had been closed when he'd left two hours prior. He listens for movement within, but hears and sees nothing amiss. After a few minutes, his senses on full alert and his gun drawn, he cautiously slips inside.

The cottage is silent and dark. The front room is exactly as he'd left it, except that the cigar stench is gone from the room. His tired brain intuits a deliberate connection between that fact and the open window, and he relaxes suddenly and unthinkingly. He soundlessly closes the window again, locks the door, and heads down the hall to his own room.

His suspicions are borne out by the deep, regular breathing and rasping snores coming from under a mound of blankets on his bed. Eames twists the bedclothes up worse than anyone Arthur has ever shared a bed with -- even when he does nothing more strenuous than nap, he manages to leave a bed looking like he's been wrestling angry tigers in it -- and he has Arthur's sheets rucked up and tangled around his waist, while the coverlet is bunched around his chest and shoulders. Arthur almost absently notes that the room now smells like toothpaste and shampoo, the offensive tobacco odor gone entirely.

His lips quirk into a small, fond smile, and he strips off his clothes and begins tugging the blankets into some semblance of order. Eames stirs, and groggily moves to make room for Arthur in the bed.

"You left the window open," Arthur says softly, before climbing carefully over him to take the inside half of the bed. The pillow is a little damp from Eames' freshly-washed hair, but it smells good, clean, and he thinks he'll sleep well with the familiar scent against his face. The sheets are just this side of too-cool against his bare skin, and he wrestles the blanket away from where Eames is trying to roll himself up in it again.

"Sorry," Eames mumbles. "Wanted you to come back in." He abandons his blanket-rumpling and rolls himself up against Arthur, instead, and suddenly there is enough cover for both of them. He's wearing a thin t-shirt and boxers, and Arthur curls into him gratefully.

"Did you set an alarm?" he wants to know. Eames only shakes his head, the soft stubble on his cheek scratching against Arthur's shoulder while his bulky arm steals over Arthur's belly and a hairy leg insinuates itself over his thigh. Arthur feels a little like a child's teddy bear. It's not an unpleasant feeling, and he is deliciously warm this way, Eames' minty breath blowing softly across his neck, all his sleepy warmth dragging Arthur down into a pleasant half-awake haze.

"I'm sorry I was a dick," Arthur tells him, but Eames only hums at him, and then his breathing deepens and evens out again, and Arthur stops trying to think and follows him gratefully into blissful unconsciousness.
You Were Fast Asleep Tangled In The Sheets

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: discussion of immunodeficiency disorders and stripping.

Also, I ran out of "Amy, Amy, Amy" lyrics for chapter titles, so have some "Be Still My Heart" by the Postal Service instead.

When Arthur wakes in the morning, he finds Eames still curled beside him, playing Scrabble against himself on Arthur's tablet. He can hear Kefilwe up and moving around, and realizes that Eames must be trying to exercise tact and discretion by not emerging from Arthur's room in his underwear in front of her. Arthur doesn't mind, at least the part about Eames being in his bed; he does mind that Eames somehow got past the password protection on his tablet, but that's a losing battle to fight, and he knows it.

He rubs the sleep out of his eyes, yawns, and extricates himself from the mess of sheets, grabs his laptop from the table and clambers back over Eames, settling down to research that *Mycobacterium marinum* from du Toit's medical records. They don't talk, but Eames inches over until his hip and leg are pressed against Arthur's, and he's warm, and heavy on the mattress next to Arthur, and he smells good, and it's weirdly domestic, but comfortable.


It gets Arthur's attention; he tears himself away from his laptop screen and looks at Eames. "What about frogs?"

Eames rolls onto his side, props his head on his hand. He's wearing a nondescript, beat-up t-shirt, has bedhead, and his right cheek is creased from the pillow. Arthur can't remember the last time he'd slept with anyone so beautiful.

"What I learned last night, which you dismissed because you were so anxious to get me and my stench out of here. du Toit raises frogs. Has a whole house full of them, or at least that's what he told the lovely lady on his lap."


"Do tell," Eames invites, puzzled.

"Well, I looked at his medical records last night," Arthur informs him. "He has this recurring infection, a mycobacteria. And by recurring, I mean a *lot*. A couple times a year, for the past few years. From what I can tell, recurrence is really uncommon, and it's a pretty rare kind of infection to start with -- it happens mostly in people who work with fish or with aquariums. So the frogs could explain the source of the infections, but it's still weird that he would have it reoccur so often."

Eames frowns. "Never heard of it. Is it life threatening?"
"No, that's the funny thing. It's not dangerous or even a concern, really, except for people who are immune-compromised. Like this old guy in a case study, the infection was untreated for a long time and got into his bone marrow and he died, but he was diabetic and they think that made him more susceptible. But du Toit's not diabetic and all of his blood tests indicate normal immune functioning. At least, he's HIV negative. Like I said, it's just strange."

Eames lays back, ponders this. "You're sure about his exams?"

"Here, look." Arthur pulls up PDFs of du Toit's records, and they both sit up and peer at the screen. After a few minutes, Eames' eyes widen and he sits up straighter, takes the laptop away from Arthur.

"These tests are from different clinics," he says incisively, pointing. "Look at the lab addresses -- the orders are all placed from clinics in Cape Town, Belleville, George, Genadendal, Kogelburg... it looks like he's barely gone to the same provider twice. These couldn't have been done by SARU, half of these cities don't have teams or pitches."

Arthur curses himself for missing that. Now that he sees it, he recalls that Kluwers and Makenzie's records had all gone through the SARU medical facility in Port Elizabeth. It's very odd, to say the least, that du Toit would have had all of his SARU exams through different doctors in so many different towns. He pages through the out-of-town tests.

"These are all blood tests," he realizes aloud, with a sinking heart. He doesn't have to say anything else; Eames recognizes the implications as well as he does. The union requires the players to be tested for transmittable diseases before the start of each season; players with HIV or AIDS are expelled. General infection rates are so high in South Africa that despite the miniscule risk of transmission, the union takes no chances. If du Toit is hiding an immune-deficiency disease, he'll lose his professional sports status and his income, and be vulnerable to prosecution as well.

"Cash bribes for the clinics would explain why you can't find records of unusual purchases corresponding to the deposits," Eames points out grimly.

"They would," Arthur agrees, and sighs. His to-do list just increased exponentially. Although if he's honest with himself, he's ok with that -- this is the area he excels in, gathering data, tracking leads.

There's another problem, though. If du Toit is HIV positive, using the PASIV to extract from him presents a risk of infection. He chews his lip, thinking. He hasn't had much contact with Yusuf since the Fischer job -- the betrayal still irks him -- but Eames had mentioned a while back that Yusuf had been tinkering with a modification to the PASIV to allow for use with potentially infectious subjects. Obviously if there's any question of infection, they can't run the extraction; Arthur wouldn't expose himself or ask his team to, either.

Faintly, he hears the front door of the cottage close. Eames hears it too, and is up and out of bed in a flash. "Thought I was going to have to piss out your window soon," he says cheerfully, flashes Arthur a relieved grin, and is gone. The bathroom door shuts, and Arthur hears the shower start.

He dresses and sends a text asking Yusuf to contact him, splashing a few dollar signs at the end of the message, then heads over to their working cottage to update Kefilwe and see if she has any insights given this new information.

She looks faintly amused when he enters, and pointedly looks behind him for Eames, but doesn't say anything, other than "dumela rra."
"Dumela mma," he returns, and then "We think we have a problem."

She arches an eyebrow inquisitively, and he lays it all out for her: the frogs, the infections, the blood tests, the bribes. Somewhere in the middle he breaks off to ask, "what are you doing?"

Her laptop is open on her desk, and she appears to be taking notes on an episode of "The Sopranos." Some scene in the Bada Bing! club. As far as he knows, she doesn't have a personal aesthetic interest in female strippers, and whether she does or not, he's a little irritated that she's wasting time watching television instead of working.

"Eames, last night when you are asleep, says to me we should set the dream in a men's club," she explains. "I have never been there and he says I should look in movies. He said look for Showgirls and Striptease and Tony Soprano."

Arthur inhales, prepares to object -- he wasn't consulted, Eames can't just go assigning their architect to build things without talking to him -- but pauses. It's actually a pretty good idea. Since they can't get into du Toit's house, and they know he likes to spend time in strip clubs, it will be easy to build a generic club. Then a suspicion takes root, blooms in his mind.

"Did Eames say who he intended to forge?" he asks neutrally.

She chuckles. "A blonde woman. He said you will know her."

Does he ever. He remembers her from the Fischer job, but he's seen her on other jobs too; the blonde is Eames' go-to, her long legs, plump lips, huge blue eyes, and cascading platinum locks nearly universally appealing to men. He frowns, already anticipating what Eames has in mind for their script. Damn him.

"Keep working on it," he tells her, a bit grudgingly. He considers suggesting Dogma to her as well, but remembers that the strip club scene has that shit monster in it, and, no. Eames can point her to the movies he wants her to look at, Arthur's going to stay out of it.

He leaves her to her note-taking and checks his compiled phone record results from last night. There's a regular pattern of calls to and from two particular numbers in the Cape Town area. The timing doesn't work out for the rugby matches in question, but the concentration of calls to those numbers piques his interest, and he tracks the names: Arnaud and Thierry Matin. The last name is tantalizingly familiar, and he has to go his dossier before he finds it: Diane du Toit's maiden name was Matin.

A quick Google search (Arthur is a professional, but he's found many times that it's best to start with the broadest net possible and narrow it down from there) yields the intriguing information that both Arnaud and Thierry have been arrested multiple times on drug trafficking charges, as part of an organized crime crackdown in Cape Town in recent years. He's not sure this will yield useful information for their extraction, but something tells him to follow it anyway. He adds their names to last night's request for Diane's criminal history, and puts it on a priority track. It will cost him, but his Spidey sense is tingling, and he wants to pin this down now.

Eames strolls in a few minutes later, wearing an open-necked golden-green silk shirt that immediately makes Arthur feel nauseated, but which does coordinate nicely with the antique watch on his wrist. He spends the day working with Kefilwe, describing seating arrangements and private rooms to her, demonstrating pole dimensions with his hands, pulling up more movie and television clips from YouTube while she sketches and makes notes. They go under twice, emerging with fresh ideas, Eames holing up with his voice recorder in the other room and Kefilwe busying herself with modeling clay.
After their first trip down, Eames eyes Arthur warily. Arthur ignores the look, and feels just a trifle smug. Let Eames wonder if he's angry about being left out of the loop. It's not good for Eames to feel that he knows everything all the time.

By late afternoon, Arthur has a fairly clear picture of Diane du Toit nee Matin's history. She and her brother Arnaud were born in South Africa, but her parents were originally from France, immigrating just a few years before Arnaud's birth. Her mother has been dead for more than ten years, of natural causes as far as he can determine.

Diane was working as an exotic dancer, stage name Celeste, in a strip club in Cape Town when she met du Toit as part of a "Rugby Weekend" promotion at the club. They were married six months later, and she hasn't worked since, or at least, hasn't reported any income of her own. She travels with du Toit when the team has away games, and visits her family in Cape Town periodically, but doesn't have many female friends and keeps to herself while in Port Elizabeth. She doesn't have a criminal history of her own, but her father and brother have been in and out of jail, and he suspects she has access to the contacts she would need to find and retain doctors willing to accept bribes for faking blood tests.

Around 4:30, Arthur stands, stretches, realizes he's starving. They'd called in room service for lunch, but the resort food doesn't hold a candle to the local restaurants and cafes, and he's abruptly antsy, wanting to get out of this room, this cottage, and stretch his legs.

Also, Yusuf has responded to his text, and is sending him a technical paper on modifications to the PASIV that he swears will eliminate the potential for any backwash of infectious material from du Toit into the device, the hardware for which he is willing to ship to Arthur for "a modest fee" that makes Arthur cringe. He wants to talk this over with Eames, see if there's another option that doesn't mean capitulating to Yusuf's avarice.

"I need a break, and some food," he announces in the general direction of Kefilwe's desk, where she and Eames are not even pretending to be working anymore, both equally engrossed in the movie Magic Mike. Kefilwe simply waves him away with a "no, thank you," but Eames looks up as if to gauge the scope of the invitation, and something in Arthur's face (or maybe his own conscience, but Arthur doubts that) has him scrambling up out of his seat and over to where Arthur waits at the door. He notices that Kefilwe is smiling to herself a little at Eames' haste, but she says nothing more, and they leave the cottage for a small cafe just outside the resort, Eames trailing a step behind Arthur.

Before they get there, he stops, turns to face Eames. "I'm not mad," he says calmly. "I did kick you out of the room last night before you could say anything. And I think you made the right call." The trailing-behind business irritates him; he wishes the forger would just come out with what's on his mind, instead of engaging in this careful deference.

Eames pauses, then falls into step with him. "Split a Gatsby?" he suggests.

Arthur is agreeable, mostly. "If it's steak or chicken, not that polony lunchmeat stuff."

When they are settled on the cafe's patio with the sandwich between them, Arthur picks out the french fries from his half and carefully places them on the side of the plate to eat separately, while Eames simply digs into his, fries and all. They don't bother arguing about the right way to eat it; that had been fun the first four or five times they'd been here, but there isn't much point in repeating it ad infinitum.

"You realize we could stand to earn more from du Toit from our silence than we do for completing the job for the union," Eames points out when he's finished.
Arthur had realized it, and now he's angry at Eames for making him consider it again. Arthur is a criminal, true, but he's a purist; he doesn't do art heists, or pickpocket, or dabble in extortion. Nor is he about to doublecross his current employer and risk his dreamshare reputation, or for that matter, the health of the players who his silence would be condemning to play, unwittingly, with a potential vector of an incurable disease.

"No." His voice is flat.

Eames is not so easily deterred. "No you hadn't realized, or no you don't want to?" His tone remains light, and his mouth and eyes are just a fraction too innocent; it's not a serious inquiry, then.

Arthur snaps, glares at him. "You know very well which. And I don't appreciate being tested."

Eames nods, his face resuming its normal expression. "We're on the same page, then. Good to know."


When he goes to stand again, Eames surprises him by pulling his chair out, lightly touching Arthur's lower back as he walks down the short flight of steps to level ground. His face is thoughtful, and Arthur can't read the expression there. He walks close to Arthur, their shoulders bumping occasionally, and Arthur feels his irritation draining away.

When they reach the resort, Arthur goes to turn in, but Eames nudges his shoulder and continues walking instead. Arthur accompanies him, curious. Neither of them are really dressed for the beach, but when Eames cautiously picks his way across the sparse grass and out onto the narrow strip of hot sand, and sits, Arthur does the same, and watches Eames stare out over the waves.

"How certain are you?" Eames asks suddenly. "About his blood." He's still looking out across the water, not at Arthur.

"I don't know how to be certain without taking a sample," Arthur admits. "And you know how long it can take to get results back. We don't have that kind of time. It's just an informed guess."

"What about going to one of the doctors directly?" he suggests, and finally meets Arthur's eyes. Arthur can see, now, what's behind that thoughtful expression on Eames' face. It's fear, and Arthur can understand that, understands better why Eames asked about blackmailing du Toit instead of carrying out the job.

He considers the proposal. Technically, intimidating a doctor or breaking into his files would fall under the rubric of "dreamshare," at least for this job, so he wouldn't be violating his own rule about extracurricular crime. "What's the closest one?"

"Grahamstown. About an hour and a half east. Dr. Nusrat Khali."

That's not that far out of the way. If Arthur hurries to track Khali's home address, they could probably go tonight. He says so, and is surprised when Eames vehemently negatives the idea. "We don't want to be driving a rental car on these rural highways late at night, love. And I doubt you want to stay there overnight after threatening a local."

Good point. "Ok, what do you suggest, then?"

"We'll go in tomorrow. Drive in the morning. I'll offer him a bribe to run me a clean blood test,
see if he bites, and if he does, use that to get the information about du Toit out of him. How are you fixed for petty cash?"

It can't hurt, they'll only lose half a day at most, and Kefilwe can keep working on her models while they're gone. Arthur's head starts nodding his answer before his mouth can get there. "I have about 2,000 rand on hand. We'd need to go to SARU for more, or front it ourselves. It's enough for you to have a fat wad of bills to show him, anyway -- I assume you're not going to leave him with any."

Eames looks relieved, and it's settled, then.

"Oh," Arthur remembers. "Yusuf says we can retrofit the PASIV to avoid any contamination -- he's used it in his dream den, you'd mentioned it to me a while back. He wants $10,000 U.S. for the hardware, though. Do you have any way to get him to lower that, or know of any other sources you trust?"

"That wanker," Eames laughs. "Yeah, I'll lean on him a little. Leave him to me."

They're alone on the beach, and Arthur feels bold enough to nudge his hand closer to Eames' in the sand, just resting two fingers over Eames' twisted pinky. Eames tilts his head slightly at Arthur, his grey eyes soft and a faint smile on his lips.

"So, the blonde," Arthur says levelly.

"He likes blondes," Eames responds, not quite evasively.

"Then I'm sure he'll like this one."

Eames glances at him shrewdly. "You said you weren't angry, darling."

"I'm not," Arthur admits. "I just don't like the idea of watching you give a lap dance."

"You know I'll need to practice on you, if that helps," Eames tells him. "Believe it or not, I haven't done this before. Not as a woman, anyway."

Arthur feigns shock, and Eames shoves his shoulder, grinning.

"What?" Arthur asks. "How hard can it be? You just shake your tits and ass and prance around and undress and wiggle on the guy's lap, right?"

Eames' face is a study, as if he can't tell if Arthur is joking or not. "You really don't get out much, do you?" he asks, finally.

"The atmosphere of those places is a huge turnoff," Arthur responds hotly. "Guys who can't get laid, paying money to sit together getting hard in their pants watching strange women take their clothes off for money. No, I'd rather have honest, mutual, face to face sex with someone who's not doing it out of coercion, or as an... economic transaction, thanks."

Eames shakes his head, slowly. "That's as may be. I'm not defending the politics of the places. Just saying -- if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right, and doing it right for a connoisseur like du Toit involves more art than just shaking one's tits and wiggling."

Arthur lacks the experience to be able to refute this principle, so he just shrugs. "You're the expert," he says sourly.
"Look, pet, I don't go to clubs recreationally, and I prefer honest, mutual, non-economically-driven sexual partners myself, but sometimes needs must. All right?” He sounds more resigned than angry, and Arthur realizes he's not being entirely fair.

"Yeah. Let me know if you need me to torrent some training videos for you, or something," he offers, and squeezes Eames' hand with an apologetic smile.

Eames returns it. "Thank you, darling. I would, actually." He stands up, then, brushing the sand off his pants, and holds a hand out to Arthur. "Shall we head back? I think she's had enough private time with *Magic Mike* by now."
So I Didn't Change My Shirt

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: some unspoken, un-explicitly-negotiated D/S elements.

When they return to the cottage, Eames retrieves his forgery materials from his room and busies himself in one of the back bedrooms of the cottage. The pungent scent of his inks and solvents, faintly detectable from Arthur's desk in the front room, is both familiar and reassuring. He doesn't bother asking what Eames is doing; he trusts that he has good reason for whatever he's working on back there.

Kefilwe wants Arthur to go under with her to look at her initial design for the club. He doesn't want to admit his lack of experience to her the way he had to Eames, so he shrugs, sets up the PASIV, hooks them both up, pushes the button.

She and Eames have already developed a working model, and it's quite a bit classier than Arthur had expected. They're standing in a large, square room with navy walls and a single, oval-shaped stage in the center. It's ringed with deep blue leather club chairs with wide seats and sturdy armrests. Small white lights twinkle, star-like, in the black ceiling, and microscopic fiber optic filaments spray out over the stage area. A bar is inset into one corner of the room, and doors open into the other three corners. The walls are lined with dark leather bench seats behind small round tables. There is a low ambient lighting from sconces on the walls, and spotlights converge on the stage from above each door.

He whistles, impressed already. There's a curious flatness to the decor -- they haven't worked out all of the textures or materials yet, and from overhearing their discussions earlier, he knows they're planning to fill in the walls with erotic art -- but it's well on its way to completeness.

A few projections mill around, but they're all club staff, cleaning the tables and vacuuming the floor and ignoring the two of them. He turns to Kefilwe, puzzled, and she says in a low tone, "It is 9 in the morning. No customers."

And that's -- huh. Kind of brilliant, actually. He's unsurprised when she tells him it was Eames' idea.

Kefilwe indicates the door diagonal from the bar, where Arthur will serve as the bouncer. It's an easy excuse for him to be well armed.

"There should be an entry vestibule, where someone coming in has to go through two doors, not just one, to get in," he says. "The doors shouldn't open at the same time."

"Very well."

"What are the other two?"

She points to one -- "where the ladies dress" -- and leads him to the other and down a hallway -- "private rooms." There are six doors in the hallway, all closed, and an elevator set into the end of the hall.
"We go down, to another hall, with a room for him to dance in," she tells Arthur. He can feel his jaw tighten, but he nods.

"That would be helpful in controlling and minimizing projections," he agrees. They go down one level, and emerge into an identical hallway.

"Choose your door," she says. "They are all empty now, but he has told me what to put in it."

He thinks about it, then heads to the door furthest down the hall. No sense placing them any closer to an entry point than they need to, if the projections get riled up. He opens it, and stares. It's an empty box, white walls and floor and ceiling, lit only from the chandelier in the hallway.

As he watches, the walls darken to a charcoal grey, and the floor becomes walnut parquet. A lighter grey tile dance floor, about four feet square, appears in the center of the floor, with a recessed light directly overhead and a pole running from floor to ceiling. Additional concealed lights flare up around the perimeter of the ceiling, and then dim themselves. A low, flat velvet couch -- one long cushion, no pillows -- materializes against the wall facing the door.

"A little deeper burgundy, maybe," he suggests, and the couch shimmers and darkens.

"There will be a safe," Kefilwe says. "For his wallet, before the lady comes in. And for his secrets. It opens in the other room, too."

Arthur feels his face go grim. He knows who is going to have to play the role of pimp, here, and he's not looking forward to it. "Show me."

She holds his eyes for a minute, but doesn't comment, just turns and squints at the wall. A safe appears, inset into the wall, with a keypad entry for the lock.

"Put a table just below it, something plain, dark wood. And a smaller one, next to the couch." She does. Then the wall on the other side of the couch wavers, and a door-sized mirror solidifies there.

"There will be art, here and here," she says, indicating. "And a camera," she points to one corner of the ceiling.

Again, the effect of the whole is surprisingly more upscale than he'd thought it would be. He makes a mental note to ask Eames why that is -- Arthur's own limited experience with such clubs is that tacky and tawdry are the name of the game, but maybe they do it differently here than at home. "How are we fixed for escape routes?"

Kefilwe smiles. "Open the mirror." He walks up to it, looks for a handle, then presses gently at the middle left edge. There is a soft click, and it obediently swings open into another room, with a staircase going up. He nods approvingly.

"They go up to dressing rooms from this hall. Elevator locks; you will have key access."

"This is very good," he tells her, and she beams. They walk up the stairs, and he suggests a few other security measures, but what they have already will be perfectly serviceable for the job.

They kick themselves out, and when he has cleaned and put away the PASIV, he pokes his head into the room Eames was using. His materials are still there, and a certificate on heavy paper stock in a language Arthur can't read but he thinks is some variant of Scandinavian is drying on the table, but Eames is nowhere to be seen. He isn't in the main room, either. Arthur shrugs, and sets himself to the task of finding stripping and lap dance instructional videos.
It turns out there's no shortage of videos; the trick is finding ones that actually purport to instruct and aren't just plain old porn. After an hour and a half, he's assembled what he thinks is a good start. Eames can give him more direction if there's some particular trick or style he wants.

He unwinds himself gracefully from his chair. He's not hungry yet, and he's ready to put work away, but it's still too warm out to go for a run outside. He decides to head to the resort's fitness center instead, hit the treadmill, run through his mental to-do list for the next job for a little while.

When he gets there, he hears familiar rhythmic pants from the free weights area, and pauses to watch Eames finish his pullups. Eames catches his eye and winks. He's wearing a ribbed white tank top and loose black shorts, and Arthur has to turn away before he can quell the surge of interest in his groin at the sight. It doesn't matter how stunning the blonde woman forge is, he thinks; she'll never eclipse the gorgeous sensuality of Eames in his own liberally-inked, masculine skin, all curves and flat slabs of muscle and his classically handsome face to top it off.

Twenty minutes later, he's settled in to a solid pace on the treadmill when Eames stops by, towelling his hair dry and still breathing a little heavily. Arthur slows down, tells him "It looks great down there. You two did good work."

The answering smile and duck of the head are almost shy, but undeniably pleased. "She's a quick study."

"You going out again tonight?"

Eames shakes his head, wraps the towel over his shoulders. "No, thought I'd work on my skill set this evening. I've a good idea of what he likes already, just need to figure out how to make it happen."

"I left you a folder with instructional videos," Arthur tells him, panting slightly. He can smell fresh sweat, a faint trace of body odor and the wintergreen candy Eames chews after sneaking a cigarette. He remembers Eames telling him that scent is a direct line into a subject's limbic system, and... yeah. It certainly seems to be for him.

"Thanks, love," he murmurs, touching Arthur's upper arm briefly, and turns to leave.

"Eames," Arthur says, almost involuntarily. "Don't -- don't shower."

Eames turns, his eyebrows raising and his mouth slack with surprise, which rapidly shades into a sensual grin. He pauses to look Arthur slowly up and down, and Arthur feels himself flush, both at the scrutiny and at his own boldness.

"All right," he says simply, and goes.

Arthur does another twenty minutes, showers -- maybe it's not fair, but Eames didn't make a reciprocal request -- and dresses. He finds Eames and Kefilwe perusing erotic art on her laptop in their work cottage. Eames has changed out of his sweaty workout clothes and run a comb through his hair, but Arthur can tell from the way it curls against his neck, and the damp patches in his clean shirt, that he hasn't washed. His nostrils flare slightly, imagining the heavy musk that will have coalesced around Eames' groin, the rich, sharp scent of his underarms, how salty his neck and nipples will taste.

Kefilwe seems to have noticed it too, though less approvingly; her nose wrinkles faintly as Eames leans close to her, pointing at something on the screen, and then her eyes stray speculatively from Eames to where Arthur sits, longing clear in his dark eyes. Eames says something in a low tone,
and she turns back to the screen, responds in Afrikaans.

Arthur tries to focus, he really does, but he can't stop thinking about Eames, about how his scent seemed to drive right into Arthur's brain stem. He drafts a status report and updates their expenses log and wonders how long he will have to wait before he can get Eames alone. His cock stirs, and he shifts, trying to make it subside through sheer force of will.

As if she's read his mind, Kefilwe stands abruptly. "I will go, bring food. Braai?"

Arthur feels the tips of his ears go hot. Eames, unflappable, tells her "that would be splendid, thank you" and doesn't look away from the screen in front of him until she's out the door. Then his head swivels slowly toward Arthur, his long lashes shading his eyes.

"Come here," Arthur orders. Eames goes still for a second, and then rises from his chair. His movements are slow, deliberate, and his face is expressionless. For a moment, Arthur thinks maybe he isn't going to move any further, but then he saunters toward where Arthur still sits behind his desk, and any illusion Arthur has that he'll be the one calling the shots this round goes right out the window.

Eames seems to have at once drawn himself up, and settled down heavily into his own bulk; the aura he gives off is that of a much larger man. He looms over Arthur, somehow, as he stands silently next to his chair. His eyes are dark, half-lidded, but there's a spark in them Arthur doesn't think he's seen before. It intrigues him, makes him wary as well.

"Go wait for me in the back room," he tells Arthur quietly, his voice deep and authoritative, with a hint of a growl. Arthur finds himself complying without hesitation.

The room still smells of the inks and chemicals Eames was using earlier, but it's faint and unobtrusive. He sits tentatively on the bed; he's not sure what "waiting" encompasses, but if this is how Eames wants to play it, ok. Having been given no further direction, he decides not to improvise.

It's several minutes before Eames appears in the doorway, long enough that Arthur has time for second thoughts, and time to decide not to act on them. He closes the door behind him and begins unbuttoning his shirt. He says nothing to Arthur, but their eyes lock, and Arthur's palms become damp where they rest on the bedspread. He hesitantly moves them to his own shirt buttons, but Eames shakes his head very slightly, and Arthur drops them again, sits passively. While he is outwardly still, inside he feels anticipatory, flammable, as if he will explode instantly if Eames says just the right word or touches him just the right way.

His shirt gone, Eames starts on his pants, leaving them on but unbuttoned and unzipped. He's commando under them, and his heavy, uncut girth is visibly half hard already. He pulls it fully out, strokes it, his eyes boring into Arthur's. In the small room, Arthur can smell him more clearly, and his mouth waters at the thought of getting his mouth, his nose, buried in the neatly trimmed hair there, tasting the salt of his skin.

"Come here," Eames says, one eyebrow raised. It is deliberate echo of Arthur's own command, but there is an "or else" in his voice that Arthur had omitted, and there is a strange thrill deep in his belly at the sound of it. Swiftly, he rises and stands before Eames, his eyes steadily gazing into the dark grey depths in front of him.

Eames lays a hand on his shoulder, and Arthur is moving almost before he pushes down on it, sinking to his knees and inhaling all that hot lovely vulgar scent, sweat and musk and precum and whatever pheromone it is that makes cock smell like cock. He closes his eyes and just breathes,
and Eames' hand tenses, then relaxes where it remains on his shoulder. His other hand strokes Arthur's cheek, then cradles the back of his head and nudges. Arthur goes willingly, bends forward and takes the head of it into his mouth, pulls gently with his lips, then goes deeper, does it properly, all spit and lips and tongue and suction, as Eames inhales sharply.

He can see Eames above him if he cranes his neck, rolls his eyes up; that expanse of bare, golden skin, the sublime V of muscle delineating his hips and pointing directly down at his groin, the glitter of his dark grey eyes as he watches his own length disappear into Arthur's mouth. There's something perverse about what they're doing, Arthur fully and neatly dressed, clean and deodorized and brushed and proper, on his knees with spit running down his chin in front of the half-naked, tattooed, sweaty Eames. The thought of it makes him even harder, and his hips rock minutely as he kneels there.

Eames must notice, or be operating according to some timetable in his head that just happens to coincide with Arthur's increasing need, because he pulls out between one breath and another, leaving Arthur panting there, his hands gripping his own thighs.

"Take off your clothes," Eames tells him, and drops his own trousers to puddle carelessly on the floor. He lies back on the bed, stroking himself idly, watching as Arthur scrambles to his feet and unbuttons his shirt and pants. He tries to do it gracefully, erotically, and fails; he has to concede that maybe Eames has a point about stripping being more than just taking off one's clothes. But Eames doesn't seem to mind, or maybe he awards points for enthusiasm, because Arthur may not be artfully seductive, but he is certainly efficient.

"You're lovely," he says softly, breaking character, and then his features go hard again, his voice resumes its commanding growl. "Lie down."

Arthur does, and is both gratified and a little offended when Eames swiftly straddles his chest, his cock and balls right there in Arthur's face. The rich scent of him is dizzying, delicious, but Arthur waits; somehow he knows there's more direction, that Eames wants him to remain pliant, biddable, not to take initiative. He's not wrong.

"You may resume," Eames tells him, a little condescendingly, sounding bored. Arthur does. This is not how they fuck. They haven't been fucking that long, true, but it's been long enough that there's a way of it, and this is not it. This is them playing, experimenting a little, and it's directly tied into the role Eames will be playing in London, and they both know that, are willing to stretch their boundaries a little and see where it takes them. So far, Arthur is perfectly content with it -- maybe even a little more than that. Eames' hand in his hair, being pinned by those powerful thighs, the note of command in his voice... it works for him.

His own neglected cock twitches, untouched, and Eames can't possibly see it out of the back of his head, but somehow he knows to reach back, and then he's stroking Arthur roughly, just this side of painfully. It's too much, he's overwhelmed, his senses flooded, and the extra thrill of being dominated, ordered around, when they both know Arthur could resist and put up a more than fair fight if he wanted to, sends him over the edge.

Eames seems to have been waiting for him, because his shallow thrusts into Arthur's mouth abruptly become deeper, harder, and his weight settles more firmly on Arthur's chest. Arthur is not 100% sure he cares for this part of it. It feels impersonal, suddenly, and he panics and gags. Eames immediately pulls out and eases his weight off of Arthur's ribs, looks him in the eye until Arthur stops choking and gives him a go-ahead nod, and then without ado brings himself off onto Arthur's neck and chest.
When he collapses down next to Arthur, his demeanor has changed, become softer, more affectionate; he curls, leech-like, around Arthur, heedless of the come spattering his skin, and wraps him up in that teddy bear embrace again. Arthur relaxes, breathes him in, lets himself drowse for a few moments. Then:

"You're going to be amazing, up there," Arthur tells him honestly. His voice is only a little scratchy. "They're going to be smothering you in panties and room keys."

Eames laughs out loud. "It's Royal Shakespeare, Arthur, not the Rolling Stones."

Arthur shakes his head stubbornly. "Doesn't matter. You're fucking incredible like this. Women are going to be crawling all over you."

He earns a sweet, crooked smile and a nuzzle of his ear for that. "Too bad for them that I prefer stubborn, brilliant, devastatingly handsome point men, then," and damn if that doesn't do something funny in Arthur's chest.

Eames traces his hand down Arthur's sticky skin. "May I shower now, darling? I think I've offended Kefilwe's delicate sensibilities."

Arthur pretends to think it over. "I did sort of want you all stinky still in my bed tonight," he confesses. "But if you're not comfortable like this, go wash."

"Stinky."

"..In a good way." He rubs his nose against Eames' hair. "You smell like you, only more so."

Eames' chest quakes in a silent chuckle. "You smell like... bleach." He sniffs. "And mushrooms."

"Oh God," Arthur says, sitting up and pushing him away. "No. The romance is gone. You killed it."

"Nothing wrong with smelling like honest come, love. You earned it," Eames tells him earnestly, but he can't keep a straight face, and neither can Arthur.

If Kefilwe notices, later, that the bathroom in their work cottage is moist and steamy, and that the floor and towels -- and Arthur and Eames -- are noticeably damp, she doesn't say anything.
A Lingering Taste In My Mouth

They leave early in the morning, Arthur driving this time so Eames can spend the time settling into his persona. He informs Arthur that for the next several hours, his name is Willem Kruger. He wants to chat with Arthur in Willem's slangy *Afrikaans* accent, describe Willem's background and family and his *lekker* job as a bartender, where he gets all the fine *stekkies, bru*.

Arthur feeds him small talk to respond to, and internally marvels at the transformation.

Eames has done something to his hair -- it's lighter in color, tangled and spiky -- and shaved his face, which now looks several years younger. He's wearing a loose black tank top, cargo shorts, flip flops, a couple of chains around his neck and heavy rings on his fingers. There's even green contact lenses, and an earring, which puzzles Arthur until Eames shows him it's magnetic. Temporary designs interweave with his actual tattoos, obscuring and expanding them down his forearms and up his neck. He's carrying himself taller and lankier, somehow, and his eyes are round and his lips are thinner, his voice higher and a bit nasal.

Although he's 36, he could pass for a man in his mid-twenties, one of those guys who would have been a frat brother if he'd gone to college but chooses to live in a beach town with an undemanding job, pretending he's forever twenty-one, instead. He's still handsome, though he looks as much unlike his normal self as Arthur's ever seen him in real life.

The story is straightforward. Willem Kruger is a South African citizen traveling to Sweden to visit an ill grandfather. The consulate is requiring a blood test and certification of HIV-status before he'll be permitted to enter the country, he's supposed to leave in four days, and he'd foolishly failed to have his blood tests done in time to get the certification completed. A customer at the bar he works at suggested that Dr. Khali could help him "expedite" his tests to show the expected negative result, for a special fee. He has the certificate ready right here, Dr. Khali simply needs to fill it out, and perhaps he could backdate it just a bit?

If Khali takes the bait, Eames will lean on him, and threaten to expose him to the authorities unless he reveals Matheiu du Toit's blood results. He has a Beretta tucked into the waistband of his cargo shorts if there's any trouble. Arthur will wait in the car, out of sight of the clinic, so they can make a rapid getaway; Eames can change in the car.

Kruger will be memorable, unavoidably, but anyone looking for him wouldn't suspect him to be in Arthur's expensively dressed and humorless ("Oh, fuck you, Eames.") presence, or look twice at the sleek, well-groomed Englishman. They'll be Stephen and Tony again, a tourist couple out for a day of wine tasting in the area, if stopped.

Arthur can't see anything wrong with it. If Khali doesn't bite, or it turns out du Toit's blood is fine, they'll have more research to do, try to find another angle into why his tests are so shady, but they won't be any further behind than they were yesterday. Eames has talked Yusuf down to $5,000 for the modifying hardware, and talked Arthur into taking it. It will arrive by courier tomorrow, and they'll have time to test it and decide if it's worth risking the extraction.

"Did you create that certificate from scratch?" he asks curiously. It looks like the real deal, with Swedish and English and even a seal indented into the paper.

"Don't be daft," Eames snorts, reverting to his own voice. "I called Maarit and asked her to fax me a form from the consulate, then copied it to a heavier stock and inked it. The seal is a generic one and it's simple enough to inscribe the royal motto into it."
"How much did that cost you?" Arthur has worked with Maarit several times; she's a competent architect, and he's happy to have her on his teams, but he's never known her to do anyone a favor that didn't cost an arm and a leg.

Eames looks smug. "Not a dime. She's a very generous girl, you just have to know how to ask the right way."

The way he says it, Arthur's not sure he wants to know, or think about, what the right way involves, and if it has anything to do with how undeniably, blondly attractive she is. He goes quiet. Eames sees it, and elaborates.

"She served as the subject in a dream on a trial run once, when I was extractor. I found some things that she doesn't care to have made general knowledge." His heavy, heavily-ringed hand settles on the back of Arthur's neck, scratches nails lightly into his hairline. "Feeling jealous, darling?"

Arthur sighs. "If the two of us went through everyone we'd slept with in dreamshare, it would probably last most of the rest of this drive, wouldn't it?"

He sees Eames' wry smile out of the corner of his eye. His fingers keep lightly stroking, scratching through Arthur's hair, soothing him. "It's a small community, I doubt it would take that long. But are you sure you want to have this conversation?"

Arthur's already shaking his head. "No. I don't need to know, unless it would impact a job, or affect who you'd want on a team. You're clean, I'm clean, let's leave it at that."

"All right. If that's what you want," Eames agrees, but then says apologetically, "...Except, Ariadne."

He can't tell if Eames is confessing, or asking something, and didn't they just agree not to talk about conquests? His forehead knits together in confusion, and Eames continues. "On the Fischer job. In the hotel lobby."

Oh. "You saw that, huh."

"I did."

"Then you saw the complete lack of any chemistry between us." Arthur doesn't like to think about that; it had been a miscalculation on his part. He'd seen Dom make the trick work, once, but that had been with Mal, and Mal had been crazy about Dom since she'd first laid eyes on him. In contrast, Ariadne had been scared, and inexperienced in dreamshare, and -- he'd realized as soon as his lips touched hers-- not attracted to him, and it hadn't fazed the projections for a second.

It's not an issue for him and Ari, they've worked together several times since and tacitly agreed to never speak of it again, but obviously it hasn't been settled in Eames' mind. He hadn't known Eames had seen the kiss, actually.

Eames shrugs. "I wasn't exactly close enough to observe the nuance."

"Yeah, well. There is and was nothing happening there. You know, you touch her a lot more than I ever have," Arthur can't resist adding, and is gratified when Eames looks a little sheepish.

"She squeaks so delightfully," he explains. Arthur knows what he means, even if it would never have occurred to him to try to elicit said squeaks. But Eames goes on, his voice serious. "If it truly disturbs you, I'll stop."
Arthur is unexpectedly touched, but shakes his head. He thinks, maybe, he can handle seeing it if he knows it's not sexual. And there's another thing: "If you stop fondling everyone you work with, they'll know something's up with you and someone," he points out.

Eames' face falls, just slightly. "True," he says neutrally. "And that would be bad."

Arthur meets his eyes in the rearview mirror. "It wouldn't be safe. You know that."

The conversation is cut short by their arrival on the outskirts of Grahamstown. Arthur's not dumb enough to think that it's over, not by a long shot, but they both need their head in the game until they've got the information they need.

Eames squints at the printed map and directs Arthur to a storefront in a newer strip mall building downtown, cozied between a furniture store and a hair salon.

The actual extortion is pretty anti-climactic, from Arthur's point of view. He drops Eames off around the corner of the building, circles the block, and pulls up to wait in front of the next building over, keeping the car running. Fifteen minutes later, he spots Eames in the side mirror, walking casually but quickly toward the car; he reaches over to unlock the passenger door, Eames slides in, and they're off again.

Arthur swiftly maneuvers them out of the town proper and back onto the highway; he can't be completely sure yet, but he doubts they've been followed.

Eames' face is a mix of satisfaction and disgust as he reaches into the back seat, rummages through the open duffel bag there, and begins rapidly divesting himself of the Willem Kruger persona. "We were right."

"About...?" Arthur prompts, when Eames seems more interested in taking off his jewelry than in talking.

Eames scowls. "All of it. du Toit's blood, this rotter's little side business. He's a greedy bastard, too, wanted twice what I offered. du Toit paid him in cash, as we suspected."

The earring, chains, rings and contact lenses go into containers and disappear into the duffel bag. He briskly wipes his arms and neck down with alcohol-soaked pads, removing the fake tattoos, before swapping his black tank top for a white undershirt and pulling on a finely woven, three-quarter-sleeve lavender sweater over it.

"You got the money back, right?" Arthur can't help it, he's the one responsible for their budget here.

Eames shoots him a dirty look, but nods. He produces the wad of rand, waves it at Arthur, and tucks it and his gun carefully into the glove box.

Swearing a little at the cramped conditions of their little rental car, he wriggles out of his cargo shorts, revealing pale lavender bikini briefs. Arthur looks askance at the latter.

"What," Eames says defensively, and holds up a pair of bone-colored linen trousers. "I know you prefer the black trunks, but I could hardly wear them under these."

"Of course not," Arthur agrees, but he doesn't bother hiding his amusement. He reaches out, drags one finger along the outline of Eames' quiescent cock through the thin cotton. It twitches with interest, and Eames gives him a surprised, saucy grin before shimmying into the trousers and diving into the backseat again to dig a pair of grey suede loafers and a leather belt out of the bag.
His transformation is almost complete, and his mood has suddenly improved.

Arthur's mind churns. "We'll need to test Yusuf's adapter right away, then. Or -- we should talk about whether we even want to go through with the extraction. We could just give the SARU what we have, take a lower payout, let them worry about connecting the dots."

Eames pauses. "Let me think about it for a bit." He mists water from a small bottle all around his head, and begins brushing his tousled hair down into its usual sleek style. He's maybe a little too bulky in the arms to really pull off the pastel colors he's wearing, but his overall appearance screams "harmless," not to mention "wealthy tourist;" he'll do.

"Money problems?" Arthur guesses. He gives Eames a shrewd side-eye, and doesn't miss the way Eames' lower lip faintly dips inward for a second; Eames thinks if he bites his lip internally, it doesn't show, and Arthur's not about to disabuse him of that notion. It's a useful tell, if you know what you're looking for.

Eames' eyes flicker toward him. "Perhaps."

"Gambling?"

"Piss off, darling," Eames tells him pleasantly but warningly, and Arthur leaves it alone.

"You did well there," he says instead. "You've been doing well -- this job has run incredibly smoothly."

"A little too smoothly, perhaps." Eames sounds glum.

Arthur turns to look at him, puzzled. "What does that mean?"

Eames reaches out, settles his right hand tentatively on Arthur's leg. "It's going very quickly. And then you're back to the States for a month, and I'm off to the dear old dreary mother country on my own."

He immediately covers Eames' hand with his. Eames has no trouble showing physical affection, or sprinkling endearments into conversation, but verbal expressions of how he's actually feeling about Arthur are few and far between, and Arthur believes in positive reinforcement.

"You still want me there, then?" he asks, just to make sure.

Eames hastens to reassure him. "I do. Want you there." His voice is earnest, but a little too hurried, when he continues: "There's plenty of room, there's even a spare room you can co-opt, you'll have as much privacy as you like. You needn't worry about me smothering you."

Well, that's just odd, frankly, because Arthur has never raised a concern about having enough space or privacy. He has, again, the walking-on-quick sand feeling that he can't read Eames; his tone and words and demeanor are shifting too quickly for Arthur to follow. "What if I want to be smothered?" he says in a level voice.

Eames doesn't respond right away, so Arthur goes on. He hadn't meant to push this, not now, but he's tired of Eames' too-careful casualness; wants to know what he's getting himself into. "I know you don't want to put a name to it, but I'd feel better if I had some more clarity about what you think we're doing here."

Eames looks troubled, glances out the window, and doesn't answer. Irritation goads Arthur into directness. Maybe, he thinks, it will be easier for Eames to tell him what he wants, rather than what
"Are we on the same page?" he asks, frustrated. "Alec." Eames meets his eyes, finally. "What do you want from me? From this? No jokes," he adds sternly, seeing a familiar lift of the eyebrows that tells him a quip is making its way from Eames' brain to his mouth.

Eames closes his mouth again, shuts his eyes, and recalibrates for a moment. In a measured tone, but without looking at Arthur, he says "I want to share your bed while we're here, and I want you with me, in London, during the run. I want to keep working with you, and I want to see you sometimes between jobs, too. I don't want to fuck anyone else, and I don't want you to fuck anyone else. I don't want to feel like we have to conceal it. I don't see an end in sight for wanting those things."

Arthur nods unsteadily, and has to clear his throat before he can get words out. "That sounds like the right page." After a minute, he turns his head, looks directly at Eames' profile. His jaw is faintly clenched and he's staring straight ahead, as if he's just had to endure some sort of ordeal.

"Alec." His voice is gentle this time, and internally he still thrills, just a bit, that he's allowed to use this name, a secret between the two of them, and that Eames likes him using it. "Is it really so hard to say?"

He halfway expects to be told to piss off again, but Eames surprises him by shaking off the tension in his face and neck, and taking a deep breath instead. His hand flexes on Arthur's thigh.

"I told you, this hasn't worked out for me before," he says in a low voice. "I don't know what I'm doing, what's... too much. Or not enough." He meets Arthur's eyes, then, and there's honest distress and unease in his face.

Arthur's driving, dammit, and he can't wrap his arms around Eames like he'd like to right now, but he can stroke his hand, and twine their fingers together on his lap, so he does that. "You're doing fine," he assures him. "There's no too much. I like this. I just need some..."

"...specificity," Eames finishes, in perfect unison with Arthur. He smirks, grips Arthur's hand more firmly so Arthur can't punch him.

"And apparently a bigger vocabulary."

"Your vocabulary is just fine. Your pronunciation, though..." Eames shakes his head in mock sorrow. He's loosened his grip on Arthur's hand, so Arthur is able to land a swift poke in his ribs for that.

"We can't all be polyglots," Arthur says with dignity.

Eames smiles, but it fades suddenly from his face. He's looking in the rearview mirror. "There's a winery coming up shortly. Pull off there, will you?"

Arthur feels a chill prickle the back of his neck. "Are you thirsty, or do we have trouble?" He hasn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, but then, he's been a little wrapped up in the conversation. He's careful not to look too quickly in the mirrors or change the speed he's driving; he trusts Eames and whatever he's seen, or thinks he's seen.

"Can't tell. Do it casually," Eames responds tersely. His body language is loose and relaxed, but it is belied by the tension in his voice. He reaches up to stroke Arthur's neck and hairline again, leaving his hand there, and Arthur relaxes a fraction at the touch.
The Van Vroek winery is just a few minutes further down the highway; Arthur recognizes it from the drive in this morning. The tasting room is a low, dun-colored building, with large windows and a sloped terracotta roof. They park near, but not directly in front of, the building, and Arthur tucks his Glock into a holster under his jacket.

Eames, unexpectedly, produces a small, rectangular leather bag with a long strap out of the duffel in the backseat. He stashes his Beretta and the money from the glovebox in it, snaps it closed, slings it crosswise over his torso, and blinks innocently at Arthur, who is staring at him in dismay.

"Ea-- Stephen, that's a man purse."

"No, it's a camera bag," Eames says calmly. "Shall we?" He holds his arm out, and Arthur takes it, a bit sulkily.

He himself owns several expensive and well-styled messenger bags, but his personal aesthetic for menswear does not extend to purses. He has to admit that Eames has accessorized well with his outfit, though, and obviously Willem Kruger wouldn't be caught dead wearing a purse; Eames has probably made the right call, here.

As they enter the building, a dusty white sedan pulls into the parking lot behind them. Eames squeezes Arthur's arm in warning, and then strides up to the tasting counter as if nothing is amiss. By the time the inhabitants of the white car -- two men, both East Asian, in loud button-down shirts and dark pants -- walk through the door, Eames is nose-deep in a balloon glass, exclaiming rapturously in his plummiest accent about the notes of pear and straw in the nose of the white wine in his hand.

"You really must try this one, sweetheart," he urges Arthur, and waves the glass under his face. "It's marvelous." His face is too blandly polite for that to be anything but deliberate, and Arthur is going to get him for it, later. But for now, he plays along, sticks his nose into the glass and inhales deeply, ignoring the men behind him even though all of his instincts are shouting at him to turn around, draw, eliminate the threat.

"Didn't I tell you?" Eames asks, and literally bats his long eyelashes at Arthur. Arthur has to close his eyes before they can glare. He conceals it by sniffing over the glass again. He's not a wine connoisseur by any means, but he thinks he detects a note of... another whiff...

"Honey," he says, surprised. He takes a sip. It's sweeter than he generally prefers, but it's not bad.

Eames' face lights up. "Oh, excellent! You're developing a knack for this, darling. Do you think we should buy it? Maybe just one bottle. And let's try the sauvignon blanc next, please," he says to the attendant.

He's apparently oblivious to the presence of the other men, but Arthur knows him better than that, knows he's letting his rich, educated, undeniably upper-class British voice, his expensive pastel sweater and sleek hair and man purse, and his slightly tipsy, overly affectionate demeanor do their work. Arthur watched him change and still almost can't believe he's the same man as the brash, tattooed, gangling Kruger. Someone who doesn't know him, even if they're suspicious, shouldn't be able to note any similarities beyond generic height and coloring.

The men behind them are staring out the window, talking in low voices in what sounds like...Pakistani...? to Arthur's untrained ear. (Eames probably knows what it is, he thinks.) They don't approach the counter or Arthur and Eames. With misgivings, he follows Eames' cue and clamps down all of his body's instinctive danger warnings, continuing to taste and rhapsodize over wines instead.
After fifteen minutes, their followers -- if that's what they are -- have made a few phone calls and received serious stink-eye from the attendant, but they still haven't approached the bar. By this time, Eames has amassed nearly a full case of bottles he wants to buy, and is growing increasingly sillier and visibly inebriated; much more, Arthur knows, than can be accounted for by the amount of wine he's actually had to drink.

"If you buy too much here, we won't have room in the car at the next place," Arthur finally reminds him, because he's apparently been cast as the straight man in this routine (not to mention, the designated driver). Eames pouts and makes puppy dog eyes at Arthur, who has to fight to cultivate an expression that says he's charmed and delighted instead of homicidal.

"Oh, all right," Eames finally says. "It's a good thing I have you to keep me in line, pumpkin," and he leans over and plants a sloppy, wet kiss on Arthur's lips.

As a kiss goes, it's practically offensive, and it's by far the least sexy way he's touched Arthur in these past few weeks, but it appears to be the final straw in convincing their followers that Eames and Arthur have nothing to do with the threat to Dr. Khali. They finally leave, shaking their heads and arguing, and the attendant tries but fails to conceal the dirty look she gives them for lingering so long without buying. As Eames pays for his wine (does he actually intend to drink it all, Arthur wonders), he watches the white car reverse out of the parking lot and head back in the direction of Grahamstown.

Eames asks Arthur to load the wine into the car, and excuses himself to the restroom. That's fine; the more time they can delay leaving, the less likely their pursuers will turn around and continue following them. They should probably stop at another winery on the way back, and go straight to the resort, keep up the facade of well-to-do tourists, but Arthur's not worried, now.

He puts the box in the trunk and stands, squinting a little in the sunlight, watching the highway. His blood is still fizzing and sparking with adrenaline, and his senses are on full alert, so he hears Eames' footsteps behind him in the gravel of the parking lot. Nevertheless, he's startled when Eames walks straight up to him, curves his hand around the back of Arthur's head, and kisses him firmly, thoroughly, and fondly, crowding him back against the car door, his lips soft and his tongue teasing, flickering against Arthur's. He tastes like summer, like nectar, all of the lush, floral, honey-rich flavors of a dessert wine.

Arthur forgets where they are and closes his eyes, sinking himself wholly into the kiss, chasing the lingering sweetness in Eames' mouth and reveling in the warm bulk of him against Arthur's body, the way he's holding Arthur's head so gently and Arthur's hip so tightly. The usual scruff around his mouth is gone, his skin still smooth there from the morning's careful shave; it's like kissing a different man, that way, but with Eames' familiar shape and smell and taste, and Arthur doesn't want it to end.

When Eames pulls off he's smiling broadly and genuinely, crooked teeth and all. "There's that done properly," he says with evident satisfaction.

Arthur can't respond for a minute. "What," is all he gets out.

Eames, delighted, smiles even wider. His hand is still cradling Arthur's head, and he trails it softly, shiveringly down the nape of his neck. "Couldn't leave you so poorly kissed," he explains. "I wasn't up to my usual standard, in there, and you looked like you were going to let me know it."

Hmm. Arthur thought he had been doing a pretty good job of concealing his responses to fake-drunk Eames, but maybe not.
"That's all right," he says stupidly, "You can kiss me badly anytime if you're going to follow it up like this."

Eames presses his still-grinning mouth to Arthur's again, briefly, and runs his thumb lightly over Arthur's bottom lip before drawing back. "We should get on our way, love. I doubt they're coming back, but even so."

Arthur's brain finally kicks into gear again, and he stands upright, straightens his collar. "Yeah, ok."

Back on the road, they discuss the situation, try to determine if there is any remaining danger. Arthur was right, Eames did recognize their speech as Urdu, but he doesn't know enough of it to know what they were saying. He'd seen the white car and recognized the gaudy shirt on one of the men from the waiting room at the clinic, put two and two together and, Arthur admits, made the right call.

They both keep an eagle eye out for cars behind them the rest of the way, and take a leisurely stop for lunch to try to flush out any trackers more savvy than the initial duo, but it looks like they're in the clear, and they return to the resort without incident.
Arthur is feeling antsy by the time they arrive; it's been an emotionally draining morning, and there are some significant decisions to be made about how to conduct the job, not to mention the fact that he's been sitting in the car for several hours now. He checks in with Kefilwe, lets her know they have some planning to do as a team today, but that he needs to spend some time alone on the treadmill first. They agree to reconvene at three, and he gratefully heads for the gym.

Eames doesn't follow him there, which is somewhat of a disappointment; Arthur enjoys seeing his muscles in play when he works out, watching the ink shift and ripple over his skin, and he likes hearing the familiar rasp of his voice, the pattern of his breathing as he lifts and presses the weights. But he recalls Eames' fear of being smothering, and, well, maybe it's better that they keep some separate time during the day.

Arthur himself isn't feeling a particular need for it, and that surprises him. He'd found that he liked, even preferred, sharing a room with Eames in Mossel Bay, and he's fully content to have Eames in his bed all night and to work with him all day here and now. It's obviously a concern for Eames, though, and that probably means it's something Arthur should keep an eye on. He adds it to his mental file, in the Personal/Relationships/Eames/Issues subfolder, and then he can shut his brain off and just focus on his feet hitting the mat and his arms pumping at his sides and the air filling his lungs for a while. He knows that sometimes his mental processes function best when they can run in the background, undisturbed by the distractions of his conscious mind, and by the time he's done he's feeling more centered, ready to dive back into his task list.

He doesn't see Eames again until they all meet in the main room of the work cottage. He's lost the lavender sweater and undershirt, and is wearing the black tank top again over his loose linen trousers. It's incongruous and a little cheesy in a Miami Vice kind of way, but also immensely sexy, if you ask Arthur. Kefilwe is looking at him, too, but she's subtle about it, at least until she catches Arthur's eye and winks. He gives her a quick, dimpled smile, and then turns his mind firmly to business.

"So, we know that du Toit is HIV positive," he begins. "We know he's bribed at least one doctor to provide false test results to SARU, and we know that he's been receiving influxes of cash with no corresponding purchases, from which we can extrapolate that he's using the money for other bribes. We need to decide whether to go ahead with the extraction or just turn in what we know to SARU. The risk of running the extraction, even with the adaptor from Yusuf, is the potential of infection. The downside of just turning in the information we have is that it's all circumstantial evidence, and without a confession, the payout will be significantly smaller. The infection risk only applies to the two of us," he indicates Eames, "but the payout obviously affects all three of us."

Kefilwe nods. She knows all of this already, of course, but Arthur likes to lay everything out clearly and up front. "I do not believe it is my decision to tell you to take the risk with your blood," she says calmly. "There are other jobs and other money."

"Thank you," he tells her sincerely, and turns to Eames. "Have you come to a decision?"

Eames meets his eyes, and there's still that fear lurking in their depths, but he nods, and his voice is steady. "On the condition that the PASIV adaptor is testable and that it does what Yusuf says it
does, I would prefer to proceed with the extraction."

Arthur wonders again what Eames needs the money for, because that has to be the only reason he's doing this when he's so clearly afraid of the risk of infection. The thought that he could divert some of his payout to Eames crosses his mind, but he quashes it; Eames didn't want him prying into the reason he wanted the money, so unless he wants to talk about it some more, Arthur's going to leave it alone.

For his own part, he's made his peace with the idea of the adaptor. He'd called around a bit yesterday, and several dreamworkers have used the adaptor, or a variant of it, with no ill effects. There's some talk of making it a standard part of the PASIV kit, just to be on the safe side, and Arthur can get behind that. The only downside he sees to that is an erosion of trust in one's colleagues, because if the adaptor is commonplace, there's less incentive for everyone to ensure their own blood is spotlessly clean.

"All right," he says aloud. "We'll plan to proceed, then, assuming the adaptor tests out ok when it arrives. Kefilwe, are we set on the design and the mazes -- can I start committing them to memory?"

"Yes, I made some changes today. I will show you. But it is done," she confirms.

"Eames?"

"I need to practice my, ah, routine a bit, and I need your help with that," Eames drawls.

Arthur resolutely does not think about what that will involve. "Tomorrow ok, after I have the design down?"

Eames nods slowly. "I'll go under this evening, do what I can on my own, and the two of you can go under tomorrow morning to polish up the design. Then you and I can work on it in the afternoon."

"I'll see if we can schedule it for the day after tomorrow, then." He watches Eames' face as he says it, and there's more than a trace of disappointment plain on his handsome features. "Or actually, the day after that," he amends. "No sense rushing it."

Eames meets his eyes, and looks surprised and pleased. He stands, stretches -- Arthur ogles the tattoos under his arms, which he rarely gets to see -- and saunters into the dreaming room, while Arthur and Kefilwe huddle at her desk and review the updated models and schematics.

Later, he's in bed, reading, when the door opens and Eames pokes his head in, a question written plainly on his face. Arthur sighs, moves over, flips the bedspread down in invitation. "You know if you keep coming in here, it's just going to make it harder for both of us to sleep when the job's over."

Eames strips off his shirt, drops it on the floor. He's wearing those thin, soft cotton track pants again; Arthur is getting downright used to feeling them against his bare legs during the night, now. "I sleep better with you."

"I thought I thrash around too much," Arthur says skeptically.

"Nonetheless."

He squints. "Then why..."
Eames pauses, sitting on the edge of the bed. He's bowing the mattress, and Arthur wishes he would just lie down all the way. "Because I just want to be here?"

"I want you here, too," Arthur admits. He's suddenly disinterested in the book, and he realizes he's been subconsciously waiting for Eames to come in. "That's the problem."

Eames does lie down, then, turning his body toward Arthur and tucking his left hand under the pillow. His tone is a little too light when he replies. "May as well do it while we can. Maybe your job will run long, maybe you'll get made, maybe you'll get a better offer than cooling your heels in my flat for a month..."

Arthur bonks him gently on the forehead with the book, and cuts him off. "Stop that. I'll be there. At least for the first two weeks of the run." He pauses. "What are you going to tell people I am?"

"I thought you might like to be a software programmer this time. Those fellows are all socially awkward, it will be a perfect cover... Ow, what the bloody fuck!" Eames slaps Arthur's fingers away from his bare nipple.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Arthur says sweetly. "Was that socially awkward of me? Did it hurt?" But he's secretly pleased; it's a solid cover story, one that will be easy to remember and portray.

Eames glares. "Don't be a twat."

Arthur persists. "I meant what are you going to tell people I am to you. Besides your personal, on-call software programmer."

He carefully considers, and comes up with: "...My gangsta wifey?"

"Oh my god." Arthur puts his face in his hands.

"My bit of fluff. My kept boy," Eames tries. His eyes are sparkling, and he's trying hard not to crack a smile.

Arthur shakes his head, still covering his face. "Nope, that's it, the trip's cancelled."

Eames is full-on smirking now. "Me fella."

Arthur elbows him in the ribs, and then freezes. "Wait, that's Irish slang. Did you run out of Briticisms already?"

"That's not a word, Arthur."

"You understood it."

Curiosity glints in Eames' eyes. "How do you know it's Irish, anyway?"

Arthur snorts. "I have a house there. I occasionally leave it and interact with other human beings. I even talk with them sometimes. Offline."

"You have hidden depths, my dear," Eames tells him solemnly, grinning.

"I love Dublin," Arthur says truthfully. It's prosperous and clean and full of good things to eat and drink, and he's put a lot of work into his large, light-filled flat there. The Irish don't look down on Americans the way the English do, and it's a hell of a lot easier to understand them than it is the Scots and the Welsh.
"You would," Eames rumbles, his voice fond. "Do you have any aliases from there that we should use, then?"

Arthur scratches his ear. "Actually, my neighbors think I bought the place with stock options from selling my stealth startup company in California, so that would work. My name's Aaron Gershon, there."

Eames thinks aloud. "You met Jonathan Kent in... where do internet millionaires go to vacation?"


"In Lisbon. Right. Where I was performing in a miserably underappreciated production of 'The Glass Menagerie.'"

"You're a little old for Tom, aren't you?" Arthur asks dubiously.

"'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,' then," Eames says sulkily. "I'd make a fine Brick."

"You'd make a 'fine' anything," Arthur corrects him. "But you'd make a great Brick." He doesn't have to ask if Eames can do a southern accent; he's already heard it. And now that he thinks about it, Eames would be excellent in the role. He has the handsome face and athlete's build to look the part, and he's no stranger to complicated family and sexual dynamics.

It works; Eames' face brightens, although he looks a bit puzzled. "Have you been hiding a literature degree in your back pocket, love?"

Arthur laughs quietly. "No, my mom was into the local theater scene, and my dad very much was not, so she dragged me with her instead." After a moment's thought, he adds, simply, "Alec, I'm not hiding anything from you. I know there are things you don't want to tell me, and that's ok, but if you want to know something about me, just ask."

He watches Eames' face to see what effect this will have. His mouth goes soft and his eyes widen, then narrow as his quick, inventive mind considers (a) whether to take Arthur up on that right now and (b) if so, what he wants to know. Arthur knows that (a) is a given; (b) takes a bit longer, and he waits patiently. He's aware that he's opened a can of worms here, but he trusts Eames, and he'd like to get things more settled between them before they have to separate; if that means Arthur needs to be the one to go out on a limb, so be it.

Finally, he comes to a decision; grey eyes flick up to meet Arthur's and hold them steady. "You asked me what I want, today, and I told you. Tell me what you want.

"I want you to kiss me again like you did this morning," Arthur says promptly, and trails an anticipatory, possessive finger over the ink on Eames' right arm.

Eames' chest quakes in a noiseless laugh, and he gives Arthur one of those spontaneous, lovely, crinkly-eyed smiles, strokes his hand. "Oh, darling, I fully intend to." His gravelly voice has gone deep and velvety. "And then?"

What the hell; Arthur goes all in. "What you said, earlier. A lover, a partner. Someone I can trust at my back. Someone," he leans over and drops a kiss on Eames' bare chest, "with a spectacular body, and a giant cock, and ridiculous long eyelashes, and the most gorgeous mouth I have ever seen on a man in my life." He presses his lips to the nipple he'd twisted, a tender apology for the pain. "Someone with incredible natural gifts, who will never, ever stop surprising me with just how fucking competent he is at everything he touches -- including me. That's what I want. To be with you." He can't quite bring himself to look at Eames' face, now, and he feels his ears turning
pink; he presses his face to Eames' taut bare belly, holds his breath.

Eames stills under him, as if he's also holding his breath, and then he inhales shakily, and his hand gently moves to Arthur's chin and tilts his face up until they're looking in each other's eyes. "Arthur, love," he breathes out, his voice husky, his eyes soft, and it's an acceptance and a declaration all in one. He pulls Arthur up to face him, and Arthur goes gladly, presses his mouth to those warm plush lips. Eames' powerful arms curl around him, one hand buried in Arthur's hair, the other stroking down his back, but not straying further, not yet.

They simply kiss, slow and deep and sweet and open, taking all the time in the world. Eames' bare skin is warm and smooth against Arthur's, except around his mouth, where five o'clock has come and gone and left the barest trace of stubble. He smells faintly of sandalwood and cigarettes, and tastes fiery-sweet like the whisky they'd drunk the night they first kissed. Arthur runs his fingers over Eames' hair, remembers all over again how intensely present the forger can be in a kiss, how keenly he feels that he's the focus of Eames' whole concentration in that moment. It's heady and sensual as hell, and a low noise of pleasure escapes him.

Eames responds to the sound with a deep growly purr of his own, and rolls Arthur over onto his back, following quickly to lie half on Arthur, half on the bed. His eyes have gone dark and his lips are swollen and pink as he gazes down on Arthur's face, then, maintaining the eye contact, drops his head impossibly slowly to kiss Arthur again. At this angle, though, Arthur can tell there's more on his mind than just kissing, and frankly, he's feeling the same urge. He cant his hips so they're aligned with Eames'. Just the barest nudge brings their hard bulges together, and the kiss goes feral.

His hands run urgently over all of the now-familiar territory of Eames' back and arms and shoulders, gripping the solid ridges of deltoid and tricep, loving the tactile sensation of skin on skin. Eames' left hand is under Arthur's head, supporting it as he continues to deeply kiss him, lips and teeth scraping and demanding, but his right hand sweeps surely and possessively down Arthur's chest, over his ass, roughly tugs his hips closer against Eames' own. The sheer strength of him is erotic beyond belief, and Arthur feels as if his spine has turned to molten steel, sending heat into his lips and his heart and his cock and down into his toes.

Arthur's pants disappear somehow; he must have helped take them off, because Eames never stops kissing and stroking him, but he doesn't remember how or when it happened. When he tugs Eames' thin pajama pants down, he can see and feel that Eames is still wearing the lavender briefs, and he's struck by an irrational fit of the giggles, has to stop what he's doing and regain control of himself.

"Take those off, I don't even --" he orders, but he's smiling as he says it, and he doesn't wait for Eames to comply, just reaches and pulls them down himself. Eames' cock is hard and full and flushed a deep dusky rose, and he looks so good Arthur can't help but bend down to taste him. His flesh is blood-hot, there, and salty and musky and unmistakably male, the skin glossy and silky against Arthur's lips and tongue over the solid shaft. He strokes, licks, sucks with abandon, going mindless with enjoyment of the exquisite male body beneath him -- not only the beauty of the body, but of the brilliant intuitive secretive exasperating mind animating it, the fact that it's Eames, that he wants to be here in Arthur's bed moaning Arthur's name. He's so single-mindedly devoted to what he's doing that he's startled when Eames goes to push him off.

Eames' eyes are wide and awed, his face flushed, his chest heaving. "Jesus Christ, Arthur," he exhales raggedly -- "I didn't want to, yet, come here" -- and he's pulling Arthur back up and kissing him dizzy as his hand gropes down Arthur's side and finds Arthur's own hard length. It's easy, then, between them, easy and so good, thrusting hard and fast into each other's fists, panting into each other's mouths. Arthur feels like he could do this every day for the rest of his life and never
get over the thrill of their bare bodies together, the keen sexual spark between them.

He's brought Eames too near the brink already, and he comes quickly, the deep rasp of his voice as he says "Arthur" bringing Arthur to the edge himself, and then he spills deliciously over, his own voice far away saying "Alec, God, Alec, fuck."

They sprawl there, sweaty and sated: Arthur's head on Eames' chest, listening to his heart beat as it slows; Eames' hand heavy and fond on Arthur's hip; Arthur's hand curled next to Eames' neck. Eames turns his head after a few moments, presses a kiss to Arthur's knuckles.

"My partner, then," he whispers. "Yeah?"

Arthur nods drowsily into Eames' ribs. He can live with partner. "Yeah."

Chapter End Notes

"Gangsta wifey" is from Delires' wonderful Chav Verse.
Eames is gone when Arthur wakes. His hand automatically fumbles for his alarm, but it hasn't
gone off yet; that's not what woke him up. After a groggy minute, he realizes that it was the sound
of voices in the kitchenette, instead, and he comes fully awake, tries to listen in.

It's just Eames and Kefilwe, but their voices are raised and they're obviously arguing. He can't tell
whether it's in Setswana or Swahili or Afrikaans or some combination of the three. The gist of it is
clear, though, and he rubs his eyes, embarrassed.

He definitely hadn't been thinking about tact or discretion or professionalism when he was crying
out Eames' name last night, and Kefilwe's room is right across the hall from his. He'd be pissed
off, too, if he was in her position.

Even as one part of his mind is racing to figure out how to resolve this unexpected breakdown in
collegial relations, another, more besotted, part is marveling at the expressiveness of Eames' voice,
the way even when he is speaking a language that is completely incomprehensible to Arthur, his
tone and inflection manage to convey a considerable amount of information. Right now his voice
is deferential and soothing, not quite coaxing, while Kefilwe's ordinarily pleasant voice is clipped
and surly.

Eventually Eames makes some final exclamation, his voice exasperated. A few seconds later the
front door opens and closes, and it's silent in the main room. It's an expectant sort of silence,
though, and Arthur has a sinking feeling that the person who's still there is the person he'd rather
avoid.

Arthur sighs, and stretches, and -- oh, ugh, he's a mess and so are the sheets. They must have just
drifted off after the sex last night. He's touched, though, to see that there's a fresh mug of still-
warm water and a clean washcloth on the nightstand that hadn't been there last night. Eames can
be a real pain in the ass when he wants to, but he's shown a hitherto unsuspected considerate side
on occasion over these past few weeks.

He's a little surprised that he didn't wake, either when Eames got up or when he returned with the
washcloth. He's had lovers sleep over before, of course, but he usually springs into instant
alertness at the slightest noise or movement. Apparently his unconscious mind has decided to
make an exception for Eames.

*Eames.* Arthur lets himself have a few moments of going back over their conversation last night;
the way his eyes had looked when he'd whispered Arthur's name, the way he'd tasted and smelled
and how his warm bare skin had felt, the way the word "partner" had sounded in his deep gravelly
voice.

...Partner. Arthur says it silently to himself, and despite his trepidation about the conversation
awaiting him in the other room, he smiles.

He cleans himself hastily with the dampened cloth and puts on a clean shirt and dark jeans.
Because he is a prudent, point-man type, he also picks up his tablet and runs a quick internet
search for an appropriate conciliatory phrase before cautiously opening the door of his room.
In the kitchenette, Eames is gone, and Kefilwe is standing next to the coffeepot. Her braids are loose around her shoulders, she's wearing her eye-jangling robe again, and she's glaring into a mug of coffee as if it has personally insulted her.

"Dumela mma," he says politely, and she grudgingly acknowledges him, but her long feline eyes are flinty and her mouth is pinched and angry. Carefully, he continues, "Ke maswabi," and bows his head slightly.

"You lied to me, before," she says bluntly. "You are not 'discreet.'"

Arthur can feel his ears burning, and he wonders if Eames got through this part of the conversation without blushing. "I apologize," he repeats. He's not sure what else he can say. It won't happen again? He knows he should, but he's not going to promise that, not when he has so little time left with Eames before several weeks of separation.

She makes a disbelieving sound, and shakes her head, her braids swinging. "Too much noise here. Too small for three people. I will sleep in the other house," she announces. She turns to stalk off to her room, but pauses. "I am happy you found love," she says a bit grudgingly. "But you should be more discreet." She closes the door behind her.

She's younger than he is, and childless, so why does Arthur feel like he just got a good scolding from his mother?

"I'm sorry," he calls after her again, and he hopes that's the end of it.

Arthur pours himself a cup of coffee and rummages a couple pieces of cranberry brown bread from the pantry. While they're toasting, he has a brilliant idea. After he's eaten, he grabs a cab from the concierge desk and runs a quick errand. When he heads into the working cottage half an hour later, it's with a bag of hot, fresh cinnamon-sugar doughnuts. He presents them to Kefilwe, along with his dimples.

The look she gives him in return says that she knows exactly what he's doing, but she's going to let him get away with it. She accepts the bag, and offers him one, and then they're okay.

They've gone into the dream twice, creating the dreamscape at different times of "day" to gauge how many projections materialize in different areas of the club and how best to avoid them, when Eames returns. He's carrying a large and exuberant floral arrangement. It hurts Arthur's sense of aesthetics, but he has to admit that it looks and smells expensive.

"For you. A token of my esteem, and of sincerest apology," Eames tells Kefilwe in his poshest, most purring voice, and hands it over with a debonair smile. She gives him the same look she'd given Arthur, but takes it, and inhales deeply over it. He can see the muscles in her shoulders and neck relax as she exhales.

While she's still bent over the bouquet, sniffing delicately at all of the various bits of flora, Arthur catches Eames' eye and mouths, "Supriya?"

Eames nods, and Arthur gives him a dirty look; they'd agreed to wait until the job was over to tackle that particular undertaking.

Eames is not cowed.

"I was multitasking, Arthur," he whispers, his eyes wide and mock-innocent. "I thought you of all people would appreciate that."
"I hear you," Kefilwe says, without raising her nose from the flowers.

"I know you do, dear girl," Eames responds, unperturbed, and winks at her when she straightens up. He's visibly brimming with mischief and good humor. She rolls her eyes and turns away, but there's a tiny smile on her wide lips, and she's clearly pleased with the flowers.

"We were about to go back in," Arthur tells him. "Are you ready to do a full run-through?"

Eames' eyebrows raise just a fraction. "I am," he says, but he seems to have more to say, and trouble figuring out how to say it. Arthur waits. It's not until Kefilwe turns away to put the flowers in water that he has an inkling of what's on Eames' mind.

"I'm the dreamer," he reminds Eames, meaning Kefilwe doesn't actually need to stay down there with us while you practice your lap dance skills on me.

"Right," Eames says, and nods absently. "I'll prep the machine then, shall I?" He still looks a trifle uncomfortable, but he goes into the dreaming room, stealing one of Kefilwe's doughnuts on the way.

Arthur follows hastily, intercepting him before he can put greasy, sugary fingers anywhere near the delicate machinery. He's rewarded with an impish smirk and sparkling grey eyes, and he mentally sighs; of course Eames is yanking his chain. Eames in a good mood is impossible to resist, though, and Arthur leans in, brushing his lips quickly over Eames' cinnamon-sugary ones -- and then again, more thoroughly, because the combination of Eames' plush mouth and the spicy sweetness is just plain delicious -- before he pulls out the tubing and alcohol wipes and begins his dosage calculations.

He's efficient at all of this, out of long practice, and by the time Kefilwe joins them, Eames is already reclining with the cannula inserted and neatly taped to his wrist, and Arthur has Kefilwe's and his own ready to go.

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In the dream, it's 11 p.m. on a weeknight, which is when they've determined the club will still be lively, but past its busiest hours. Arthur is wearing a plain black vest and pants, white shirt and black tie, all of which are much lower quality than his normal attire. He has a shoulder holster and his favorite Glock on display, in accordance with his role as bouncer. Kefilwe, her braids pulled back in a severe knot, is dressed similarly but in a calf-length skirt and low-heeled boots, making it clear that she's there as security and not as part of the show.

On the stage, a pair of gorgeous young Zulu projections are slinking and writhing to Ginuwine's "Pony," wearing only high lucite heels and practically non-existent panties. They're being ogled by men, and a few women, in the leather chairs and banquettes surrounding the stage. The cocktail staff is busy serving the multiracial clientele, and the vibe is cool and sexy without being (too) trashy.

Eames is nowhere to be seen, but that's the plan; they'll get du Toit relaxed and in the groove, a little liquored up, before the star turn emerges.

Arthur and Kefilwe ignore the dancers and the clientele, move through the main stage, down into the private rooms, making sure the video cameras are functioning, and then around the maze, ensuring that the escape routes are clear. Everything's in order.

After about fifteen minutes dream-time, Arthur hears the drumbeats of Nine Inch Nails' "Closer,"
and that's Eames' cue.

They'd had several arguments about the best song to use; the blonde, and the club, are both classier than typical strip-club fare, and none of the songs Arthur found on the "top stripping songs" lists really seemed appropriate. Eames is the expert here, though, at least of the three of them, and he's deemed this the one.

Kefilwe recognizes it, too, and straightens up, her lips thinning. She tilts her head and regards Arthur with disapproval. "You do not need me now?" she queries, clearly rhetorically.

Arthur closes his mouth and nods a bit frantically. "We can take it from here."

"I am sure," she says drily, and hastily makes her way toward one of the back rooms they've made soundproof, presumably to give herself the kick.

He makes his way to the main room and stands in the doorway leading to the private rooms. The plan is for Eames to dance on the stage, then approach du Toit during what Arthur's been calling the "parade" afterward, when all of the dancers make their way through the main room offering lap dances, either publicly or in private rooms. Eames will encourage a private one, and based on his surveillance of du Toit, thinks he'll agree, no problem.

When the blonde emerges from the dancers' hallway and up the short ramp to the stage, she's every bit as enticing as Arthur remembers; long slender legs, a high firm ass, plump round tits, and that mane of platinum waves swirling around her shoulders and down her back. Her ripe lips are just a fraction less pillowy than Eames' own, her delicate peaches-and-cream features and huge blue doll-eyes sultry and exotically made-up.

She's wearing a shiny, dark bronze cloth bra and thong panties, with a heavy chain belt around her trim belly and long strips of vaguely animal-print cloth forming an ankle-length skirt of sorts. It flutters and shimmers as she moves and does almost nothing to conceal her legs or hips or ass. A shimmering collar of gold plates covers her collarbones, pointing in a V down to her cleavage but leaving her bra fully visible. Gold cuffs on her wrists, with chains attached to bulky rings on her middle fingers, look too heavy for her slim arms and hands, and her shoes are impossible stilettos.

It's part Cleopatra, part Princess-Leia-slave-girl, and Arthur's mouth goes dry instantly as he is hit by a shudder of desire just looking at her-- as are all of his projections. The room goes dead silent but for the pounding bass and insinuating vocals, as Eames begins dancing.

He starts slow and deliberate, strutting across the stage and lightly fingering the poles, swinging the blonde's hips and running her fingers almost absently over her own tight belly and firm breasts. Soon, though, she's going all out, stroking and smacking her own buttocks with the tempo of the music, rotating and undulating her hips. Her breasts quiver and bounce as her back arches, and her hair and skirt flare when she spins and drops. Her expression is sensual, challenging, and she makes direct eye contact with a different audience member with each line. She loses the skirt and belt after the first chorus, and the dance becomes less sensual and more explicit, more centered on the pole.

Through the haze of arousal rapidly clouding his brain, Arthur thinks some of the movements are familiar, and not from the videos he'd found for the forger to study. There's a stylized, almost formal quality to them that he's seen somewhere before. He'll ask Eames about it later, when his brain is firing on all cylinders again and his body's not diverting most of his blood supply into his pants.

At "your sex I can smell," Eames drags a dainty manicured hand through the sweat between her
breasts, then *licks her fingers*, and the room goes wild as Arthur stares in disbelief. His balls literally ache, watching her. He's dimly aware that the edges of the room have gone fuzzy -- he's losing his concentration on the dreamscape -- but his projections, enthralled with Eames' performance, don't seem to notice.

Eames unhooks the front-snap bra at the second invocation of "you get me closer to god," and her breasts are as perfect as Arthur had pictured them. The audience is rapt, all eyes on her in her tiny g-string and the shining, heavy collar and cuffs. As the last verse begins, she drops to her hands and knees, crawling and writhing around the edges of the stage, and eager hands reach to tuck rand and Euros and dollar bills into her waistband and crotch. The song ends, and she gracefully retrieves her skirt and bra and is down the ramp and back into the dressing room before Arthur's breathing returns to normal.

The "parade" is set to begin immediately afterward, so Arthur waits. When the women emerge from the dressing room hallway, he catches Eames' eye, crooks a finger at her, and heads toward the elevator to the second level of private rooms. On the job, she'll make a beeline for du Toit and entice him to buy a private dance from her in that room, but in this run-through, Arthur's not willing to wait and watch her be pawed over by other projections for the sake of verisimilitude. She's all his, this time, and he wants to get down to the private room and get his hands on her -- well, *him* -- oh, fuck it, on *Eames*, in this shape that's nearly as lovely, as touchable, as his male, waking form.

They haven't discussed what they'll do while Eames is shape-shifted, whether sex is on the table or not, but Arthur would like to find that out as quickly as possible.

Eames follows him, dressed again in her bra and belt but without the heavy gold collar or wrist cuffs. Her stilettos click slightly on the polished floor of the hallway.

To Arthur's irritation, the elevator is staffed by a projection in a uniform similar to his own, who pushes the second floor button and stares politely straight ahead. His presence means Arthur can't speak to Eames-as-Eames, or touch her. He just looks, instead, taking in every exquisite detail. It's a flawless forge, and he's reminded all over again of Eames' sheer bloody competence.

"What's your name?" he asks, just as the elevator grinds to a halt.

Her voice is a soft contralto, with a lilting Afrikaans accent. Despite her frankly erotic dancing just a few minutes before, she affects a certain modesty, glancing up at him from under long, sooty lashes. "Cassandra." The door opens, and she leads him down the hall, to the specially modified room at the end. When the door closes behind them, Arthur reaches out to draw her to him, but she demurs.

"No. Sit. I need the practice." For a split second, the lift of her eyebrows and the wry tone in her voice is pure Alec Eames, but it disappears before Arthur can even put a name to it, and she's a stranger again. "And put your gun in the safe."

"I don't know if I can hold out," Arthur confesses, and complies.

"I'll let you know when you can touch," Eames promises, and Arthur has to give in; they are technically on the clock, down here, even if there's no-one but their own projections to see them.

He sits back passively on the deep velvet couch, spreading his arms along the back. Eames flicks a switch that sets the miniature disco ball above the dance floor spinning in the dimly lit room, as the opening chords of "Je t'aime... Moi Non Plus" whisper from hidden speakers.

Eames doesn't bother with the dance floor or pole, just moves straight to Arthur. Standing between
his knees, she shimmies and undulates, caressing her breasts and turning to give him a good closeup of her soft, sleek buttocks, bending backward to brush his lap with her long pale hair as she removes the belt and skirt.

In just her tiny bra and panties (and those ridiculously high heels, Arthur doesn't know how Eames manages to stay upright), she faces him again and straddles his lap, her full breasts only tantalizing inches from his face. Her slender thighs sink down onto his as her hips rotate, her panties just barely whispering over where his pants are tented again. In the background, the voices in the song moan and coo and gasp at one another, and it would be cheesy if it wasn't so damned arousing.

Arthur grits his teeth with the effort of keeping his arms spread along the back of the couch instead of running them all over her silken alabaster skin. Eames maintains eye contact, no longer coy, as she presses her breasts into his collarbone, bowing her head so that her fair hair curtains their faces as she sinks down further into his lap. She arches her back and deliberately, frankly rocks her pelvis against his hard bulge. Her lips brush his, and they're moist and supple and open. He clenches his fists to keep from touching her.

She laughs softly, noticing his restraint, then draws back and unhooks the bra, slipping the straps off her shoulders and then bending backward, bracing a hand on each of his knees to support her weight as her hips roll in a slow maddening circle against him. Her breasts are even lovelier up close, delicately plump, with tiny rosy-pink nipples. They bob gently as her weight shifts, and Arthur can't hold back any longer. He bends forward to lick and taste one, gratified when the soft little nub hardens and swells in his mouth.

The sound she makes then is reminiscent of Eames' deep purr, but in a higher, female register, and it brings him back to what they're doing, or supposed to be doing, here.

"How did I get so fucking lucky," Arthur muses, and lifts his head to look Eames in the eye. They're round and bright blue, not the clear grey he's used to, but the intelligence behind them is the same.

"What do you mean, darling?" The accent has slipped; she sounds more British than South African, and Arthur is inwardly pleased at this evidence that what they're doing is getting to Eames, too. She grasps his hand, twining her fingers through his, then places it on her lower back as she leans eagerly toward him, and apparently he's been released from his no-touching stricture. He runs his hands over her silky skin, enjoying the unfamiliar curves of hip and breast and buttock in place of the hard, defined muscle and wiry hair he's used to.

"I get you," Arthur says breathlessly. "A beautiful woman sitting in my lap right now, and a gorgeous brawny man in my bed every night. And have I mentioned lately exactly how motherfucking good you are at what you do and how much of a turn-on that is?"

Eames smiles, clearly pleased, but doesn't answer, still slowly writhing against him. "Tu vas, tu vas et tu viens / Entre mes reins," she sings softly along with the female voice in the song.

He pulls her hips down hard against his erection, pleased when she gives out a little cry in response. "Yeah, about that...?"

"We're supposed to be working here, Arthur." But her tone is teasing, breathy.

"Please," Arthur halfway begs. He can't think straight with her on his lap like this.

"Tell me what you want." Her voice is serious, now, and she rubs harder, grinding against him. He can smell her arousal, a faint wild-honey scent, and it makes him reckless.
"Just -- I want you," he says, honestly. "Can I take you? Here, like this?"

Eames' laugh is silvery and pretty, and Arthur belatedly realizes he doesn't know how deep the forge goes. She looks and feels all woman as far as he can tell, but he's never done this before with a forger. Maybe they don't bother recreating genitals? After all, the point is for her to tease du Toit, not to fuck him.

"Oh, all the parts are there." The voice is deeper, fully British, and when he looks into her eyes, they're grey and there's a familiar, fond, amused expression on the feminine features.

She grasps his hand and guides it between her legs, the panties melting away into nothing. She's hairless there, pink and luscious and already sopping wet. Arthur gently rubs the tiny nodule at the top of her cleft, then delves deeper into the juicy plush folds below, marveling at Eames' fidelity to detail. He pushes two fingers fully inside her, watching her face as her eyes flicker from blue to grey and back again, then continues fingering her with slow, gentle strokes. The wall of tight, slippery muscle, indistinguishable from any other pussy Arthur's ever known, contracts and flutters around him as his other hand finds her clit again. Her eyes close and she moans softly, her hips rocking first minutely and then more insistently against his hand. Her aroused scent, and the tiny slick sounds of his fingers moving in and out of her, are absolutely maddening.

"Does this feel..." he begins, and she presses a single manicured finger against his lips.

"Stop thinking, Arthur," she whispers, and kisses him again.

Arthur obediently abandons all attempts at higher thought function and just goes with it. He doesn't know which of them has unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, but they're crumpled around his thighs and she's sinking breathlessly, wetly, down onto his rock-hard cock between one breath and the next. He suckles at one delicious pink nipple, then the other, and grips her rounded hips, supporting her as she rocks against him with soft pleased noises.

It's a blur of silky skin and heat and her long hair in his face, tickling his chest and then brushing against his knees again as she throws her head back, riding him, the soft slick noises growing more rapid. Her eyes continue to shift from grey to blue, and the intense, focused expression on her face is pure Eames, but she holds her form, her breasts impossibly soft and round against his face and shoulders, her miraculous cunt snug and exquisitely wet around his cock.

Eames comes once, panting and crying out shamelessly, and then a second time, before Arthur is groaning out his own orgasm, pulling her down hard as his cock pulses into her. When he's done, she doesn't withdraw, but collapses against him, planting soft, sweet kisses down his neck and shoulder.

Arthur rests one hand on her hip and strokes gently down her back with the other. A fuse has blown in his mind and some key cognitive circuits aren't back online yet, so he's content to remain here for a while, her slight weight pleasant against his lap and torso.

After a few moments, he murmurs, "So incredibly good at what you do." She makes a pleased sound, but doesn't look at him.

It takes a minute for Arthur to register the latter fact, and he frowns; Eames only withholds eye contact when he's trying to hide something. "What's up?" he asks as neutrally as he can.

"Do you prefer this? With her?" Eames asks Arthur's collarbone, her voice small and vulnerable, and Arthur suddenly sees what the problem is.
"No," he says honestly. "If I had to choose, I'd want you in your own body" (and gender, he doesn't say, although they both know that's what Eames is really asking), "but this was incredible, and I'll do it again with you anytime you want to. If you like it, I mean? That's what I was asking, whether it feels, you know, the same for you."

She sits upright so that he can see her face again, and Arthur is rewarded with a genuine Eamesian smile. "Oh, I like it very much indeed. I'd never trade what it's like to be with you as men together, but there was something so luscious about being with you as a woman. You... fucked me differently, touched me differently. You looked at me differently." She lifts her tousled platinum mane up off of her neck with both hands and grimaces. "I could do without all this beastly hair in the way, though."

"I liked your hair," Arthur protests, pulling her hands away so that the silky shining mass of it falls down across her back and breasts again, and he can comb his fingers through it. "I always like long hair on women. Even more so when they're naked."

Eames laughs and trails her long nails gently down Arthur's chest. "Noted. As for how the physiology works, I don't question it. The nerve endings all seem to translate on their own, without me having to explicitly direct them. If my subconscious decides I should be able to come multiple times as a woman, I'm not about to throw a wrench in that process by thinking about it too closely."

Arthur runs a hand through his own hair, then replaces it on a warm, satiny thigh. "So that's a yes."

Eames nods dreamily. "It's different, of course. But still good, for something that's not... real."

Arthur gets that. There's something indefinable and irreproducible about feeling living flesh against living flesh, the true contact with another body. Sex in dreams will always lack that, be somewhere halfway between masturbation and a shared sexual experience. That's not to say that he didn't just experience a real orgasm, or that Eames didn't just have two in a row (and Arthur would like to find out how to make that happen for himself, someday), but it is different. And now that his brain is humming along again, he has a few questions.

"Were you down here just practicing by yourself? I see what you mean about it being a more subtle art than I'd thought, now."

Eames tilts her head, confused. "I practiced on my own projections, darling. They were very appreciative."

"No," Arthur admits. "You did hear me tell you how good you are at this. And," he runs an appraising eye over her lush body, "how gorgeous you are."

She's even more beautiful when she smiles. "Thank you, Arthur. And... are we done here?"

He's not, quite. Eames seems to see this, and waits for him to get his thoughts lined up. "How far... I mean, what are you planning to do with the mark. I'm not telling you what you can or can't do," he hastens to clarify, "but I'd like to know."

"Only dancing, love," Eames says gently. "This was just for you."

Arthur looks her squarely in the eye. "Thank you... love." It's important to him that Eames knows
he appreciates the fidelity. The endearment feels strange coming out of his mouth, though -- it doesn't roll off his tongue as easily as it does for Eames, who has that whole British slang thing to make it seem casual. From Arthur, it just sounds serious, and he flushes a little with embarrassment.

Eames only grins and gives him a wink, and eases off of Arthur's lap to pad naked to the mirror just next to the couch.

Arthur stands, too, and tugs his trousers back up. When he looks up again Eames is in his original body, male and muscular and handsome and fully dressed in an outfit identical to Arthur's own. He opens the mirror, and waits for Arthur to retrieve his gun from the wall safe before climbing the staircase and exiting into the alley behind the club. He pulls his Beretta from its holster and waits for Arthur to pull his Glock, and they take the kick together.

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Above, Arthur removes the cannulas from both of their arms, presses gauze to the droplets of blood that form on the surface of the skin, cleans and re-packs the PASIV. He's running low on Somnacin, but he ordered more from Yusuf and it should be arriving today along with the adaptor.

Eames waits for him, and they go out into the front room together to debrief with Kefilwe.

"The forge is solid, although there were a couple of times where the eye color shifted from blue to grey," Arthur starts. "And I believe the mark will be sufficiently absorbed by the dancing that the extraction should go unnoticed." He's proud that he keeps his voice completely level during that last part.

Eames nods. "I noted a few instances of the outer edges of the dreamscape fuzzing out, but the design is spot-on and the timing and placement should work very well. Arthur, we should choose a second song for the private room to give us some leeway in case there's a delay with the extraction -- "Je t'aime" is not quite five minutes long."

It has to be a song Arthur knows by heart, since he's the dreamer. And Eames is right, they should be prepared if they need to extend the private dance session. "All right," he agrees. "Oh, and we're sure du Toit doesn't speak French? Given his parentage?"

"I'm positive," Eames tells him smugly. "I tried to strike up a conversation with him the last time I was at the club, and all he said was 'I don't speak French,' in English and Afrikaans. Then I told him 'Votre femme laide est la fille d'un criminel sale,' and he didn't react at all, so I think we're in the clear."

"Why do you ask?" Kefilwe inquires.

Arthur looks at Eames, tries to figure out how to explain his concern. Eames steps in. "The song sounds like a sensual love song, and most English speakers assume that's what it is, but the lyrics say 'I love you, I love you - me neither' and 'physical love is a dead end.' It's an appropriate song for a stripper, in a rather sarcastic way. It could be off-putting to someone who understands -- or is listening to -- the lyrics."

She accepts this, shrugs. "If you are certain he does not understand, then use it."

"We'll keep it," Arthur decides. "Give me some suggestions for the second song today, ok?"

"Right. Now, can we put a few mirrors in the main room where I can see them from the stage?"
They continue fine-tuning the details. Kefilwe doesn't have much to contribute at this point in the build, but she asks the right questions, helping them refine the approach and playing devil's advocate to flesh out all possible ways the scenario could go wrong.

When they break, Arthur is satisfied that they've got a solid plan in place.

Chapter End Notes

This is the translation I relied on for the song.

Votre femme laide est la fille d'un criminel sale = "Your ugly wife is the daughter of a dirty criminal," according to Google Translate.
Oh How You Laughed At My Complete Lack of Grace

Arthur has a meeting with the SARU representative that afternoon to report on their progress and schedule du Toit's extraction. Mindful of the fact that they're almost certain du Toit is the leak, and his time with Eames is limited after the job is complete, he asks for the extraction to take place at least at the end of that week. He knows he needs to inform them about the blood contamination, and the reason they're using an adaptor with the PASIV, but he wants to do that when there's more than one representative in the room: du Toit has to be paying off someone there to accept blood tests from clinics all over South Africa instead of requiring him to come to the SARU facility, and Arthur doesn't know who that someone is.

The rep agrees to schedule the extraction on Friday, and promises to get the date and time confirmed by that evening.

When Arthur returns to the resort, he's startled to find Yusuf himself lounging on the sofa in the working cottage, wisecracking with Eames and Kefilwe in Swahili. He's grateful to see that Eames is perched on a desk, when Arthur knows he'd ordinarily be sprawled next to Yusuf on the sofa, poking his round belly or mime-boxing his shoulder. *He does listen*, a small voice in Arthur's heart whispers, pleased. Since they hadn't expected Yusuf, they hadn't talked about whether to let him in on the change in their relationship, so he decides to behave like just-coworkers unless Eames does otherwise.

Yusuf is not and never will be Arthur's favorite person, after he accepted Cobb's bribe on the Fischer job, but he's a dependable source of high-quality Somnacin, and his hardware is going to allow them to complete this job and get Eames the payout he needs for whatever it is he needs it for. So Arthur welcomes him warmly, shakes his hand, makes all of the requisite polite noises about how good it is to see him in person instead of a courier.

Eames greets him with a nod -- *all right, coworkers it is* -- and tells him that Yusuf will stay the night in the work cottage, and that the four of them have a dinner reservation in a few hours. Arthur leans casually on the desk, next to him but not too close, and tries to keep up with the conversation.

He hadn't realized that Kefilwe and Yusuf knew each other, but apparently they've worked one or two jobs together and know some of the same people; at least, that's what he gathers when they lapse periodically into English. He busies himself counting out the Somnacin bottles and wiring the funds to the account number Yusuf gives him, and then sits in the chair behind his desk, feeling superfluous and ignored, as the three of them talk animatedly and rapidly around him, frequently bursting into laughter. They're obviously comfortable enough to tease each other, and it would all be warm and pleasant and companionable *if he could understand a single goddamn word they were saying*.

He tries to catch Eames' eye, but Eames seems oblivious to Arthur's predicament. He's not feeling quite sulky enough to demand that they speak in English, but he's not going to just sit here smiling and nodding and silent all evening, either. Arthur's not a stupid man, and he hates being made to feel that way.

"Yusuf," he interjects the next time someone pauses for breath. The three of them break off their dialogue and look at him. He feels two tiny spots high on his cheeks start to burn, but he maintains an impassive expression. "Can you show me how the adaptor works? And then I'm going to work out," he adds idiotically. *Very suave, Arthur. Like they give a shit.*
"Of course," Yusuf says smoothly. "Shall we all go under? Eames can be the infectious agent for this demonstration. I am clean, myself -- there's a copy of my papers in the box with the hardware."

It's pretty ingenious, actually. There's a vacuum attachment on the outflow tubing to the infected subject, leading to a second tube, to keep any backflow from spilling into the main body of the device. They'll have to use a weaker compound on du Toit, since the vacuum will pull a slightly increased amount of the compound into his veins, but Yusuf has that ready (for a reasonable price, of course). It includes a miniscule amount of dye, enough that Kefilwe, monitoring above, would be able to visually trace any backflow and give them all the kick before it can reach the PASIV proper.

As the mark, Eames reports no detectable difference in the quality of the dream using the special compound, and he seems to be able to interact normally with Arthur and Yusuf. They go under a second time, allowing Eames to unleash his militarization, and it works flawlessly, even through the adaptor -- Arthur wakes up gasping, his skin cold and prickly with goose-bumps, and Yusuf is pale and clammy and shaking. Arthur has a quick, sotto voce conversation with Eames, and they agree to go forward with the extraction using the adaptor.

He does go work out, afterward, pounding the treadmill for a solid hour, and it helps lift his mood. Afterward, he showers and dresses, and finds the other three are ready to leave for the restaurant. It's just a short walk across the resort, and specializes in grilled meats. The food is good, and they share one of the bottles of wine Eames bought on the way back from Grahamstown. Arthur allows himself to think that perhaps the evening will be a pleasant one after all, and relaxes, pours another glass of wine.

Soon enough, though, the conversation veers back into Swahili, and Arthur feels his irritation come roaring back. He sits, nods, sips, tentatively smiles (hoping the jokes are not about him), and tries to ask Eames silently for help, but Eames is in the middle of a long, apparently hilarious story that doesn't involve making eye contact with Arthur. Kefilwe, who is usually quite observant, is equally absorbed in the conversation; there's no help from that quarter.

And then Arthur can't take it anymore. He drains his glass and stands up abruptly, cutting Eames off mid-sentence. "Yusuf, thanks for the demonstration earlier. The money should show in your accounts tomorrow. Kefilwe, we'll do another run-through in the morning, all right? Good night." He turns and walks out of the restaurant without a glance at Eames.

There's silence at the table behind him for several seconds, then he hears Eames' voice, low and troubled, but he doesn't stop or slow down. Arthur walks fast, and makes it all the way back to the cottage and into his own room before Eames catches up with him, panting slightly.

"Arthur, darling..."

"Fuck off." Arthur glares at the wall.

Eames pretends to consider that for a split second. "No. Talk to me."

"You didn't seem particularly interested in me talking back there," Arthur spits out, and then feels childish and hates himself. Then he feels like an idiot for hating himself, and hates the three of them instead. He turns the glare on Eames.

Eames scrubs a hand briefly through his own hair and strokes the scruff on his chin before he responds. Even amidst his pique, Arthur realizes that he recognizes these mannerisms, now; he's getting a much better read on Eames. These are "slightly discomfited" and "thinking" gestures,
respectively. As good as he feels about that, though, he's not expecting what comes out of Eames' mouth next.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," he says simply. "I wasn't paying proper attention. And it's rubbish not being able to touch you. Only, I didn't know what you wanted me to do in front of him, he gossips worse than a girl." He reaches out a little tentatively for Arthur's hand.

After a pause, Arthur takes it. He sits on the bed and draws Eames down next to him, then slowly leans over and thunks his forehead and face into Eames' solid shoulder. He doesn't let go of Eames' hand, and Eames runs his thumb over the back of Arthur's fingers. It's comforting.

"Now I look like an asshole," he sighs, his voice muffled against Eames' arm.

"You are an asshole," Eames agrees. His voice is grave, but when Arthur looks up, his lips are twitching. "A lovely, pert, twinkling, puckered little--"

"Oh God, stop right there," Arthur groans, burying his face again. Then: "Twinkling?"

Eames looks sheepish. "You've got me all bollocksed, darling, I don't know what I'm saying." He nuzzles his cheek against Arthur's. His beard is still growing out after yesterday's clean shave, and it's scratchy and rougher than Arthur likes. He pushes him away, but gently.

"Look, go... go back there, talk all night, do whatever. Just come in here to sleep, ok?" Arthur asks.

Eames squints at him. "You're sure, love?"

"Yeah. Tell them, I don't know, I'm following a research lead or something. Something that makes me look like less of a twinkling asshole. Please?"

He gets the chuckle he's looking for, and Eames nods. "Will do." He leans forward and gently presses his closed lips to Arthur's, once, twice, a third time, then stands.

"But no drinking peaty whisky," Arthur orders.

"Check."

"And no cigars."

"Of course not."

"And bring a bottle of water with you."

"Yes, dear. Anything else, dear?" His tone is saccharine, his eyebrows mocking.

Arthur's brain has moved on to the tasks he wants to finish later, and isn't monitoring what comes out of his mouth. "No, that's it," he says absentmindedly. "I --," then stops short. Eames is halfway out the door, but his ears perk up when Arthur doesn't finish that sentence. He reels around. "What?"

Arthur, horrified, shuts his mouth with an audible snap. "Nothing."

Eames narrows his eyes and hums skeptically under his breath. He knows. "Arthur."

Arthur shuts his eyes. He does not want to have this conversation. Not yet. "Yeah."
"Arthur."

His hands clench the sheets, next to his thighs, but he opens his eyes and looks unwillingly up at Eames.

Eames is leaning against the doorway watching him, his posture deceptively casual. There's a faint smile on his lips, and his grey eyes have gone dark and fierce and approving. "I," he deliberately pauses, "too. All right?"

Arthur's heart contracts into a tiny ball in his chest, and then goes supernova in an instant, and he's hot all over. He grins, dazedly.

Eames gives him a lopsided, affectionate grin in return. "I'll be back soon, love," he says gently, and winks, and then he's gone.
This Could Be A Brand New Start, With You

Arthur doesn't know when Eames came to bed, but he's there in the morning, bare-chested and icy-footed and snoring into Arthur's ear. Arthur uses his toes to twitch the blankets down over Eames' bare feet, and rolls onto his side, pressing his back against Eames' otherwise warm body. It's still barely light out, and the cottage is silent; he's in no particular hurry to get up.

He fishes his tablet from under his pillow and checks his email, makes sure the payment to Yusuf has been processed, and attends to sundry other minor tasks. At some point, either the tapping or the light from the screen rouse Eames, and his arm creeps around Arthur's waist.

"Where are Yusuf and Kefilwe?" Arthur asks quietly, without turning around.

"She's across the hall, he's in the other cottage," Eames murmurs. "She said," he yawns, "if she hears any untoward noises from this room again, she'll tell Yusuf what we've been up to."

His hand wanders lower on Arthur's body. Arthur, alarmed, ignores it. "She can't tell people, Eames. It's not safe for us."

Eames chuckles, his breath huffing softly onto Arthur's neck. "It was an instruction, not a threat, love. She'll keep it quiet. She just wanted to make sure we behaved."

"If you want me to behave," Arthur says steadily, "you should take your hand off my dick."

"Bah," Eames grumbles, but he does as he's asked. He rolls onto his back, looking out the window at the increasingly blue sky outside, and idly scratches the hair on his chest, his crooked little finger dangling.

Arthur closes the tablet and turns to look at him. His hair is rumpled and his eyes are bleary with sleep, but his fine bone structure and exquisite musculature, and his beautifully modelled mouth, are enticing nonetheless.

"God, you're gorgeous." It comes out unbidden and unplanned, and the effect on Eames is delicious. His whole face lights up, and Arthur swears he can see the color of his eyes shift, becoming a little brighter, a little more blue. He beams at Arthur, and one powerful arm reaches out to tug Arthur down to his chest. Arthur hears and feels a chaste kiss on the crown of his head, and then --

"Are you biting my head?" he asks disbelievingly.

"No," Eames lies, his husky voice muffled in Arthur's hair.

"You are a very strange human being," Arthur tells him, grinning.

"Hmm, perhaps. But you... something... me anyway."

Arthur snorts. "Something."

Eames' tone is a little too light. "Well, I wouldn't presume to put the word in your mouth."

"Oh? What word is that?" He tries for a teasing tone, but feels bad as soon as it's out.

Eames' hand sweeps lightly and warningly down Arthur's bare ribcage, and he freezes. "I something you," he agrees hastily, before Eames' deft pickpocket's fingers go into tickling mode.
"Say it," Eames demands, but his voice contains a note of vulnerability, ticking upward at the end like it's a plea. His hand rests almost hesitantly on Arthur's hip.

Arthur pulls back, looks him full in the face. "How can we be sure?" he asks instead. "This is... so recent."

"We've known each other, what, six years now? No, seven," Eames points out. "It's not like I just picked you up at a bar last night." His face and eyes have gone blank and neutral. It's an actor's trick, concealing his emotions, and it saddens Arthur.

"I--" He stops. "Eames. Alec." He stops again, squinching his eyes shut in frustration. "Fuck, this was easier when I wasn't thinking about what I was saying."

"Perhaps I'm pushing too hard," Eames says softly. "Leave it, then." He pulls his arm out from under Arthur, swings his legs over the side of the bed, and sits up, facing away, his hands gripping the side of the mattress.

"No," Arthur says, pained. "Don't. Please." He rolls up until he's sitting sideways just behind Eames, and wraps his arms around Eames' unresponsive torso, tucks his face between Eames' neck and shoulder. There's that muscle there, the one Arthur looked at and wanted to bite, and all of the myriad tattoos he wanted to lick, what feels like both forever ago and yesterday.

"I want you," Arthur tells him, "all the time. I love waking up with you and I love the way you kiss me and I love how you touch me. I love watching you work. I want to be with you, we've got that down, don't we? And I think... I might love you. I just don't know how to know it." There. It's out. His heart races with adrenaline laced with fear.

Eames shudders once, involuntarily. His arms come up and wrap fiercely around Arthur's, and he takes one deep breath, but doesn't respond right away.

"Alec...?"

Eames stirs. "Arthur." His voice cracks slightly. "I've known you since you were just a kitten of a point man, without any of your proper claws grown in. And you were ravishing, with your suits and your pomade and your little frown and your to-do lists. I was never quite sure if there would be a right time to go to you, or if you would want me to. You already know that I've wanted you for years now. And to have had you, these past weeks... I bloody well do know how I feel about you."

Arthur holds his breath.

"Breathe, my darling idiot," Eames says, fond and cross all at once. Arthur does, and Eames turns his head to look at Arthur's face. "I love you, Arthur Neal Last-Name-Unknown, as terrifying as that may be for both of us."

It's Arthur's turn to shudder, now -- he hadn't realized what a wonderfully heart-stopping thing it would be, to hear it. Last night's half-declaration didn't even come close. He's simultaneously ecstatic and panicked. Is he supposed to do something? He should probably say something. His brain has frozen like a buggy computer program.

"You look like a deer in the headlights," Eames observes. He turns more fully to face Arthur. "All right? Not going to pass out on me, are you?" His voice is teasing, but his eyes are serious.

Arthur slowly shakes his head. His eyes are locked with Eames'. "Greenberg," he croaks out, and Eames looks startled. "Can we... do you want to run, with me? On the beach. I need to move,
somehow, or I'm gonna burst into pieces." He runs a thumb over Eames' full lower lip, still a little
dazed, but this seems to reassure Eames that Arthur hasn't been irreparably broken. "Um, love," he
adds.

Eames blinks, and his face goes all soft and playful again. "Yes, if that's what you need to get your
brain functioning again, Mr. Greenberg," and he's not quite laughing at Arthur, but he is. Arthur
scrambles to pee and dress and stretch, and Eames does all of those things too but more slowly, still
grinning at Arthur's haste and his slackwitted expression.

It's still early when they leave the cottage, the resort-goers not yet up and queuing for breakfast.
The sea air is brisk and clear, and Eames falls into step right next to him, keeping pace. They set
an easy rhythm down to the path that runs along the sand and then speed up, settling into a steady
stride that will have them back at the resort in forty minutes with five miles behind them.

Halfway through the loop, Arthur catches Eames' eye and picks up the pace, knowing that Eames,
with his heavier build, is likely to tire more quickly than Arthur with his long lean runner's body.
Eames merely raises his eyebrows -- you're on -- and keeps up, drawing even a little ahead of
Arthur, and Arthur remembers that Eames works harder than anyone he knows at making
everything he does appear effortless; he's probably been putting in time on the treadmill when
Arthur wasn't looking.

Arthur feels a smile creep across his face even as he continues his measured breathing, loving the
way the physical effort is making him finally feel grounded again, and enjoying the amiable
competition they have going here. He pushes a little harder, a little faster, just past his tolerance
level, and Eames follows him, breathing more heavily but gamely matching him stride for stride.

Eames can't sustain it, though, and slows to a jog when there's about a mile left. Arthur grins,
triumphant, but slows with him.

"Bastard," Eames pants. "You win. But I'm going to remind you of this... next time you need...
something heavy lifted."

Arthur jabs him gently in the arm with an elbow, careful to throw neither of them off stride. "It's
not my fault you're so vain about your bulging biceps. You think you need to carry around all that
muscle to look good..."

"Rot. You like it," Eames gasps out, failing to breathe and talk simultaneously.

"No," Arthur corrects him, "I love it," and he takes off, hearing Eames' raspy laughter behind him.
When he turns to jog backward for a few seconds, Eames has stopped entirely and is half-bent
over, watching Arthur and still laughing.

Arthur finishes the mile five minutes later and makes a beeline for the shower. Kefilwe is up,
starting a pot of coffee. She greets him far more pleasantly than she had the previous morning, and
he throws his dimples her way before closing the bathroom door behind him and stripping his
sweaty clothes off. In the shower, he uses Eames' hair and body products, just because, and
catches himself humming as he dries off afterward.

He's euphoric enough through breakfast that even the resumption of Swahili Exclusion Time
doesn't faze him; he tunes out of the conversation, taps at his phone and eats his eggs and presses
his knee firmly against Eames' under the table, smiling a little to himself as Eames blinks and
pauses for a split second mid-sentence. Throughout the meal, Yusuf pokes Eames' arm and slaps a
hand on his shoulder in their usual touchy-feely camaraderie, but Eames doesn't reciprocate, and
Arthur's little smile grows just a fraction bigger.
Yusuf shows no inclination to leave after breakfast, following them to the work cottage and installing himself firmly on the sofa there. Arthur doesn't understand why until he says, a trifle too innocently, that Eames had told him about their dream setting and that perhaps he could offer a professional opinion on whether they've, you know, come up with a realistic setting.

"Professional?" Arthur asks.

"Well, experienced, anyway," Yusuf amends.

It's clear enough what he wants, so Arthur invites him to participate as the mark in their run-through. "We're not going through the full scenario, though," he warns. "Just the setting and timing. And no lap dances." He doesn't want to watch Eames touching Yusuf that way, even in someone else's skin.

Yusuf shrugs philosophically. "Whatever I can do to help, of course."

Eames snickers and catches Arthur's eye; they had, in fact, planned a full run-through, and he knows damn well why Arthur is demurring. But it's all right, they have two more full days before the extraction. More than enough time.

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They all go under, Kefilwe to work with Arthur on finalizing the art pieces they've chosen for the walls of the hallways and private rooms, Eames to play the role of Cassandra so they can practice the timing, and Yusuf as the stand-in for du Toit.

Eames and Yusuf immediately get drinks at the bar in the main room and settle into two of the chairs near the stage, watching Yusuf's projections writhe and gyrate while Arthur and Kefilwe make their rounds. From time to time, Yusuf mutters something in Eames' ear, and Eames nods and looks thoughtful; Arthur can't tell if Yusuf is offering actually useful feedback on the dreamscape, or just critiquing the performance of his own projections.

One song before "Closer," Eames disappears into the dressing room area, and emerges on cue as the lushly beautiful blonde. Her costume is different, though, with a more solid bra that provides more coverage for her breasts and is covered with what look like tiny jingling coins. Her skirt is as sheer and diaphanous as ever, but her belt has been replaced with a heavy bronze fabric wrap that's also decorated with coins and which modestly covers her ass. Her dancing is different as well; the formalized postures and movements that he'd noticed before are more prevalent, while the typical exotic-dance flourishes are more perfunctory.

To Arthur's surprise, she doesn't remove any clothing, and it's a far less salacious performance than the one Eames had given him the day before. Yusuf's projections don't seem to mind, though.

When she exits the stage and the "parade" of lap dance offerings begins, she struts directly to Yusuf, and he enthusiastically agrees to accompany her down to the private rooms. She leads him to the doorway of their target room, Arthur trailing discreetly behind them, and pauses there, her eyes downcast, as Arthur takes Yusuf inside.

"You are purchasing one ten-minute private dance session with Cassandra here," Arthur tells him. "You pay me directly before the session begins. The Velvet Tiger does not permit any sexual contact to take place on the premises. To protect the ladies' reputation in that regard, we ask that for the duration of the private dance session, you remove your wallet and any other valuables you may have on you and place them in the safe located on the wall there," which he indicates.
"Valuables, hmm?"

"Yes, sir," Arthur says without expression.

Yusuf laughs. "Fine, then." He pulls a wallet out of the back pocket of his pants and peels off two hundred rand, which he hands Arthur. He unclasps a heavy, expensive-looking watch from his wrist as well, gravely enters a four digit code into the safe, places the wallet and watch in it, and closes it.

"Thank you, sir," Arthur approves. "Please enjoy your dance session." He bows his head slightly, then leaves the room, closing the door when Eames has gone inside. He hears "Je t'aime" start up, and hastens to the room immediately next door to see if anything else has appeared in the safe. He turns the sound on the video monitor up so he can listen in while he disassembles the back of the safe.

"I'm not giving you a lap dance," Cassandra says in her soft Afrikaans accent.

"Cocktease," Yusuf grumbles.

"I believe I heard you agree when Arthur said no lap dances."

Yusuf snorts dismissively. "And I believe you were the one who described Arthur to me as a 'stick in the mud.' Besides, he's not here."

Arthur frowns, but keeps working on the safe. Of course it smarts, but he's also heard the same phrase directly from Eames himself more than once, in addition to other, less complimentary epithets.

The frown morphs into a genuine grin, though, when he hears Eames' response. "All right then. You just lean back and enjoy it," he drawls in his own deep raspy male voice. When Arthur looks quickly at the monitor, he sees that Eames has plopped himself, all hundred-and-eighty pounds of brawn and hairy legs and stubbled chin, squarely onto Yusuf's lap, and is smiling beatifically into the camera. Interestingly, he doesn't opt to correct Yusuf's misimpression about Arthur's presence.

"Get off me," Yusuf sputters. Eames snorts, but heaves himself up. "Bring her back, I liked her."

"Christ," Eames says, disgusted. "You know she's still me, right?"

"No, she definitely isn't. I mean, I suppose you're alright-looking to other poofs, the muscles don't really do anything for me personally. But she... she's someone else. Someone very, very hot, whom I would very much like to show me her fine bosoms. Also, she weighs several stone less than you do, you great ox."

"If you would like to spend your ten minutes debating the nature of gender identity, and avatar identity, in shared dreaming, I would be happy to accommodate you, sir," Eames says politely, still in his own body. "But the only lap dance on offer tonight is from this muscly poof."

Arthur, who has been observing and cataloguing Eames' mannerisms with particular care these past few weeks, detects a faint note of real injury under the acidity of that last part, even through the security camera microphone. He looks up briefly at the monitor again. Yusuf is sitting on the couch, but Eames is pacing the room as Gainsbourg and Birkin moan and whisper endearments from the speakers.

Yusuf doesn't seem to hear anything other than standard Eamesian snark, though. "What do you care, anyway? I won't even touch her."
"Honestly, do you have any idea how off-putting that request is?"

"Oh, please, Eames. I know you've fucked any number of marks, in and out of dreams." Yusuf scoffs.

"Well, you are not going to be one of them, mate," Eames says with precision.

Arthur hears the warning tone, but he has other things on his mind right now; the back of the safe has come off, and there's an envelope inside next to the watch and wallet. On the flight down to Port Elizabeth, Arthur had watched one of the Harry Potter movies (he can never get the names straight), so the first thing he thinks when he sees what's written on the paper inside it is "potion." It's nothing but a long list of ingredients with the word "stir" at the end. Among other things, it calls for eleuthero, shatavari, and horsetail. Arthur can't make any sense of it; whatever his secret is, Yusuf has encoded it well.

He begins putting the safe back together, going over the list several times to commit it to memory. He vaguely registers that "Je t'aime" has ended, and the second song of the set -- Dannii Minogue's "Put the Needle On It" -- has begun.

"You had to practice on someone," Yusuf argues. "Ooh, was it Arthur? Did you show him your tits, give him a thrill?"

Arthur pauses to look at the monitor again. Yusuf is staring at Eames' face, which Arthur can't see because Eames is turned away from the security camera.

"I practiced on my projections, Yusuf. I do all of my preparation solo, you know that." His voice is smooth and unruffled. "Arthur and Kefilwe both saw and approved the stage dance. What goes on in this room is more... improvisational."

Surprisingly, Yusuf doesn't pursue it further. "Ah, your dance. I recognized that, you know. It wasn't stripping."

"I've been observing the mark at clubs, and he has a strong preference for the girls who incorporate elements of it. It happens to be part of my repertoire, so that's what we're going with. Besides," Arthur can hear the smirk in his voice, "are you going to tell me it makes her any less desirable?"

Yusuf groans, and Eames chuckles.

"I repeat: cocktease," Yusuf says mournfully.

They're quiet for a moment. Then Yusuf squints. "Speaking of Arthur..."

Eames waits. When nothing more is forthcoming, he says, "What about him?" He sounds as bored and disinterested as Arthur has ever heard him.

"You're not taking the piss nearly as much as you usually do," Yusuf says pointedly.

"Ah, it got a bit old, didn't it," Eames replies vaguely. "He's stopped taking the bait, just gives me a disappointed look and a shake of the head. Not nearly so much fun."

"Sounds dull," Yusuf agrees. "If you get tired of working with him..."

"I know, you don't want to work his jobs." Eames recites, as if he's said it a hundred times. "Look, mate, if I hear of a job that needs a chemist on-site, you're first on my list."
Listening to them is slowing Arthur down -- the second song is nearly over, he doesn't have the safe back together, and they don't have a third song ready. Shit. He casts wildly about in his memory for something sexy.

When the new song begins playing, Eames wheels around and looks directly into the security camera. "Madonna?" he mouths silently, one eyebrow raised. Arthur will apologize after they're done, but he honestly couldn't come up with anything else.

"Ah, this song takes me back," Yusuf says approvingly. "Do you remember the music video for it? Prime wank material, that one."

Eames turns back to him, surprise evident in his voice. "No, I missed it, actually. So -- the music works, you think?"

"For lap dances? Sure. You think your mark is going to care what the music is when he's got that luscious lady on his lap, though?"

"Noted." Eames sounds amused.

Arthur tightens the last screw and he's done. It looks like they will need three songs, to be safe; he can't imagine Eames' conversation with du Toit is going to be any easier to listen to than the one he's just had with Yusuf, especially since Eames will be nearly naked and on du Toit's lap. Arthur is going to have to clamp down on his emotional response and focus. He wants to be able to keep working with Eames; he can't let their relationship slow him down or distract him in a way that will affect the job.

As the song ends, he sets his face into an impassive stare, and opens the door to the room. "Your ten minutes are up," he tells Yusuf. "Cassandra, say goodbye."

Eames hasn't bothered to shift back to the blond. He saunters out the door, coos "Goodbye, you sexy, sexy thing," to Yusuf, and heads into the room next door.

"Please retrieve your valuables from the safe, and I'll show you to the men's room, where you can freshen up," Arthur says blandly. Yusuf sighs, but stands up, enters his code into the safe, pulls out his wallet and watch, and dutifully follows Arthur down the hallway to a private restroom.

"Now what?" he asks. "Seeing as how I don't particularly need to use the loo."

"Now I meet Eames in the safe room, we exit the premises and shoot out, and the dream collapses on you," Arthur tells him pleasantly. "Stay here and pretend to clean up, please. Or shoot yourself out, if you prefer."

"Can I go back up and watch some more, instead?" Yusuf wants to know.

Arthur shrugs. "You only have about two minutes, but sure, if you want to."

Yusuf happily pushes the elevator button, and Arthur returns to the room with the video monitor, where Eames is waiting for him.

"You heard?" Eames asks, watching Arthur's face.

Arthur nods shortly. "I did. We'll need to talk up top, ok? Let's get out of here."

As they climb the concealed stairs to the exit, he remembers something. "Hey, I meant to ask you. Some of your movements, dancing, looked sort of ...formal. Not like any of the stripping videos.
Like Yusuf said."

Eames' expression registers immediate understanding, but his response is an apparent *non sequitur.* "Did I ever tell you about this job I was on in Ankhara in 2005?"

He hasn't, but Arthur heard all about it from Dom. He shakes his head. "Sounded like a clusterfuck. That was the one where Margolis was killed, wasn't it?"

Eames winces. "Yes, poor bastard. There wasn't anything we could do for him by the time we found him." He's quiet for a second, remembering, before looking up again at Arthur. "My forge for that job was a bellydancer at a restaurant the mark frequented, and I spent several weeks training for it. du Toit has a particular fondness for one of the girls at the club who incorporates that style into her stage show, and it came back to me after just a bit of practice, so I thought I'd use it."

They've emerged from the club to the exterior street, but Arthur wants to finish the conversation before leaving the dream. "You were bellydancing," he repeats, just to make sure he's heard correctly.

"In the Turkish style, yes. It's quite a bit different from the Egyptian style, you know. Earthier." Eames is matter-of-fact; he doesn't seem to see anything unusual about this.

Well, that explains why the movements looked familiar. Arthur's not a dance aficionado, but he is fond of Middle Eastern food, and one of his favorite Lebanese restaurants near Dom's place in Los Angeles often has bellydancers performing in the evenings. He reminds himself that Eames is an actor and forger and that this is just what he does, it's part of his job. But all the same, he's flummoxed.

"Is there anything you *can't* do?" he blurs.

Eames gives him a rueful grin. "I can't sing a note. It's quite painful to hear, when I try. And you know my spelling is, er, irregular. I can't cook either. I do hope you can, or we'll be having take-away the entire time you're staying with me."

"I can cook."

"Lovely. Hmm... I hyperventilated the only time I tried scuba. Terribly embarrassing, never doing that again. I'm fair at cricket but rubbish at most other team sports. I've no head for machinery or plumbing. I've already told you, I'm bollocks at relationships." He thinks a moment, then shakes his head. "No, that's all, I'm brilliant at absolutely everything else I've put my hand to."

Arthur rolls his eyes, punches him lightly on the arm. "Your modesty is the most appealing thing about you, have I told you that?"

"Well, you know I can't do what you do, love," Eames says honestly. "Wouldn't have the faintest idea where to start. With the hacking and the databases and whatnot."

That's true. Arthur feels a little better. When he meets Eames' eyes, he sees Eames is watching him closely; he probably guesses why Arthur's asked, but Arthur finds he doesn't mind too much.

"Shall we?" he asks, pulling his Glock from his holster. He's thought to include one for Eames, too, which he hands over. Eames solemnly leans over to kiss Arthur's brow before placing the gun at his own temple. Arthur hastens to take his own shot, so that he doesn't have to see Eames die.
"Mugwort," Arthur says, and leaves it hanging there.

Yusuf smirks. "I've learned a few things since Inception, Arthur. People always seem to want the chemist to play the mark for training purposes. So I give them a secret formula."

"What formula is that?" Eames inquires, suddenly intent.

Arthur closes his eyes, concentrates, then recites it for him verbatim: "Stinging nettles, eleuthero, pu-ehr, shatavari, mugwort, skullcap, pennyroyal, elecampene, horsetail. Stir."

Eames frowns. "Yusuf, that sounds vile."

"What is it?" Arthur asks.

"Tea," Eames says shortly.

Yusuf gives Eames a thoughtful look. "It's a remedy for hangovers, mostly. Or if you need an emetic."

"Good to know. Now, do you have any input on the setting or music?" Arthur hadn't particularly enjoyed overhearing the conversation in the dream, and frankly, he would like Yusuf to leave as soon as possible, but he's not going to pass up useful feedback.

Yusuf is a big proponent of "Justify My Love," so they decide to make it the second song and use the Dannii Minogue as the third; that will give Arthur at least ten minutes to tackle the safe, and if he cues the third song it will let Eames know there's a potential problem.

"You might have to turn up the charm in there when you hear it, eh?" Yusuf winks at Eames.

"You know I always keep some charm in reserve," he replies lightly. "What about the seating, you had some thoughts about that while we were down there."

They continue debriefing and making modifications to the dream scenario for another forty minutes, and then Yusuf reluctantly makes his way out to hail a cab to Port Elizabeth's tiny airport. Watching him walk away, Arthur can feel tension he hadn't realized he was carrying starting to dissolve. His eyes go immediately to Eames', and they're troubled.

"Kefilwe, can we do another run with you as the mark after lunch?" he asks. She's been present through their discussion, but there really isn't much left for her to do, job-wise. "There are some things I need to go over with Eames first."

She nods patiently. "I will be by the pool when you need me. Take your time." She disappears into her room in the working cottage. They leave her there, and walk to one of the resort's many cafes.

Eames waits until they're seated to start in. "I know that had to have been unpleasant for you --"

Arthur cuts him off. "Look, no apologies. We knew it would be awkward at best, and I wasn't surprised he brought it up, given the way we've behaved together in the past. I know I have a reputation as a humorless taskmaster. That doesn't bother me."

"Much," Eames says knowingly.

"Fine. It doesn't bother me much," Arthur acknowledges with a shrug. "Besides, it's just Yusuf. I
got the device and the Somnacin we needed, that's all I care about as far as Yusuf goes."

"He thinks you're still holding a grudge from the Fischer job."

"Oh, I am," he agrees. "That's why he doesn't want to work with me?"

"That and the afore-mentioned humorless taskmaster bit, yes." Eames reaches for Arthur's hand on the table, holds it and absentely strokes his wrist.

A thought occurs to Arthur. "All the Swahili, you think that was deliberate?"

Eames' eyebrows shoot upward and his mouth purses slightly as he considers this. "Could have been. I wonder what he thought when it didn't bother you this morning."

"Probably not the real reason," Arthur says drily, and meets Eames' eyes. They're just faintly crinkled in amusement, and his lips are pressed together trying not to smile. "For what it's worth," Arthur continues, "I think you passed any test he was setting you."

Eames looks pensive, and his fingers go still on Arthur's wrist. "Yes, but I hate seeing and thinking about what that does to you."

"Being reminded of you teasing me, and hearing that Yusuf doesn't like me much, is hardly the worst experience I've had in this work," Arthur reminds him. "I can handle it. And I'd much rather you pretend to be cold and dismissive in front of other people than see you used as leverage against me by someone who figures out what we are to each other." Or be used as leverage myself by someone you've pissed off, he doesn't say.

"Right." Eames nods shortly. He still looks unhappy. They don't need to elaborate on what could happen if their relationship falls into the wrong hands; they're criminals, after all, and they've both crossed some very influential and powerful and ruthless people in the course of doing business. However much either of them might have bemoaned their lack of long-term relationships, they've at least been much safer that way.

"Hey," Arthur tells him, deliberately softening his voice and face. "I'm fine. We have what we need. We have at least a couple more days together. Let's just -- be present here and now." He turns his palm up, squeezes Eames' hand. Eames meets his eyes and squeezes back, and for the moment anyway, they're ok.
Hey, I wanted to see if you and Dad are going to be in town during the second week of April. I'll be stateside for some training and thought I could come by for a few days, if that works for you. I miss you guys.

Work is going well, they're keeping me pretty busy. Sorry, you know I can't say much more than that. At least I've been able to stay in the same country for several weeks.

I also wanted to tell you, I've met someone...

He pauses there. He's not sure which of Eames' names he should give his parents. Alexander Eames, the card sharp and sometime spy? Jonathan Kent, the reclusive classically trained actor? Stephen Lange, the hunky personal trainer? He decides to wait on this particular announcement until he can do it in person -- he knows his mother, and emailing her a name is only asking for an immediate all-out search on her part. She's no Arthur, but for a middle-aged academic she has some impressive Google-fu.

He'd ask Eames what name he should use, but he feels a little pre-emptively defensive when he imagines Eames' reaction. Eames warning his mum that he'd be having a houseguest for a few weeks isn't quite the same as Arthur announcing that he's Met Someone and that It's Serious, which Arthur admits to himself is what he's actually doing here.

... He's an actor. I had seen him in "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof" in Europe a few years ago and then was surprised to recognize him again in a touring production in the location in Africa I've been assigned to lately. We've spent the last several weeks together. He's British, sort of the charming rogue type. I think you'd like him.

Thanks for sending me the pictures of Hannah's new baby. Let me know about April.

love,
A

There, filial duty satisfied, but he hasn't given them enough detail to snoop with until he's there in person. Arthur's always been leery about putting details in writing that might come back to haunt him later. He hates lying to his parents, but he's been doing it since he entered dreamshare, parlaying a fictional job programming for the government into his current fictional job as courier. It's par for the course by now. Before he sees them, he'll re-read what he's sent to make sure his story remains consistent.

He hits "send" and skims through his inbox, but there's nothing urgent that requires his attention right now. Suddenly restless, he stands, moves to the window and looks out across the pool. It's a hot, clear day, and the pool area is noisy, filled with children playing in the water and their parents sunbathing or dozing on lounges. Kefilwe, her braids pulled up into a high ponytail and a gaily flowered cover-up in disarray over her modest halter swimsuit, is reading under an umbrella. Eames had gone outside with her half an hour ago, but Arthur doesn't see him out there now.

There's a strange, hiccupping little twitch in his chest when he thinks of Eames. He's not sure if it's
the knowledge that they'll soon be separated, or just garden-variety, standard-issue lust, that makes
him come all over shivers, makes his breath stutter out, on the roughly fifteen hundred times he
thinks of Eames during the day. It's a new feeling, a little pleasant and a little painful at once, and
it's worse when Eames is near.

As he is right now, Arthur realizes, although he's not conscious of hearing a sound. When he turns
around, Eames is standing in the doorway, hands in the pockets of his well-worn khaki trousers,
watching Arthur with a faint smile curving his full lips.

"Just admiring your bum," he says easily.

Arthur shakes his head, but he can't help a little answering grin as he turns and leans back against
the wall.

Eames moves fully into the room and drops into the chair behind his desk. "What are you in here
for, anyway? It's lovely out there, and there's nothing more we need to do to prepare at this point."

"Emailing my mom," Arthur admits. "It's been a while, I thought I'd stop and see them for a few
days before the next job."

Eames studies his fingernails and says casually, "Telling mum all about your new boyfriend,
hmm?" His eyes flick knowingly up to meet Arthur's.

Damn it, does he have to be so astute? "They'll ask," Arthur points out, without answering the
question. He knows his evasion is the same as a straightforward "yes," but maybe Eames won't
make him say it.

He just looks at Arthur intently. "You don't like lying to them."

Arthur shakes his head, mutely.

"I see." Eames bites the inside of his lip again, thinking. "None of my identities are quite right for
it, are they? I admit, I haven't had to be prepared for this sort of eventuality for... nine, ten years
now. I don't tend to meet the parents, love."

"I told her I'd met a touring actor," Arthur blurs. "No name. We have time. I'll help you put
together an online presence, of course. I just didn't know which you to use." He's both
embarrassed and relieved to have it out in the open.

Eames just nods, deliberately ignoring Arthur's frazzled state. "Well, we have some time to think
about it. Come have a kip with me on the porch?"

Arthur declines the nap, but the shade of the porch and Eames' sleepy company there sound
appealing. He fetches his tablet from his room, and when he emerges again, Eames has taken off
his shirt and is ensconced out front on a low wooden lounge with -- Arthur squints -- The Mayor of
Casterbridge. Arthur plumps a pillow up on the porch swing instead and opens up his tablet.

Out of habit, he runs a quick check on their mark's email account after checking his own; it's a
sensible practice, helps avoid last-minute surprises. He skims down the list of mostly junk
messages until one item catches his eye.

"Hey," he tells Eames. "Remember how frustrated I was that du Toit's wife wouldn't leave the
house?"

Eames hums assent, but doesn't look up.
"They have a dinner reservation tonight at Ginger. If you still wanted to get into the house for any reason, this would be the time."

This news does pique Eames' interest, and he closes the book, holding his place with a finger. "Just the two of them?"

Arthur clicks through the link in the message, and pulls up the reservation. "No. Party of four. Why?"

Eames purses his lips. "Wondering if it would be more useful to tail them to the restaurant, get a look at his interaction with his wife."

"We could do both," Arthur suggests. "You've tailed him solo before with no problems. Or you could take Kefilwe out with you. I think she's getting bored."

They both turn their heads and consider Kefilwe, who appears to be sound asleep under her umbrella by the pool, the drink in her hand listing precariously to one side and a magazine fallen to the ground beside her.

"There is that," Eames acknowledges. "You're going to try to get into the house, then?"

Arthur nods. "If I can find something that conclusively proves his involvement with the betting groups so we get paid the full amount, and I don't have to watch or listen to you giving him a lap dance, I'd say it's worth the risk." It comes out a little snarkier than he'd intended, but it's true. He's never actually liked having to observe Eames' seduction of the mark, in or out of the dream, but it's never made him feel physically ill, the way he feels when he thinks about having to endure the upcoming extraction -- in his role as a pimp of sorts, no less.

Eames' gaze is sober and searching. "Is it going to be a problem working other jobs?" he asks quietly.

Arthur shakes his head. "I don't know," he admits. "It shouldn't, but I really don't like it. I mean, I really don't. I trust you -- it's not that I worry you're getting anything out of it -- I just don't want to see it."

There's still concern in Eames' eyes, but he smiles too, just a little. "I'm touched, darling," and his voice is candid, not mocking.

"So you'll go with Kefilwe?" Arthur says abruptly, all business. "The reservation is at 7 at the bar for cocktails, then at 8 for dinner. I'll leave it to you to decide when you think you should arrive."

Eames looks somewhat askance at Arthur's sudden shift in tone, but acquiesces. Arthur rises -- he has research to do, and he needs to be in position to surveil the du Toits leaving the house well before their reservation time.

Five hours later, he is quietly cursing to himself. Getting into du Toit's house once he and Diane had left wasn't a problem. Getting used to the swampy reek of the aquariums in every room of the house presented few difficulties. Getting past the lock on their filing cabinet was a piece of cake. But he's been over the whole house, and skimmed through every document in the cabinet, and there's not a single piece of paper here that ties either of them to the betting organizations. There's no safe either, as far as he can determine. If there is a paper trail, du Toit is keeping it elsewhere. They're going to have to go through with the extraction, lap dance and all.

His phone vibrates discreetly in his pocket. He ignores it, but then it vibrates again, and he digs it out, frowning.
It's a text from Eames. Their dinner dates are Kluwers & Erika. She sends her love.

Arthur swears some more. It hadn't occurred to him that du Toit and Kluwers might socialize, or that this might be the weekend Erika was supposed to visit Kluwers, but of course if he'd been thinking clearly he'd have realized both of those things.

His phone vibrates again in his hand. Also, du Toit is speaking French w/ his wife. He may have recognized me, as Erika made quite a production of introducing me to the table.

what do you want me to do? Arthur responds. the house is a bust, nothing here but frogs

You'd lend verisimilitude to my story if you joined us here. Immediately, if you wouldn't mind.

Could this night get any worse? fine, omw. 10-15 min

In the car, his phone buzzes again. He fishes it out of his pocket and glances down, trying to keep his eyes on the road. r u carrying? if not, do

"Fuck shit hell damn," Arthur says aloud, and texts back with one thumb. wtf are you up to??

getting stinkeye & dont fancy fistfight w bloke who has hiv. The breakdown in punctuation -- Eames is usually a fairly formal texter -- has Arthur more worried than the content of the message. It can only mean that Eames is hurried and trying not to be caught texting, and that means he think he's being watched. Also, what the hell is Eames doing out without a gun on him? He should know better than this.

The thought that perhaps Arthur has Eames every bit as distracted and off his game as Eames has Arthur does not occur to him.

Traffic is blessedly light, and Arthur makes it to the restaurant within ten minutes. He takes a few seconds to breathe in and try to settle into Tony Levinson's persona again, harmless and friendly and pedantic and a bit dull, before squaring his shoulders and entering. It's an open, inviting space, bustling and noisy and full of see-and-be-seen types.

He spots Erika before he sees Eames. Her long brown hair is up in a complicated knot, and she's wearing long slinky gold earrings and a simple, dark green halter dress. He'd forgotten how attractive she is. She sees him too and waves, a bright inviting smile on her face. He holds up one finger in the universal sign for "wait a minute," and heads toward a corner of the room where he sees Kefilwe sitting alone.

She smiles politely, but her face is worried. "He is in the W.C.," she tells him.

"What's going on here?" he asks in a low voice, trying to keep his face relaxed as he eases into the bench seat opposite her.

"She sees him when we come in, and asks us come meet them," Kefilwe whispers, and Arthur groans -- she can't be the "nurse" for the extraction now, in case du Toit recognizes her. "She is very happy. Kluwers does not care, but du Toit looks at ... Stephen and speaks to the blonde woman in French. Stephen says you must come."

"And thank you, darling, for making it here so quickly," Eames murmurs, sliding onto the seat next to Arthur.

"What the hell is going on, sweetheart," Arthur hisses, and pecks him perfunctorily on the cheek in case anyone other than Kefilwe is watching.
"Well, it's hardly my fault she was here, was it?" Eames rejoins under his breath, his voice snippy but his expression absolutely delighted.

He has a point. If anything, Arthur should have followed up on Erika's emails, since they knew she was planning a visit. Arthur shuts his eyes and rubs his left eyebrow, where tension always seems to gather.

"You were the one who had to confront him in the club, though."

"Can we perhaps sort out the blame later and deal with what's in front of our faces here and now?" Eames shoots back.

Arthur swallows a retort, because he is a professional and because he suspects they are being watched by their erstwhile mark. "Fine. What did you tell them?"

"Her name is Lesedi" -- Eames says shortly, nodding at Kefilwe -- "and she's the cousin of a friend of mine back home. You were at a swimming lesson, that's why you're late. We've been traveling up the coast and we're staying at the Radisson. All right?"

"Right." He sighs. "I should go say hi. Are you coming with me?"

"Overjoyed to," Eames mutters sourly, and grabs Arthur's hand to lead him to where Erika sits, practically wriggling with glee. She bounds out of her chair to hug Arthur, and smiles warmly at Eames.

Before Erika can make introductions, du Toit offers Arthur his hand and says in flawless French, "Je m'appelle Mathieu. Vous devez ètre Tony."

"Nuh par-lay fran-say," Arthur responds carefully, in the most American accent he can muster, and assumes a politely confused expression.

du Toit smiles. Arthur does not like the way it looks on his face. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought, since your friend speaks it so fluently... I said my name is Mathieu. This is my wife, Diane."

"Tony Levinson," Arthur introduces himself. He shakes du Toit's hand and nods at Diane, who gives him a flat smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"Tony, this is my cousin -- Johan," Erika tells him, stressing the word cousin very slightly, and her eyes travel rapidly over his face to see if he'll make the connection. "He and Mathieu work together."

"Good to meet you," Kluwers says shortly. Arthur can't tell if he's displeased about meeting Erika's Big Gay Friends, or if he's just a sourpuss in general. His observation of Kluwers makes him think it's primarily the latter.

The obvious question in any other social situation would be "what do you do," but Arthur is not about to touch on that subject. "Nice to meet you," he says politely, and turns his attention back to Erika.

"How are you?" she says in a rush, her brown eyes sparkling. "I felt awful not getting your email after our last dinner, I wanted to keep in touch since we had such a good time. Stephen gave me his just now, though. I'll friend you both on Facebook tonight! So where are you going next? Don't you love Port Elizabeth? I've been thinking of moving here myself."

He's a little dizzied from that onslaught. "It's a beautiful country," he says honestly. "We've really
enjoyed our time here. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to head back to work in a few days -- it's tax season and my manager is already unhappy that we've extended our trip."

"It's lovely to see you, but we just wanted to stop by," Eames interrupts. "I hate to leave a lady unattended," and he nods toward Kefilwe, who is picking at her food and looking morose. "Erika is in town for the next two days," he tells Arthur. "Perhaps we can see each other again?"

"That would be great," Arthur says with forced enthusiasm. "It's so good to see you again," he adds in a less forced tone, taking Erika's hand and giving her a genuine smile.

As they turn to make their way back to Kefilwe, Arthur tells Eames -- flirtatiously, and just a little louder than he would normally speak -- "I didn't know you spoke French."

Eames gives him a mega-watt grin, his eyes crinkling with pleasure, and responds, also just a little louder than necessary, "Oh, I've only picked up a few words here and there, mon cœur." His accent is atrocious, and Arthur laughs in spite of himself. They're probably out of earshot, but du Toit and his wife can still see their body language, so he continues the charade.

"What does that mean?" he asks innocently, slipping his hand into Eames'.

"My heart," Eames says simply, dropping any pretense. He pulls Arthur's hand to his mouth and presses a soft kiss there.

Despite the predicament they're in, Arthur still thrills to hear those words in Eames' low purring accent, and with that look on his face... He's beautiful, and he's Arthur's. Even if Arthur is going to kill him later for being so reckless and insulting the mark and drawing all kinds of unnecessary attention to them. Before they sit, he strokes the soft stubble on Eames' jawline, and smiles in spite of himself.

Eames grins tightly back at him, then gets right down to it without preamble. "So, how does this change things?"

"He'll recognize you," Arthur reminds Kefilwe. "We'll need to keep you out of sight before the injection."

"That is simple to do, but he will also recognize you," she points out. "And you do not forge."

Before Arthur's heart can stop entirely (he hadn't thought, just rushed down here -- stupid of him), Eames is already shaking his head. "Actually, it will lend a certain reality to the dream if he recognizes Arthur's face, rather than Arthur appearing as a complete stranger. Most laypeople have heard of the, er, 'mental backwash' theory of dreaming, where the brain simply sorts through random images and people it's encountered in the previous day or so. He may attach feelings of suspicion to Arthur, so you'll have to watch the projections more closely" -- this latter directly to Arthur -- "but I'm confident that will not pose a problem for you."

"Thanks," Arthur responds tightly.

"Oh, chin up, darling. He has no reason to suspect you of interference in a dream, and no reason at all to attach suspicion to Cassandra, so the extraction itself should proceed smoothly once you're out of sight."

Well, that's true. Arthur starts to feel a little bit better. Only a little bit, though.

"You were concerned about fistfights?" he prompts Eames. He's been careful not to look back at du Toit's table, so he doesn't know whether du Toit is watching either of them.
Surprisingly, it's Kefilwe who confirms this. "Yes, he is very angry. I see him watch Stephen walk to the W.C. He stood to follow you there, but his wife stopped him."

"No more visits to the loo this evening then," Eames says lightly, but his eyes narrow and his jaw tightens.

"I'm prepared, if we need to chase him off," Arthur mutters. "But we should probably go straight to the Radisson tonight, and stay there. It's not much good stopping a fight by showing him ... what I brought. It'll just make him more suspicious. Will you be all right at the resort on your own if we do that?" he asks Kefilwe.

Her face and posture are tense, but her voice is composed. "My husband has a cousin the next town over. I will stay with them. I will be safe there."

It sounds like they have a plan, then. Staying a full night away from his laptop and the PASIV makes Arthur feel distinctly uneasy, but it can't be helped, and at least he'll have Eames with him. They finish the meal, albeit quickly, in order not to arouse suspicion, and wave cheerfully at Erika on the way out. They bundle Kefilwe into a cab, and drive to the Radisson in Arthur's rental car.

At the hotel, Arthur reserves a room for the night using Tony Levinson's ID, while Eames pleads a mysterious errand and vanishes into the gift shop. Arthur has his suspicions about said errand, and the smug look on Eames' face when he rejoins Arthur in the lobby does nothing to dispel them.

Up in the room, feeling strange with no luggage and no computer, he moves to the window and stares out over the dark water. Behind him, Eames sits in the chair next to the mini-desk and toes off his shoes. Arthur hears them fall on the floor and then slide, one by one, under the desk. It's something he hadn't noticed about Eames before this job; he won't wear shoes any longer than he has to. Then there's silence.

When Arthur turns around, Eames is watching him, a wolfish smile on his face.

"I guess we'll just have to watch TV all night, since we have no lube," Arthur comments drily, and cocks an eyebrow at the bag from the gift shop.

"You were meant to be surprised by my thoughtfulness and resourcefulness," Eames complains.

"I know you," Arthur retorts. "Given the circumstances, it was completely predictable that you'd stop to pick up lube before doing anything else."

Eames just smiles and pats his knee and says "Come here, you."

Arthur doesn't move, but raises an eyebrow. "Are you harboring Santa Claus fantasies?"

Eames snorts. "Suit yourself." There's both affection and amusement in his voice. "Did I ever tell you about when Mal wanted me to forge Father Christmas?"

"Please tell me you weren't extracting from a child." Arthur pushes himself off the wall toward where Eames is sitting, tipped back in his chair. Rather than sit on Eames' lap, appealing though it is, he perches on the desk directly in front of him instead, opening his thighs slightly in invitation.

"No, the mark was a middle-aged office manager with a penchant for collecting figurines," Eames assures him. "We had to abandon the idea, though. Couldn't decide which type she thought was the real thing -- she had tall skinny ones, fat jolly ones, curly bearded and wispy bearded..." As he speaks, he stands and nudges Arthur's knees further apart with his thigh, cradling his hands possessively in the small of Arthur's back. "You really do have a lovely arse, darling." His lips
brush across Arthur's slowly, giving Arthur plenty of time to object, but he's not going to: they have the whole night alone, and Eames is here and kissing him and he won't be a week from now.

Arthur kisses him back, and it's good, Eames' lips plush and slick against his, Eames' broad shoulders firm and pleasantly bulky under his greedy hands. It's been a warm day, and Arthur is wearing a slim-cut pair of navy knee-length shorts. Eames lightly runs a teasing hand just under the hem. He can't make much headway, though, and Arthur laughs into his mouth.

"Do they have to be quite so fitted?" Eames complains, pulling off to mouth at Arthur's neck.

"You're inconsistent, Mr. Eames. If I wore them looser, you'd have a harder time admiring my assets," he teases, stretching his head back to give Eames room to suckle.

"Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative," he murmurs into Arthur's ear in return, and Arthur pauses.

"I've heard that before."

"Oscar Wilde," Eames admits. "The master of the epigram. I" -- he takes Arthur's earlobe gently between his teeth -- "studied him devoutly, when I was supposed to be in Sunday School."

Arthur shivers. The heat of Eames' mouth, the lightning flicker of his tongue along Arthur's ear, and the firm bulge he's slowly rocking against Arthur's stomach -- ok, and Oscar Wilde -- are doing their work. He grips Eames' hips and tugs him roughly closer, slipping off the desk to press the full lengths of their bodies together.

Five minutes later, Arthur is undressed and on the bed and efficiently scissoring himself open before Eames' admiring eyes.

"Christ," Eames exhales reverently, and he's flicking open the lube and slicking himself up immediately. He hadn't bothered to pick up condoms, and Arthur is a trifle indignant about that before he remembers that they have all night, and he can bend Eames over next if he likes. Besides, it may be inconvenient and messy, but there's still a delicious thrill that runs down his spine at the thought of the trust between them that’s reaffirmed every time they bareback.

For all that the night has gone so wrong, it's sweet here and now, and wickedly hot: Arthur belly-down with his knees tucked underneath him and his face buried in his own arm, Eames kneeling behind him narrating exactly what he's doing to Arthur and how good Arthur looks like this, the words tumbling out of him in a low, husky whisper.

It doesn't last long, but it doesn't need to. As they collapse next to each other, breathless and heated and sweating, Arthur grips Eames' forearm, a tinge of "we'll-be-parted-soon" unhappiness making him clamp down harder and a little more possessively than he means to. Eames makes a brief wordless noise -- content? amused? consoling? Arthur can't tell -- and strokes Arthur's foot with one toe, but doesn't open his eyes.

Arthur knows from experience that Eames is perfectly capable of falling asleep right here and now. He doesn't want that. He wants him awake and snarky and aggravating and engaged and ready for another round sooner rather than later.

"That was amazing, my love," he says, and watches Eames' face. Pleasure and surprise flicker across it with equal rapidity, before his long lashes blink open and he's looking at Arthur, clear grey eyes fully alert and knowing.

"It was," Eames agrees, and then scrubs a hand across his forehead. "Fuck, I'm going to miss
"Me too," Arthur says matter-of-factly. They're neither of them sentimental, they don't need long drawn-out poetic articulations of every facet of each other's personality, habits, scents, quirks that they're loath to do without; they'll both miss this, nothing more needs saying.

They'll oversleep in the morning, and Arthur will sulk when his hair dries curly after his shower, and Eames will laugh at him and rumple the curls and successfully evade Arthur’s angry swatting hand. All Arthur’s day-of preparations for an extraction will be thrown off, and he’ll worry about Kefilwe until they return safely to the resort to find her calmly making coffee, and there’s a pit of dread in his stomach for how the extraction is going to run this afternoon. But at the same time, this night together with no housemate and no books or email or other work to be done, just the two of them and this big bed and a now mostly-empty bottle of gift shop lube, will be one of his favorite memories from this job.
And I Thought, Be Still My Heart

It's go time. They're as prepared as they can be: the PASIV adaptor and Somnacin compounds are ready, the set list for the lap dance has been reworked to eliminate "Je t'aime," and they've destroyed the paper evidence and Kefilwe's models, cleared out the cottages at the resort, and shipped most of their clothing and extraneous gear to pre-arranged dropoff points, keeping only one suitcase and carryon apiece plus the PASIV case. Once they leave the SARU this afternoon, for better or worse, they're just tourists.

Kefilwe's husband is driving down to pick her up, while Arthur and Eames will be staying at the Port Elizabeth Radisson for another two days before they leave for Paris, with connecting flights to LaGuardia and Heathrow, respectively. The resort has agreed to arrange a transfer of their luggage to the Radisson -- there's very little you can't manage with the right amount of money directed into the right hands, and this way if someone is tailing them, they won't arouse suspicion by lugging around their own suitcases.

Despite the preparation, Arthur can't shake an unfamiliar feeling of foreboding. He hasn't been this anxious about an extraction since Inception. It's not that he thinks they won't succeed, or that he's worried about du Toit's suspicious projections turning on them; it's the thought of the dream itself that's bothering him, and what he'll be hearing and seeing from Eames in the course of the extraction.

It's never sat entirely well with him that forgers employ seduction in the dreamscape, but he's always been able to brush it off, reasoning that it's little different from engaging a mark's feelings of affection for a deceased or absent loved one, or fear or admiration for a powerful public figure. Moreover, he gets it, intellectually -- sometimes a seduction is the most straightforward, effective way to get the job done, end of story.

But still. There's a hard knot in his gut, just under his ribs, a leaden weight that's making it hard to breathe freely.

This isn't how Arthur approaches dreaming. Usually, even for the grimmest, sketchiest jobs, he looks forward to going under and creating the world of the dream. Today, he just feels keyed-up and jumpy.

Eames has clearly picked up on Arthur's tension, and has been giving him concerned looks when he thinks Arthur can't see him. He's obviously torn between comforting Arthur the way he wants to comfort Arthur, and being courteous to Kefilwe, so his attempts to soothe Arthur are taking the form of surreptitious touches and more hair rumpling, which is having the opposite of the desired effect. Arthur doesn't say anything, though. It's beyond rare for any of Arthur's colleagues to notice, much less care, if he's upset or anxious, and he appreciates the intent even if his fingers are itching to smooth his hair down again each time Eames comes near him.

The three of them share a somber breakfast of savory millet porridge and boiled eggs at a resort cafe, dissecting and re-dissecting du Toit's words and actions the night before and his odd denial of understanding Eames' confrontational words in the club the week prior. It's obvious that he's connected harmless gay tourist Stephen Lange to the rude stranger who insulted his wife at a heterosexual strip club (Arthur is never going to let Eames live that down), but they can only speculate as to what he thinks about it.

"Diane knows he goes to the clubs," Arthur offers. "She complained about it to a friend in email, that he stays there too late. And -- you did directly insult her family. It's hardly surprising that he
would have told her."

"Yes," Eames says testily, "I know what I said, Arthur, thank you."

Kefilwe puts a pacifying hand over Arthur's before he can open his mouth to respond in kind. He meets her eyes, nods minutely in acknowledgment, and continues in a more neutral tone. "All right. We'll assume they both know, and that that's the reason they were so rude yesterday. There's nothing that we know of that would allow them to connect your presence or your statement with the SARU's gambling concerns, so we're probably good to go as far as the dream is concerned."

Eames nods. "I'll forge a patron of the club until it's time for Cassandra to perform. You should change your appearance as best you can -- perhaps pull your hair down over it again, and make your clothes baggier. Your face is distinctively handsome, darling, but there's nothing to be done about that right now."

He has to smile just a little at that last. "I still have to talk to him," he reminds Eames.

"Right. I don't suppose you can do an accent...?"

Arthur makes a face at him. "Yeah. French. That's as good as my foreign languages get, and for obvious reasons that's not a great idea in this case."

"Hmm, no."

"Look, I learned programming languages," Arthur reminds him defensively. "Which got us most of the information we needed to pull this off. And there wouldn't have been any need to change my voice if you'd just kept your mouth shut at the club!"

"Me opening my mouth at the club is what got us the information that he's an unnaturally suspicious bastard and that he's well aware of his wife's ties to drug kingpins," Eames points out, the line between his brows deepening into a particularly stubborn groove that Arthur knows only too well.

Kefilwe, who has been looking increasingly uncomfortable during this exchange, suddenly leans forward and smacks her cell phone down on the table. "My husband, he can do it."

They stop bickering and turn to her.

"He comes early today to bring me home. He will go in and be the employee to talk to du Toit."

She taps a finger on her phone. "You stay in the next room. The mark will not see your ... distinctively handsome face." She cocks her head slightly to the side, waiting to see what they think of her solution.

Eames meets Arthur's eyes. "I've worked with him before. He's competent," he says neutrally.

It's hardly a glowing endorsement. "What does he do?" Arthur asks cautiously.

"He is a chemist," Kefilwe tells him.

Arthur thinks about this. "What if you go under with us and he acts as the nurse up top?"

Eames is already shaking his head before Kefilwe can say anything. "Male nurses are extremely rare here, black men even more so. Far too risky. Further, we need a man to play the pimp role. It would be an anomaly, to say the least, for a woman to handle that part of the transaction."
"Well, does he speak English?"

Instead of answering, Eames bends near Kefilwe and murmurs in what Arthur thinks might be Setswana. She chews her lip, thinking, then responds in the same language. Arthur feels his blood pressure rocket almost instantaneously -- for fuck's sake, there are only three of them at the table -- but before he can go ballistic, Eames turns back to him with a hint of apology in his eyes.

"He'll accept one fifth of my share of the take. Since it was my fault he recognized me, I can at least do that much."

Arthur doesn't like this at all, doesn't want their careful plans switched around, doesn't want deviation from the script this late in the game -- but he doesn't see much of a choice. Eames appears to be resigned to it happening, and certainly Kefilwe can vouch for her husband's reliability.

"No offense," he says carefully, "but can we discuss this?" He nods at Eames.

"Of course. Excuse me." She steps away from the table, ostensibly to admire a floral display in the cafe's entrance.

"Competent?" Arthur asks. "That's not saying much."

Eames shrugs. "He's a bit of a Gloomy Gus, but he's bright -- knows his compounds -- and I don't see any reason he wouldn't be able to pull off the role. He's obviously already vested in our succeeding."

"Any other reservations?"

Instead of answering, Eames raises an eyebrow. "You're taking this remarkably well."

Jesus, Arthur thinks, exasperated. "Yeah, well, I don't see much of a choice. I'd rather get it done, get out and get paid and not get butchered by his projections."

Eames hums thoughtfully. "I doubt you'll care for him, love, but he should be able to get it done. I'd accept the offer."

"Fine. Good." Arthur motions to Kefilwe, and she returns to the table. "If he's willing, we're willing. Look, what time will he be here? What's his name?" he asks her.

"Thabo. He has two hours to drive, now." Her rich brown, feline eyes scan his face, and she seems reassured by whatever she sees there. He wishes he felt the same way.

"All right." He looks at Eames. "You take him down and run the script when he gets here. I need to contact SARU and let them know we're adding an extra person for this one, and produce some information about his dreamshare experience. Kefilwe, can you email me a summary of jobs he's worked? Does he have a current blood verification?"

She nods. "I will write it. His blood is clean like mine, but I will get you his papers." Her voice is gently reproving, but her face is understanding.

He regrets asking, but he had to. And he'll insist on Eames looking over the document, too. This is part of what he does, as a point man; just because they're changing it up late doesn't mean slacking off on the routine precautions.

Eames pushes his chair back and stands. "I have a few calls I need to make." He brushes the back
of his hand across Arthur's temple in a quick caress, and he's gone.

Arthur pauses, and Kefilwe smiles. "Go. I will have more coffee, first. Do what you need to do."

He smiles back and thanks her before leaving the cafe, heading straight to the cottage to boot up his laptop. He skims du Toit's and Diane's email again, but there's nothing new since their dinner reservation last night. He also sends a few texts, to other points and extractors who work in this part of the world, to see if any red flags pop up on Thabo. He trusts Eames, of course, but it never hurts to have more information.

The call to the SARU rep goes about as well as he'd expected -- Arthur will be so happy when he doesn't have to deal with that particular prissy little functionary anymore -- but the responses to his texts are positive, and the fax and PDF copies of Thabo's blood tests he receives (from a chemist Arthur's worked with in the past) appear legit. Eames confirms Arthur's impression, as best he can from the copies without the original in hand.

The man himself, when he arrives, is nothing like what Arthur had pictured. He's built like a supermodel, tall and elegant and impossibly leggy, with velvet ebony skin and close-cut, greying hair. It's like Jack Sprat and his wife, Arthur thinks, and then feels bad for thinking it. It's not that Kefilwe is fat, exactly; she's just short and has an overabundance of curves, whereas Thabo would make even Arthur himself look overweight by comparison.

Luckily, Thabo is wearing khakis and a collared shirt. It's not quite business attire, but with one of Arthur's spare ties, it will do for their purposes. His English is rather better than Kefilwe's, and his voice is startlingly familiar to Arthur from Kefilwe's nightly Skype sessions. After introductions, Eames coaches him on his lines, and they run through the scenario a couple of times in the waking world and then twice in the dream. With his long, melancholy face and sepulchral manner, Thabo makes an unlikely pimp, but he's adequate in the role, and Arthur reminds himself that this is the safest alternative open to them.

About halfway through the practice runs, Arthur admits that Eames was right. He doesn't actively dislike Thabo, exactly, but he probably wouldn't want to work with him on a team. Arthur has a healthy sense of risk aversion, but Thabo carries it all the way over into pure pessimism. The last thing they need at this late stage of the job is someone to pick apart and call into doubt their careful plans. He's perfectly pleasant and polite, but his air of gloom threatens to be contagious.

Two hours before the appointment, they travel separately to the SARU complex, Arthur and Kefilwe in a cab and Eames in Thabo's car. Ordinarily they'd play this part a little looser, but since du Toit can recognize Arthur, Eames and Kefilwe, Eames had suggested an early arrival and Arthur had immediately concurred. He's already explained to the SARU rep that the mark "may have" spotted them the night before, and they of course want to avoid running into him and arousing suspicion if he decides to show up early for his physical. The rep is visibly irritated when he greets them -- Arthur wonders if they've cut into his lunch hour -- and leaves them alone in the small examining room with a perfunctory bow.

Kefilwe and Thabo murmur quietly in Setswana together. Their behavior toward each other seems oddly formal to Arthur, whose parents have always been openly and sometimes embarrassingly affectionate in their reunions, but he reminds himself that they're in a different culture, with different mores.

To his great relief, Eames does not join in their conversation, but sprawls slightly in his seat across the room, picking at his fingernails. He appears to be completely absorbed in this task, but Arthur can see the glitter of his eyes under the lowered lashes; he's watching Arthur. Eames is wearing the same pale yellow linen suit as last time, with an ice-blue shirt and a blue and yellow tie tastefully
patterned with *fleurs-de-lis*. It fits him beautifully and brings out a blue note in his grey eyes, and Arthur is momentarily awash in admiration at how stunning Eames can be when he tries.

It must show on his face, because Eames smiles slowly and rakes his eyes obviously up and down Arthur's body, concluding with a raised eyebrow and a smile hovering just at the edges of his mouth. Even under these circumstances, that leer and the little smile spark a reaction in Arthur, and he shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

Eames laughs suddenly in a low voice, and dials down his predatory sensuality. "Darling, did you see Kluwers' face last night when Erika said she was thinking of moving here?"

"I missed it."

"You Americans have an apt expression for it, which unfortunately escapes me just now. It's as if he was going excrete building materials..."

"Shit a brick," Arthur says bluntly. "--Excuse me, Kefilwe." He gives Eames a brief glare, knowing that Eames knows the phrase perfectly well. Kefilwe merely nods, and continues a lengthy monologue. Thabo ignores the interruption entirely.

Eames smiles beatifically. "That's the one. You know, I've a feeling we may not need to intercede on that front. Something tells me it will work itself out."

Arthur had nearly forgotten his agreement to help Eames meddle in Kluwers' relationships. On the one hand, he's irritated that Eames is focusing on this right now, when they both need their heads fully in the game and ready to anticipate anything at all that might happen during the extraction. On the other hand, he did commit himself, and they have two more days to kill here. He sighs.

"Ok, and Supriya?"

"That's another matter. Would it be too brazen to simply tell her he'd been spotted kissing his cousin?"

Arthur groans. "No. I mean yes, it would be too brazen. Stop being brazen. We don't want Kluwers and du Toit realizing that the same nosy Brit has been poking into their business. Let's do it, but not in a way that can be traced to either of us. We're overexposed as it is. And I know you know that."

Eames shrugs. "Just tossing it out there." He runs his fingers thoughtfully over the stubble on his jawline and chin, and Arthur is distracted all over again. His own fingers know that texture, how it's soft and razor-sharp at once; there's still a rashy spot on his neck, hidden by the high collar of his shirt, that can attest to its exfoliating properties.

"Look, I suggest we do what we originally discussed," he says shortly. "Take some photos this weekend, draft a short summary of times he's been with Erika or escorts when he's told Supriya he's busy, send them to her when we're safely out of the country. I can set up a relay to make it appear the message is sent from a local IP address, if anyone tries to trace it. No more entanglements, Al- uh, Eames."

"Stick in the mud," Eames teases. "There's no gratification that way. We won't be around to see the fallout."

"Yeah, and we won't have to experience any fallout. End of story."

Eames pulls an unexpected puppydog face at him, frowning sadly as his eyes well with fraudulent

"I said no, sweetheart," Arthur tells him, narrowing his eyes and dropping his voice to a steely whisper.

Eames blinks, startled, but recovers quickly and beams at him. "Darling, I do love it when you call me sweetheart in that menacing Arthurian tone. Please, again?" He cocks his head expectantly.

Arthur tries to keep scowling, but he can't maintain it; his dimples pop out. "Oh, fuck off. ...Excuse me, Kefilwe." When he looks at her, he sees that she and Thabo are silent, staring at him and Eames with reproval and consternation, respectively. Oh. Right. "I'm sorry," he adds.

Kefilwe shakes her head scoldingly. "Do you not have a book to read? Something ...quiet? And you," she turns to Eames, and lapses into Setswana.

Eames' response is lengthy, and Arthur recognizes a "ke maswabi" or two in there. Kefilwe snaps back at him, and finally he bows his head slightly toward her, sighs, and desultorily picks up a magazine. His eyes meet Arthur's for a split second, and they're amused.

Arthur does, in fact, have a book on his phone. It's not his preferred way to read, but they've been properly told off, and she's right; they should be quieter.

The wait feels interminable, but eventually the harried little German pokes his head in the room to inform them that du Toit has arrived. Arthur hands over the syringe for the pre-extraction sedative. Ten long minutes later, the man knocks again, and they stand, ready to begin the job.

"He was very reluctant to take the shot," the rep informs them.

"He did take it, though?" Arthur asks.

The rep nods. "Yes, he's out. You had best hurry."

They hasten into the other room, where du Toit is sprawled on the exam table, snoring lightly. His handsome face, tawny and faintly freckled under its halo of crisp black hair, is surprisingly childlike in sleep, free of the suspicion and anger that had clouded his features the night before. Arthur is reminded how young he actually is. He slips on a pair of latex gloves, opens the PASIV on a chair next to the table, and fits du Toit's cannula, attached to the PASIV adaptor, into his arm, stripping the gloves off and disposing of them in the medical waste receptacle immediately after this operation is complete.

It's crowded in the little room, and the three of them finally sit on the ground, backs against the side of the exam table, Eames' solid bulk between Arthur and Thabo. The doctor, the SARU rep, and Kefilwe stand uncomfortably against the far wall, trying to avoid the dreamers' feet. Arthur has already calculated dosages, and they get set up as quickly as they can.

Then Eames meets Arthur's eyes and nods. Arthur presses the button.

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At first, it seems to be going according to plan. Arthur has placed security cameras around the perimeter of the main room, so he can observe du Toit and Thabo from his room downstairs. He's wearing his club staff outfit of plain white shirt, black vest, and trousers, and fully armed, but ideally he won't have to leave this room. Thabo, wearing an identical outfit, hovers near the entrance to the club, playing the role of security guard.
For his part, du Toit seems content to nurse a bottle of Carling and ogle the dancers on stage, occasionally tucking a bill into a g-string or bra strap or whistling at some particularly scandalous movement. Arthur knows Eames is one of the men drinking and tossing rand on the stage, but Eames hasn't told him the forger's description, and Arthur is careful not to try to seek him out. They want du Toit and his projections to be completely comfortable, without even a hint of tension in the air.

The first ten minutes are uneventful. du Toit's dancer projections, who run a gamut of sizes, ethnicities and skin tones, are quite a bit more blatantly sexual than either Arthur or Eames' had been. Arthur tries not to watch them, keeping his eyes trained on du Toit's face, watching for any sign of boredom or impatience. He seems entirely comfortable, but Arthur is still relieved when the time to cue "Closer" arrives.

du Toit appears to recognize the opening percussion; he sits up a little straighter, his eyes seeking out the dancers' entrance with a slight smile. When Eames/Cassandra struts up the stairs to the stage, the smile broadens and he whistles loudly. She turns toward the sound and teasingly moistens her upper lip with her tongue, mouthing the lyrics while maintaining eye contact with him, and Arthur can tell: she's caught him already.

Cassandra's dance is every bit as erotic and sexually charged as Arthur remembers it, and the crowd of men watching her look almost predatory. du Toit continues to respond enthusiastically, waving bills until she crawls to the side of the stage in front of him, circling her hips incrementally closer to his outstretched hand and allowing him to caress her sleek buttocks as he tucks the money into her waistband. By the time she strips off the little fabric triangles covering her breasts, Arthur can almost smell the lust in the air around the stage, for all that he's not even in the same room. He revises his earlier thought: du Toit isn't just hooked, he's salivating.

The song ends, Cassandra demurely collects her costume and disappears into the dressing room, and Thabo steps up onto the stage to announce the "parade" and the cost for a private dance. du Toit immediately pushes his chair back and looks expectantly at the dressing room door. When Cassandra emerges and heads straight for him, he waves her over and whispers in her ear, one hand resting on her waist in a blatantly proprietory manner.

She nods acquiescence to whatever he's saying to her, and catches Thabo's eye as she leads du Toit to the hallway of private rooms. Thabo joins them in the doorway and escorts them both to the elevator, down the hall past the room where Arthur sits watching them on an array of monitors, and to the designated private room.

Arthur doesn't need the monitor to hear Thabo's little speech about no sexual contact and placing valuables in the safe. du Toit doesn't look happy, but after paying Thabo, he places his wallet in the safe and enters a code to lock it shut. Thabo quickly pats his pants pockets to check for loose bills. Satisfied that they're empty, he nods politely to du Toit -- "Enjoy your dance, sir" -- and steps aside to admit Cassandra, closing the door behind her.

"Please sit, honey," she says in her soft accent. "I have a special show for you."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, and I plan to enjoy it," he responds, still standing. "But you have something else for me, too, don't you?"

Arthur, watching this exchange in the monitor, frowns. He can't see Cassandra's face because of the angle of the security camera, but he can see a fine shimmer of tension ripple across her bare shoulders.

"I am sorry, sir," she apologizes. "I'm not sure what you mean. You know we're not permitted to
actually have intercou..."

du Toit cuts her off. "Not sex. The package. Where is it? You got it hiding for me under one of those sweet titties?" He steps forward and reaches out to lift her breasts, first one then the other, deftly slipping a calloused finger into the bottom of her little bra.

Arthur's fists clench.

Frowning, du Toit leans back, considering Cassandra's statuesque figure. "Am I gonna have to go diving, then? 'Cause I know there's no room for it in those little panties you're wearing."

"Ah..." Eames is obviously at a loss. That's good, Arthur thinks, believable, at least. "I apologize, sir. I don't have any package for you. I am only here to dance for you. Would you like me to begin now?"

du Toit stares at her, his eyes calculating. Arthur knows Eames has this, this is a minor hiccup, they can still move forward, but still -- he holds his breath, waiting for du Toit's judgment.

Eames must be convincing, because du Toit finally shrugs and says "My mistake." He sinks down onto the velvet lounge. "Show me your stuff, ma chérie."

Cassandra flips the switch on the wall to dim the lights and start the disco ball. "Put the Needle On It" starts up, and she begins dancing on the inset tile floor, slinking and strutting around the pole, pouting and shimmying at du Toit.

Arthur tears his gaze away from the monitor and begins tackling the safe. He's cheated, a little; loosened the screws of the back part of it while Eames and du Toit were still upstairs. It's both a blessing and a curse. Freed from the need to work at top speed, he's able to spare a few more glances at the monitor next to him, and the predatory look on du Toit's face as he watches Cassandra writhing and undulating before him makes Arthur's fingers shake with fury. Still, by the time the song ends, he's got the back of the safe open, and he exhales in relief to see that a sealed envelope has joined du Toit's wallet on the dull felt floor of the safe.

du Toit had been quiet initially, but as the lush, hypnotic strains of "Playground Love" fill the room, he becomes more vocal, muttering "Yeah, girl" and "That's it, show me that ass." Arthur pauses in the middle of opening the envelope, staring at the monitor with a mix of distaste and dislike as he watches Cassandra straddle du Toit's lap and brush her breasts across his face before untying her tiny bra.

"You like that?" Cassandra murmurs, and du Toit reaches out to stroke her bare breasts with his thick blunt fingers.

"You know I do. You feel my cock, don't you? Give me those titties, girl." He places one big hand on her lower back and pulls her abruptly closer, bending his head to mouth at one rose-ivory breast. Cassandra moans softly and shifts her weight on his lap.

Arthur chokes down a wave of nausea, and reluctantly snaps back into what he's supposed to be doing. Scowling ferociously, he rips the envelope open with a sharp jerk, and withdraws the folded paper inside it. The writing on it doesn't make sense to him for a long minute, as he stares dumbfounded.

There's nothing there about match lineups, or bribes, or the betting organizations, or anything remotely related to what they've been hired to extract. It seems that his sale of Southern Kings information is not du Toit's biggest secret. What it is, is a neatly printed list of names, telephone
numbers, currency, and corresponding types of ...street drugs? Arthur recognizes MDMA, and knows "brown sugar" is heroin, but others are foreign to him: tik, dagga, nyaope.

Damn it all. It's a pretty good secret, to be sure, but not the one they need. What to do, he thinks, his mind racing. Can we save this? Somehow?

He remembers that Thabo is waiting in the hallway -- Arthur had asked to be alone in his observation room, pleading a need for silence and privacy while he focuses on the safe -- and without thinking it over, he jerks the door open and gestures to Thabo to enter.

"He left us a sheet of drug buyers," Arthur explains under his breath. "Not the gambling information that we need."

Thabo purses his lips. "That is bad. What will you do?"

"I was hoping we could brainstorm," Arthur whispers fiercely. "We have six more minutes before the dancing is finished, and only twenty minutes until the kick comes." They've filled Thabo in on the facts, and what they're looking for, and du Toit's strange behavior the night before. Who knows, maybe the two of them together can figure something out in time.

Thabo's eyes stray to the monitor, where Cassandra is stripped down to her g-string and rolling her round hips rhythmically against du Toit's groin while he presses his face between her breasts, her long platinum hair brushing his knees as she tilts her head back in false ecstasy. He shakes his head in disgust, though whether it's at du Toit or at Eames Arthur isn't sure.

Acid burns at the back of Arthur's throat, and he tears his gaze away from the screen.

"He is already suspicious of you," Thabo thinks aloud. "Perhaps he thinks you are law enforcement, or a rival trafficking operation."

"Justify My Love" begins in the next room, and Arthur remembers the safe -- it will tip du Toit off for certain if he sees cracks of light coming through the back of the safe when he opens it in five short minutes. Thinking frantically, he drops to his knees again in front of the safe and begins fitting the back piece into place.

"What if I approached him claiming to be from one of the betting houses?" It's going out on a limb, but he doesn't have any other ideas. Arthur isn't an extractor, he doesn't have Eames' improvisational abilities or Cobb's charisma, but there's no way for them to get all of the necessary information to Eames and hope to make it out before the kick.

"Do you know the names of any of the gambling organizations?" Thabo asks, reasonably. "Or anything about them?"

Arthur nods slowly. "They gave us that information when we took the job. We don't know who he's already talked to, but I know enough about the various groups to get by. I think."

"It is risky, but I do not have any better suggestions to offer," Thabo admits.

Arthur ponders. "I'll tell him... Kwame from Interbet said they had a man on the inside with the Southern Kings, and we'll pay $50,000 rand per match if he gives us the lineup ahead of time."

Thabo shrugs. "I cannot help you make it more realistic. I do not gamble."

"We'll have to wing it," Arthur decides grimly. "Go, get ready to take du Toit to the men's room. Send Eames in here." He tosses Thabo a key. "Lock the elevator as soon as I go into the restroom,
since his projections are probably going to get up in arms when I approach him. There are couples
in at least some of the other rooms on this floor, but you and Eames should be able to handle
them."

"I do not shoot well with a handgun," Thabo tells him dubiously.

Arthur glares. "You know how small that space is. It has to be a handgun. Just keep them off my
back until I can get some kind of confirmation from him."

The song is almost over. Thabo finally nods and slips out the door, waiting in the hallway for it to
end. Arthur tightens the screws on the safe and steps away, his eyes on the monitor. Cassandra is
more or less just humping du Toit by this point, her moans of simulated ecstasy pairing with du
Toit's heavy breathing and muffled expletives. du Toit's hands are firmly kneading her buttocks
and dragging her hips tighter against his, and a sour ball of nausea grows in Arthur's gut. As sick
as he feels, though, he watches with a certain surprising detachment. That's his lover, naked and
writhing in the lap of another man. But it's also not Eames, and something in the set of Cassandra's
back and the tone of her voice tells Arthur that she's not even remotely turned on by what's
happening.

Is this as bad as it gets? If it is, Arthur thinks maybe he can handle it, as long as Eames remains as
obviously disinterested in what he's doing. Oh, it's bad -- he still feels sick, and if offered a chance
to deck du Toit without screwing up the job, he'd take it in a heartbeat -- but it's tolerable. Arthur
is fully aware that this isn't his choice to make, and that they'll both have to bow to necessity if a
future job requires a seduction, but it helps him to feel that he has at least a modicum of control
over his own reaction. The imagining of it had been worse than the reality, in fact, and now that
it's over he's relieved and ready to put it behind them.

The song ends. Cassandra promptly, but tactfully, disengages and begins wrapping the bits and
pieces of her costume around herself again. du Toit is sporting a sizable and unashamed bulge, and
he palms it slowly while he watches her dress.

Thabo knocks on the door. "Sir, your session has ended and I am entering the room now." He
does, and eyes Cassandra, now fully dressed and panting. "Say goodbye, Cassandra."

"I enjoyed our time together," she whispers to du Toit. He winks at her, and she strolls out of the
room.

Between one door and the next, Eames regains his own body, and he slips into the room where
Arthur is waiting, his expression alert and incisive. Arthur isn't sure which of them crosses the
room, or whether they both do at once, but then they're together, their foreheads bowed against
each other, their arms gripping each other's shoulders. It's not quite an embrace, not quite a clutch,
but something in between. Arthur can hear Thabo in the background, offering to show du Toit to
the men's room to clean up.

"Did we get what we need?" Eames murmurs in an undertone.

Arthur doesn't think, just blurts it out. "I love you." Eames pulls his head back, startled, and
Arthur blushes. "I do. I mean, I can handle that, what happened, the jobs will be ok, we can do
this." He's aware that he's babbling, and this is not what they need to be discussing right now. He
closes his eyes, gets a grip on himself. "Alec, the safe - it was a list of street drug sales, nothing
about the gambling. He's already suspicious of me, so I'm going to follow him to the restroom and
approach him as a representative of one of the organizations, offer to pay him for the information.
That's the only way it'll work."
Eames takes this all in with surprising equanimity. "Darling, let me, I can forge you, you needn't risk it," and his form shifts fluidly into a carbon copy of Arthur himself. Taken aback to be gazing into his own eyes, Arthur releases him and takes a step backward.

"You can't," he reminds Eames. "You don't have all of the intel on the betting organizations. And -- don't do that, don't forge me," he adds. "Help Thabo keep the projections from the hallway off my back."

Eames nods unhappily, shifting back to himself again. "You have nine minutes," he reminds Arthur, and draws his Beretta.

Arthur opens the door. Thabo is standing just outside the men's room next to the elevator. Arthur steels himself, trying to summon up the smooth confidence Cobb has always employed with marks, and saunters casually into the restroom.

du Toit is standing at the sink, carefully scrubbing his big hands and ragged fingernails. He glances up disinterestedly, and then his gaze sharpens as he recognizes Arthur's face. "The Amerikaanse," he says neutrally. "With the rude boyfriend." He turns off the water and dries his hands, his eyes never leaving Arthur. Arthur's standing between him and the door; unless he wants to severely escalate the situation, he's going to have to listen to what Arthur has to say.

"I apologize for the crude manners of my business associate," Arthur says smoothly. "We needed to see if you were able to remain composed under provocation."

"And what business is it of yours if I remain composed or not?" du Toit asks. Under other circumstances, Arthur would be impressed with his demeanor. His voice, face and body are alert but calm, giving nothing away.

"We believe you may share an interest of ours. We have a friend in common named Kwame." He waits.

du Toit shakes his head dismissively. "I don't know any Kwame. Sorry." He doesn't move, however, and Arthur senses the fish has been hooked.

"From Interbet. He suggested you might be open to... negotiations."

"Tony?" du Toit asks, deliberately sidestepping the question. "That's your name, isn't it?"

"It's the one I use in this country, yes," Arthur agrees frankly.

"That doesn't inspire confidence in anything else you have to say to me," du Toit points out. But he's still listening.

"Oh, just hear me out," Arthur tells him, consciously channeling Dom Cobb, slow and soothing and confident. "Now, we've done our homework on you, Matheiu. We know you're not averse to extra income from time to time. I have the authority to offer you up to 50,000 rand per match, just for making one phone call to my employers. We want the match lineup and any information you have about player injuries, weaknesses, illnesses, or other susceptibilities, so we can better calculate the odds we offer. I think you're familiar with the arrangement." He holds his breath -- this is what they're here for, will du Toit bite?

du Toit is silent, his face impassive. "I may remember your friend Kwame," he says finally. For a minute Arthur doesn't think he's going to say anything else, and he fumes internally, careful not to let his expression alter. "And I think you can do better than 50,000, can't you, Tony."
Arthur pretends to study his face, while exulting inside. "I can go as high as 65,000. Anything more than that, you'll have to discuss with my superiors."

du Toit studies him right back, his dark eyes contemplative under their luxuriant fringe of lashes. "Have your superiors contact me directly, then. And keep your boyfriend away from me, boudkapper."

Arthur has no idea what du Toit has just said, but the tone was distinctly uncomplimentary. "This isn't personal," he equivocates.

"It didn't have to be. You should choose your associates more carefully. If you'll excuse me now?" He gestures to the restroom door. Arthur is only too happy to step aside. He hasn't heard any gunshots, so maybe they've been luckier than they deserved and the projections haven't been riled. Now that they have what they need, he doesn't care too much how the dream ends.

There's a note of surprise in Thabo's voice as he greets du Toit and unlocks the elevator to take him back up to the first level. Arthur stares at his own face in the restroom mirror and without thinking, rolls his loaded die. Six. Two. Five. Three. No pattern, no repetition, no fours.

When the elevator door closes, Thabo opens the door to the men's room and stares at Arthur. He hears brisk footsteps in the hall, and then Eames is there too, the three of them crowding into the small space in front of the sinks.

"He bit," Arthur confirms. "He wanted more money, but we have what we need. He's not too happy with you" -- he frowns at Eames, but there's no edge to it -- "but he agreed to deal with our superiors."

"Have I told you," says Eames, smoldering with admiration, "how absolutely brilliant you are, Arthur?"

"Not today you haven't," Arthur rejoins, giddy with relief.

Thabo cuts in before their repartee grows more pointed. "I shall see you topside. You have two minutes until the kick."

"Thanks, Thabo," Arthur tells him, but his eyes remain on Eames' face. Eames says something to Thabo, too, and claps him on the back, and then Thabo is hastily backing out of the small room and Eames is moving toward Arthur, clasping a big, warm hand at the back of Arthur's neck, and tugging Arthur's mouth down greedily to his lips.

"Not just the best point in the business," he murmurs against Arthur's jaw, "now you're extracting too, so bloody amazing, darling, I can't..." and Arthur kisses him again to shut him up. Part of his mind is registering that they're doing this in a men's toilet in a dreamed-up strip club and it's so tawdry, ugh, but the larger part is just blissing out on Eames, his lovely solidity and strength, the warmth and faint sandalwood scent of his skin, the rasp of his stubble on Arthur's face, and the softness of his mouth as he trails kisses across Arthur's cheek and neck. "My heart," he growls into Arthur's ear.

And then the kick comes, and Arthur is blinking awake in the SARU examining room, gasping in a deep breath and turning perhaps faintly pink as he realizes that his head has fallen over onto Eames' shoulder where they're sitting on the floor against the exam table. Thabo, on Eames' other side, has already disconnected his cannula, and kneels to remove Eames'. There's a smirk in his eyes, but he doesn't say anything, and the rest of his face remains strictly professional.
Arthur withdraws his own cannula and blots the blood, handing the tubing to Eames to put away as he stands to address the doctor and the SARU representative. "He's the leak you're looking for. We approached him and offered him 50,000 rand per match for the lineup and other information, and he not only agreed to give it to us, but asked for more money to do it. He recognized the name of one of the representatives from Interbet. Also, if you get into his finances, you may have a hard time tracing cash deposits and outflow. We have reason to believe that's because he's been using it to bribe doctors, and perhaps someone in this organization, to accept falsified blood tests. If you take blood from him now and run the standard infectious diseases tests on it, you may get different results than the tests he's been sending in."

He's careful to keep his voice nonjudgmental, but he can almost feel a metaphorical little devil on his left shoulder dancing and capering as he gives in to the urge to rat du Toit out. Maybe it's petty, but Arthur did not like the way du Toit was looking at or talking to Cassandra, or the tone in his voice when he called Eames whatever-it-was-that-Arthur-can't-pronounce. du Toit's going to be kicked off the team anyway, because of the gambling links; this is just an extra little twist of the knife.

The doctor and the SARU representative exchange a look, and Arthur suddenly hopes he hasn't miscalculated -- surely they aren't in it together? -- before the doctor shrugs, picks up the phone, and asks for a phlebotamist to come up. "They should leave now," he tells the representative pointedly.

"Come, into the conference room," the representative says shortly, and they obediently trail him through the complex and into a dingy, windowless room in a mostly empty wing of the medical building.

Arthur has been in a lot of dodgy meeting rooms in his career, but something about this one, at odds with the shiny new decor of the rest of the complex, strikes him as wrong. He stops just outside the doorway. "Actually, we'd prefer to be on our way now," he says pleasantly but firmly. "I'll prepare a full written report, and expect to see the transfers within 24 hours as we did before."

Kefilwe and Thabo have entered the room already, but Eames stopped in the doorway when Arthur stopped walking. He's somewhat less imposing in his expensive suit than he is bare-chested, but there's still an impressive amount of power on display when he crosses his bulky arms and stares at the representative. "What is it you feel we needed to discuss in here?" Eames asks politely, making it clear with his expression and body language that he's not budging unless he gets an acceptable answer.

The representative gapes at him. "I... These are serious allegations you've made, I need to contact members of the Board to question you. If you'll just wait--"

Eames takes a single step toward him, and the man stops talking. Arthur moves closer and looks him straight in the eye. "A full written report. What you do with it is up to you. We've fulfilled our part of the contract, and we're going to leave now."

Eames steps aside to allow Kefilwe and Thabo to leave the room, and then before the functionary can object, Eames is patting him down for weapons. "Clean," he tells Arthur, as the small blond man sputters indignantly.

"Thank you for your professionalism," Arthur says coolly, and turns to leave.

"You bloody prick," Eames says, sotto voce behind him, and it's not professional at all but they're done here and Arthur doesn't care anymore, so he allows his face to crack briefly into a smile. Hell, it's true.
They swiftly exit the compound. Thabo un-knots his borrowed tie, shakes Arthur and Eames' hands, and watches Kefilwe as she bows charmingly to them both.

"Tsamaya sentle," Eames tells her, and his eyes gleam wickedly as he leans in to press a kiss on her cheek. She tsks and shakes a finger at him, and Thabo yelps in mock dismay, but they're both smiling.

"Goodbye," Arthur echoes. "I'll be in contact." He offers a formal handshake, and she accepts it. Then the married couple tuck themselves into Thabo's little Citroen, and they're gone.

They hail a cab, direct the driver to the Radisson, and squeeze into the backseat, sitting more close to each other than propriety might dictate. Arthur's heart is beating so hard he thinks he can hear it, saying "free, free, free."


"Where were we, love," Eames asks him in a low, intimate voice, "when we were so rudely interrupted by the kick?"

"Oh, no," Arthur shakes his head, dimpling. "I'm starving, don't purr endearments at me just yet. Food first, and then --"

Eames raises an eyebrow, tilts his head slightly. "Then?"

Arthur leans even closer to him. "Then I'm all yours, for the next two days," he promises.
And I Could Not Recall A More Perfect Fall

"Mmmm... oh. Just a little bit -- ahhhhhh." Arthur shudders with pleasure.

"You're shameless, is what you are," Eames says fondly.

"Mm-hmm. Harder."

"Ask me nicely."


"...As you wish."

"Stop that."

Eames snickers. "As you wish."

"Not fair," Arthur mumbles, although there's no heat in it. "Why do you get to be Westley?"

"Because," Eames replies, pausing, "I can say his lines properly, and you can't."

"Fine." Arthur rolls his eyes. "Wait, why'd you stop?"

"Tell me how good it feels. Tell me how badly you want it."

"You already know I do."

"Tell me," Eames demands.

"I love it, I love your hands on me," Arthur says in a rush. "I -- oh yes, yeah, yeah, right there."

"You're still talking," Eames observes. "I must not be doing it right."

"God, no, it's perfect, you're amazing. Keep going."

"It's been half an hour already. You're going to wear me out, love."

"Yes," Arthur mutters into his pillow, "because scratching my back is so exhausting."

Eames snorts. "Ingrate." But he doesn't stop trailing his fingers in long slow sweeping strokes up and down Arthur's bare skin, across his shoulders, down his spine.

Arthur settles back down, closing his eyes and exhaling in delight. He'd almost forgotten this part of a relationship: the warm comfort of non-sexual closeness, simply touching and being touched. No-one has laid hands on him with this kind of affection for years, and he's so suffused with bliss he feels like he's floating. Must be an oxytocin high, he thinks drowsily.

With the job over and time on their hands, the huge bed in their suite, with its crisp sheets and fluffy down pillows, has been difficult to tear themselves away from. Freed from the constraint of shared living quarters, here where they can take their time and make as much noise as they like, they've been shamelessly indulgent. Whiskey and cheeseburgers in bed, champagne in the bathtub, porn and a torrented copy of "The Princess Bride" streamed to the TV from Arthur's laptop... Now, they're resting.
"Erika left a message saying she'd like to go out tonight," Eames tells him.

"Mmmm."

"She sounded a bit sniffly. I expect things may have come to a head with Kluwers."

"Hmm."

"Darling." Eames stops scratching and smacks Arthur smartly on his bare ass.

Arthur frowns and raises his head, peering at Eames over his shoulder. "What? That's fine. Just tell me where and when."

"Seven, on the terrace downstairs." Eames reaches down and wraps his hand around Arthur's ankle. "How do you feel about leaving our nest of debauchery and finding some real food?"

Arthur debates refusing and ponders his chances of convincing Eames to continue the back-scratch instead. Regretfully concluding that the latter are "slim-to-none," he shrugs, rolls over, and sits up, yawning. "Sticky Fingers?"

"No," Eames decides, "too hot for a grill. Blue Waters?"

That finally gets Arthur up and hunting for his clothes. "Want to split a shellfish plate, or do you need your own?"

"I'll need my own if you want me to be able to keep up with your voracious sexual appetites, you slag." Eames grabs Arthur's elbow and hauls him in for a kiss that's sweeter than his words. Arthur closes his eyes and consciously savors Eames' touch and his nearness, feeling briefly giddy.

Definitely oxytocin, he thinks, and reluctantly disengages. "Right, give me a few minutes."

They've been to this cafe several times over the course of this job. The hostess recognizes them as generous tippers, and seats them in their customary booth next to the huge seaside windows.

Arthur has been compiling a list of scenarios to "leak" as to Eames' whereabouts for the months of April and May, to throw other dreamworkers off track in the event anyone goes looking for him. As they eat, Eames helps him fill in details and plot what scenario to plant where. He's given his credit cards to Arthur to reserve hotel rooms and order meals with; it's unlikely anyone will follow up to see if he's checked in to the hotels, or notice that the purchases are made by phone. Arthur will make a few purchases under Eames' best-known pseudonyms while he's in the States, too. Anyone tracking Eames will be kept busy, and hopefully far away from the U.K.

"Mustang Ranch?" Arthur inquires.

Eames shudders delicately. "I've never paid for it in my life. You might drop it in a few nightclubs while you're in Las Vegas, though. I have been known to frequent them from time to time."

"VIP... bottle... service..." Arthur says aloud as he writes, keeping his face straight.

Eames kicks his foot. "Don't be a twat, darling."

Arthur grins. "I'll think of you with every sip."

"Just don't go spoiling some slutty twink on my dime." His voice is light, but there's a very faint
worry line written into his forehead.

Arthur stops writing and reaches across the table. Both of their hands are a bit sticky with oyster brine and crab liquor, but he grasps Eames' anyway. He looks straight into beloved grey eyes. "Not even for show," he says quietly. "I'm all yours. Only yours."

"Dearest..." Eames trails off, his face unexpectedly open and vulnerable. "And I yours. No bodily fluid exchange. I won't even wank while we're apart," he finishes grandly.

"What, for a whole month?" Arthur raises an eyebrow in polite disbelief.

"You doubt my capacity for self-denial?"

"Well, no," Arthur admits. "You did live in that little hovel in Mombasa for all those years without air conditioning. When you could have afforded Paris. Or New York."

"Or Dublin." Eames hasn't let go of Arthur's hand.

"Or Dublin," Arthur agrees. "Did... you didn't know I was there, did you?"

Eames shrugs one shoulder. "You're quite good at concealing your tracks, and I don't have your research skills. No, I wasn't quite sure where you lived permanently. Wasn't sure I'd ever find out."

Arthur squeezes his hand, then releases it. "Come stay with me there, sometime. Maybe after the show is over."

"I'd like that," Eames says solemnly. "Thank you, Arthur." They hold each other's gaze silently, until Arthur raises an eyebrow and breaks the mood.

"Hey, please don't not jerk off for my sake," he says bluntly. "I'm not making the same promise to you. A month's a long time, and some of the things I've done with you are going to feed my fantasies for years."

"Care to share?" Eames' face has resumed its usual smooth, faintly sardonic, faintly amused expression.

Arthur promptly shakes his head. "I'm not going to narrate my favorite sexual positions over lunch." He grins broadly. "Tell you what, though -- every time I jerk off until I see you again, I'll text you exactly what I was thinking about. In detail. You won't know when to expect it, and you'll have to decide whether it's worth opening a text from me in case it's graphic smut."

Eames' eyes widen and he swallows, subtly but visibly. "I shall open every one immediately."

Arthur narrows his eyes. "Oh, I'm going to make you blush. You're going to embarrass yourself at some point, reading what I send you and trying to hide your reaction in public. Maybe during rehearsal."

"Challenge accepted," Eames declares. "I'd return the favor, but you're far too cautious to open anything from me anywhere you wouldn't want to lose your composure."

Arthur nods, barely controlling his dimples. "You know me well, Mr. Eames."

"I'd like to think so." Eames' smile is slow and affectionate.

They finish their meal and walk back to the hotel. Arthur can still feel an unfamiliar lightness in
his back and shoulders from having the job over with. However, it's been replaced with a new weight: his imminent loss of Eames. While his natural inclination between jobs is to busy himself with dreamshare gossip and maintaining his various pseudonyms -- a Facebook page has to have activity on it to be believable, and photoshopping and checking himself into various bars and restaurants in the appropriate location(s) takes time -- Arthur is disinclined right now to engage in anything that would separate the two of them, physically or otherwise. He wants to be fully present here and now with Eames, and to savor their connection so he has something to hold to until they see each other again.

Their path to the hotel takes them past a florist's shop, and Arthur is not entirely surprised when Eames nudges him just before they reach the storefront. He nods in agreement with Eames' unspoken question, and Eames gallantly holds the door open with a wink.

Inside, the air is cool and slightly damp, smelling faintly of greenery and potting soil and a jumble of floral fragrances that Arthur can't even begin to put a name to. The arrangements are colorful and a little more exuberant than is strictly his preference, but he can see their appeal. There's a woman at the counter, her dark head bent over a batch of long-stemmed roses she's de-thorning and her long glossy hair tucked behind her ears. She looks up when the bell under the doormat rings, and he recognizes Supriya from the night they had observed her and Kluwers at the Chinese restaurant.

Her politely welcoming expression is replaced by real delight when she looks past Arthur and recognizes Eames. "Stephen!" she exclaims.

"Hello, ducks," Eames says, grinning. "Brought someone I want you to meet." He takes Arthur's arm and pulls him cheerfully over to where Supriya is divesting herself of her gloves and sweeping rose detritus off the counter.

Her eyes widen as her gaze sweeps back and forth over the two of them. "Oh, is this --?" She stops herself. "Hello. I'm Supriya Sharma."

"Tony Levinson," Arthur introduces himself, and extends a hand. "It's nice to meet you. I've been admiring your bouquets."

Supriya takes his hand and shakes it. Her grip is surprisingly firm for such a slender woman. "Stephen has told me about you! I thought your vacation had ended and you'd left, though," she says, directing this last part to Eames.

Eames chuckles. "Sadly, we're leaving early Monday. I wanted to bring him in so you could have a look at him before we go, though. And also," his voice drops confidentially, although there's no-one else in the shop with them, "to see how you're getting along with your fellow. Last time I was in, you were a bit glum."

She frowns. Her slim face, with its wide dark eyes and delicate bone structure, is attractive enough that even that expression doesn't lessen her beauty, but the real distress that flickers over her features doesn't escape Arthur's attention. "He's been distant these past few days. His cousin is staying with him and he's busy showing her around."

"I think we saw him a few nights ago," Eames remarks. "Is the cousin a brunette? Long hair, brown eyes? A good-looking bird."

Supriya nods unhappily. "I thought he would want me to meet her, but he's been hard to reach since she's been here. Where did you see them?"
Eames pretends to think. "Ginger, I believe?" He turns to Arthur for confirmation.

Arthur nods. "Yes. They were with another couple. A teammate, I think."

She cocks her head inquisitively, and Eames says, "Marty? No. Matty?"

"Ooooh," Supriya exhales. "Mathieu? Dark, good-looking man with a blonde woman, his wife, right?" She makes a moue of distaste. "She's a strange one. Very sarcastic, not very nice. I told Johan I don't want to go out with them again."

Arthur allows nothing but polite interest to show on his face, but internally he's marveling. He reminds himself never to underestimate Eames. He doesn't think Eames planned this, necessarily - but he's so quick to seize an opportunity, and he's obviously been keeping their "destroy Kluwers' love life" plan well in mind when Arthur has mostly been mooning around over their own upcoming separation.

"Yes," Eames agrees. "She was a bit rude to you, wasn't she, darling?" He nuzzles Arthur's shoulder apologetically.

Arthur grimaces at the memory. "They both were."

Eames straightens up. "Well, at any rate, you were spared that particular outing!" he tells Supriya cheerfully. "You should probably thank this cousin for taking over your duties for an evening, at least."

This does not appear to console her; nor, Arthur knows, was it meant to. But he leaves Eames to it. Eames appears to see that he's had the desired effect, and eases off. "But that's not what we came in for. I wanted to pick up more flowers for Tony, here. Perhaps this time he can tell you what he likes -- I haven't been doing a very good job guessing." He smiles ruefully.

Arthur knows a cue when he hears it. "I've loved all of them," he protests. "You both have a good eye." He allows Supriya to draw him into a discussion about his preferences, though, while Eames watches them and smiles benignly and squeezes his arm around Arthur's waist.

They leave the shop with a small, tasteful arrangement of mini gerberas and carnations in varying shades of yellow and cream, as well as an assortment of local chocolates Supriya swears are "very mnandi."

"Delicious," Eames translates, as soon as the shop door closes behind them.

"I gathered," Arthur tells him. "And, um, thank you." He gestures with the bouquet. "They're pretty and they smell good, even if the real reason you wanted to go in there was to mess with her."


Arthur laughs. "It's all right. I was being sincere. Thank you."

Eames looks at him appraisingly for a moment, then nods. "You're welcome, love."

They still have a few hours to kill before meeting Erika, and Eames wants to build some more color before returning to "cold, foggy, rainy London," so they change into swim trunks and make their way to the hotel's pool. Arthur insists on both of them being thoroughly sun-screened ("You're an international criminal. You should be taken out by a sniper rifle or Interpol, not by skin cancer"), and finds space under an umbrella to read his book and sip a beer, while Eames
plants himself fully in the sun with a pair of aviators on.

Eames' tattoos draw some attention from fellow guests, as they always do. But Arthur, glancing up from his book from time to time, thinks that two of the men by the pool are displaying just a little more interest than can be explained even by Eames' sensual mouth and gorgeously muscled body.

"Stephen," he murmurs. "You have some admirers. Ten o'clock, under the awning."

Eames sits up, reaches out for Arthur's beer, and takes a swig, casually scanning from behind his sunglasses. "I've seen them," he says slowly into the mouth of the bottle. "Last night at the Boardwalk, and they were at the restaurant, sitting out on the deck today. That short fellow with the flat face is a bit distinctive."

"He does look a little familiar," Arthur agrees. He closes his eyes and tries to think back to where he might originally have seen that face. The other man with him -- older, with greying hair and oddly shaggy eyebrows -- seems to jog his memory too. Newspaper flickers into his mind, followed by Arrests. Trafficking. Cape Town. He opens his eyes again and scratches his nose to conceal his lips while he says in a low tone, "Arnaud and Thierry Matin. Diane's family."

"Bugger," Eames replies, softly but emphatically.

Arthur, his mind ticking rapidly, casually flattens his lounge chair and lies down on his stomach with his head pillowed on his hands. He can't see the Matins this way, but they can't see his face either. "Should we change up our plan? We can leave early, keep Stephen and Tony's tickets to de Gaulle on Monday and fly out on other passports tomorrow instead."

Eames thinks about that, then pretends to bite one of his fingernails while he speaks. "It would mean burning those identities, or bribing the Department of Home Affairs."

"I have a contact there," Arthur tells him. "I'll take care of it -- after we're out of the country."

Eames' face is a mixture of relief and chagrin. "I hate to leave you earlier than we have to, love, but I think you're right."

Arthur takes his tablet out and pulls up the next day's flights out of Port Elizabeth's tiny airport. "We can fly into Joburg, and from there to Bonn, and then separate," he says a few minutes later. "There are several daily flights into Heathrow, or you could even drive if you wanted to. I can get a flight to La Guardia after... ugh, a ten hour layover." He frowns. "I guess I can get a hotel room and sleep a while."

Eames nods. "Do it."


"I'll get us both to Bonn, and you can figure out how and when you want to go the rest of the way," Arthur says glumly. Minutes later, he snaps the tablet cover closed and looks at Eames. "Done. We leave at 8 a.m. tomorrow."

Eames is watching Arthur's face and looking unhappier by the second. "Darling," he says quietly, "if we're to part ways tomorrow, let's not waste any more time lying about out here, hmm?"

Arthur raises his eyebrows. "I completely agree, but you know I'm still sore from last--"
Eames holds up a hand and stops him there. "I was rather thinking you might do the honors, my love. Something I can still feel when you're gone."

_In that case..._  Arthur scrambles up out of his lounge. "Race you to the elevator."
And It Will Be Clear If I Wake Up And You're Still Here

Chapter Notes

Some B but none of the D, S or M; discussion of same. No more hardcore than the last chapter this came up in.

Also, schmoop alert...

Despite Arthur's words, they don't hurry to the elevator, but stroll, jostling against one another's arms and shoulders a bit more than mere companions might. Once in their room, they fall onto the bed and kiss lazily, the merest brushes of lips to lips, Eames' sunglasses discarded on the nightstand, their swim trunks abandoned on the floor.

Arthur could kiss Eames for hours. He's so focused, so present, so wholly Arthur's, that Arthur feels intoxicated with closeness. The short scruff of Eames' unshaven face against Arthur's cheek, both soft and scratchy; the careful way his big hand cradles Arthur's head; the flutter and slide of his tongue across Arthur's own: it's all delicious. Their breathing syncs, deep and slow and warm between their joined lips.

Eames is the one to push them further, pulling Arthur more firmly against him, fingers gently caressing Arthur's hip and the lower curve of his ass. "I want you," he murmurs into Arthur's ear. "In me. On me."

Arthur shudders at the faint touch of Eames' teeth on his earlobe. His hips buck gently against Eames. "Do you want me to get you off first? Help relax you a little?"

He can feel Eames' smile against his neck. "I'd never say no to that, love. Is the floor all right?"

"Yeah, it... aahhh... let me..." He reluctantly pulls away from Eames and scrambles out of the bed to kneel on the floor with his hands neatly clasped behind his back, the way he knows Eames likes it. Eames rolls up to a sitting position and just stares at him for a moment. Arthur waits.

"Arthur. May I -- may I tie you? Down there, just like that?" Eames asks, a little hesitantly.

Arthur frowns a little. "What. Right now?" He'd thought this was going to be a sweet, unhurried session of, well, lovemaking... not weird S&M kink time.

Eames looks flustered. "You look lovely, darling, and I want... I don't want you thinking, later, or wondering whether if I ask you to do something, it's because of the dominance training. I want you to know that I want this, wanted this from you, before any of that starts."

Arthur hadn't thought that far ahead. It makes him smile, Eames having thought about it and planned for it. "You may," he says steadily, lifting his head to look into Eames' eyes.

"Just your wrists to your ankles," Eames clarifies. "Nothing painful."

Arthur remains poised and still as Eames quickly loops his belt around Arthur's wrists and cinches it snugly, then wraps the rest of the long leather strap around his ankles and ties it in a double knot. It's secure but not uncomfortable. Eames stands to survey his handiwork, and Arthur dips his chin.
down slightly and looks up at Eames through his eyelashes. He feels oddly triumphant, seeing Eames' reaction, his abrupt inhalation and the way his lips part in desire as he gazes at Arthur's naked and bound body below him.

"My god, you're stunning." Eames' voice is hoarse. "You can't imagine how lovely you are. I'll picture you like this, every night." He exhales shakily, palming himself.

The open admiration makes Arthur bold. "Why don't you take a picture?" he suggests frankly. "Then you can see me like this every night."

Arthur doesn't usually do photos. Even when he trusts his partner to keep them private -- and he does trust Eames -- there's always the chance they could fall into less scrupulous hands, and it's never seemed very sexy to him, anyway. But he finds that he wants Eames to have this from him. The smolder in Eames' eyes, the obvious interest it's piquing in his cock, and the sheer intensity of his focus on Arthur's body are beyond erotic. And Arthur knows he looks good; he's fit and healthy and trimly muscled, his body hair groomed, his cock and balls proudly hard against his flexed thighs. He lifts his chin confidently and stares Eames directly in the eye.

"Truly?" Eames' eyes are wide with awe.

Arthur maintains the eye contact so that Eames can see he means it. "Yes. I'd... I want you to have that."

Eames stares at him in near disbelief for a second, then turns away to fumble on the dresser for his phone. Arthur keeps his chin up, a mixture of arrogance and submission in his posture, until Eames snaps one-two-three. He doesn't show Arthur the photos, and Arthur doesn't ask to see them; Eames' grateful, exhilarated expression says enough.

"Now get over here," Arthur orders him, and licks his lips. Eames does.

One thing Arthur has learned about doing this with no hands: you have to move slow, or the situation has a tendency to devolve into a sort of bobbing-for-apples routine that makes him feel ridiculous. They've done this enough, though, that Eames knows to help him at first, holding himself still while Arthur licks and suckles the hard shaft, until Eames' cock and Arthur's lips are slick enough to slide together. At that point it's all on Arthur to put on a proper show and to keep the right amount of suction so that Eames doesn't slip out of his mouth, to balance teasing licks with deep swallows until Eames is groaning and swearing above him, one big hand cradling the back of Arthur's head and his hips minutely thrusting against Arthur's face as he strains to retain control.

Before Arthur ever knew if he could fall in love with a man, he knew he wanted to do this. The rich salty taste of it, the heady masculine scent, the smooth, silky feel of a man's skin here, and the way his own mouth is perfectly sized to take in the full, hard length... it intoxicates him. His favorite part, though, is that fraction of a second when Eames gets right up to the line and then can't withstand it any longer, his thigh trembling and his balls contracting before his cock jerks in Arthur's mouth and the telltale shudders sweep over his whole body.

Arthur prefers to swallow, but he knows Eames likes to see his come on Arthur's skin, so he pulls away as soon as the first drops hit his tongue and allows the rest of it to land in hot spatters on his cheek and neck and shoulder. He leans forward again when Eames is finished and licks, delicately, at the tip until Eames shivers and sags back down onto the bed, panting, his eyes closed.

"You utterly undo me," Eames whispers.
Arthur waits patiently for him to catch his breath and reboot his brain. When Eames doesn't get up after a moment or two, though, he speaks up. "Alec."

"Mmmm."

"You have to untie me."

Eames opens his eyes again, stares blankly for a second, and then sits up and hastens to loosen the leather belt from Arthur's feet and wrists. "Sorry, love. You just..."

"Yeah, I know," Arthur says, laughing, and kisses Eames' bare thigh. "Where did you leave the lube?" He stands and briskly rubs his reddened wrists, then hurriedly wipes the cooling spatters from his face while Eames pulls the little bottle from his suitcase. "How do you want it?"

"How don't I want it?" Eames asks a little dreamily. "This time -- shall I lie flat?"

Oh, yes. That's just fine with Arthur.

Eames stretches out prone on the mattress, his bare back all golden skin and taut muscle and stark black ink against the sheets. Arthur takes a moment to just look at him, to fix the image in his mind, before moving between Eames' legs and gently pushing them further apart. He slicks his fingers and gently strokes at the opening, feeling how relaxed and eager Eames is already. Arthur bends to kiss Eames' back, his hip, the firm high curve of his ass, while he slowly opens him up until he's wriggling and whimpering, saying "please" and "I want it" and "Arthur, Arthur, now."

Arthur stretches the length of his body atop Eames' and carefully guides his cock to the tense, slippery entrance.

Sliding into Eames is bliss beyond words. The feel of all of their bare skin against each other, hot and faintly sticky with sunscreen, the warm musk of their combined arousal, and the deep tight slick heat of Eames' body around him are peace and ecstasy at once. As Arthur sinks deeper, Eames arches his back like a cat and makes a low wordless noise that's both content and yearning.

With men, Arthur usually prefers to be on the receiving end during sex, but they'd been a trifle too enthusiastic that morning, and he isn't willing to actively damage himself for the sake of squeezing in one more session. He's so grateful to have this instead, the unaccustomed pleasure of breaching another willing, receptive male body. Eames' solidity and strength, the knowledge of how powerful and violent he can be at the slightest provocation contrasted with how calm and quiescent he is under Arthur's weight, only enhance that gratitude and desire.

Arthur moves slowly, conscious that this might be their last time together until they rejoin in London a month from now. He holds back as best he can, struggling to draw out each precious second of sensation and make it last, one hand gripping Eames' hip, the other wrapped around Eames' own as he clutches the pillow near their shoulders. Under him, Eames shudders with pleasure, clawing at the sheet and raising his hips to meet Arthur's thrusts, turning his head to bite at Arthur's hand and wrist next to his head and whispering ecstatic broken phrases into the clean white linen.

The angle they're at doesn't allow for the deepest penetration, but Arthur can roll his hips slowly for what feels like hours, thrusting shallowly while he kisses the lovely curves of trapezius and deltoid, licks down Eames' spine, delicately bites his neck and his ear and draws out the most gorgeous uninhibited noises from him.

It's tender and sensual and almost unbearably sweet -- and also heartbreaking, to feel such acute intimacy and to know how far apart they'll be the next day. The clash of so many different
emotions is overwhelming, and Arthur's orgasm, when it comes, is almost painful in its intensity. He's astonished, and a little embarrassed, when he rolls off of Eames and finds that his eyes are prickling behind his lashes, and there's an ache in his throat that won't dislodge. He hastily throws an arm over his face, but Eames must detect something in his breathing, because he pulls Arthur's arm away and presses his own lips there instead, kissing Arthur's forehead and murmuring endearments into his hair, stroking his cheek and thumbing away the faint traces of moisture gathered at the corners of Arthur's tightly closed eyes. He doesn't say anything else, or ask any questions, and Arthur is grateful all over again.

When his breathing has evened out, Arthur opens his eyes again and meets Eames' drowsy gaze. "I love you," he tells Eames quietly. "I love this."

Eames' eyes are dark, his face blurry with contentment. "And I you. It's been perfect, this time here with you."

Arthur doesn't trust himself to say any more right now. He tugs Eames' arm around his shoulders and lies down again, his head on Eames' broad chest, Eames' lips against the crown of his head, Eames' arm heavy and warm wrapped around him. He can hear Eames' heart beating, and the deep steady rhythm lulls him unexpectedly to sleep.

When Eames nudges him awake more than an hour later, Arthur's head is clear again and he's mostly regained control of his emotions. They're both quiet, making eye contact and touching each other often as they quickly shower and help each other dress (Eames buttons Arthur's shirt; Arthur straightens Eames' tie).

Just before they go downstairs, Arthur steps up behind Eames as he checks his hair in the dresser mirror, and wraps his arms around his waist from behind. Their eyes meet in the mirror, and Eames' lower lip tightens for a second before he turns to silently embrace Arthur. They hold each other, hardly breathing, until Eames sighs and releases him, brushing his mouth over Arthur's jaw in the barest hint of a kiss.

They arrive at the hotel bar a little early for their meeting with Erika. Eames pauses in the doorway, scoping out the room, and then heads purposefully toward a small, round two-top. He pulls a third chair over and arranges them all equidistant from one another, considers his work, and then sits where he can monitor the door, motioning Arthur to join him.

Arthur sits too, and stares at him, his face carefully blank.

"So I can touch both of you," Eames explains patiently.

"Yes, I know." Arthur is in love with a master manipulator. He thinks that as long as he's aware of that fact, he'll be all right.

"Because I want to touch you. And it helps with... well, she..."

Arthur finally cracks a smile. "You don't have to explain. I saw how effective you were with her before, remember?"

Eames raises his eyebrows and huffs a short amused breath through his nose. "You did. And you know, you were quite effective there yourself, love."

"Thank you, love." Arthur bumps his knee against Eames' under the table. "Uh -- given our early flight, I hope you weren't planning on either of us trying to keep up with her tonight, were you?"
"Hrm." Eames thinks. "No, I suppose not. This is more for... personal gratification. And maintaining the cover, of course."

"Of course."

They order drinks, and Arthur half-heartedly tries to talk Eames into reading Stephenson's *Quicksilver* (because it's good, and because no-one else Arthur is close to will read it and Arthur wants to talk about it, dammit), while they both keep an eye out for Arnaud and Thierry Matin.

Erika arrives at five minutes after seven and rushes to their table, apologizing profusely. Arthur's conscience twinges as he sees that she's looking unwontedly plain, her long brown hair pulled into a careless braid and her makeup-free eyes faintly rimmed with red. She's not wearing any jewelry, and her flowered sundress is chic and flattering but her posture in it is deflated.

Eames stands to greet her, pats her shoulder, pulls out her chair, kisses her cheek and tucks her solicitously in against the table. She reaches across to squeeze Arthur's hand in greeting, and then slumps back into her chair.

"Tell us what's wrong," Eames says gently, and puts a sympathetic hand on her forearm while signaling the bartender with the other.

She shakes her head -- not negatively, just overwhelmed -- and sighs. "It shows, yeah? He... well... Johan is my cousin."

Eames nods calmly and takes a sip of his martini. "So you said, the other night."

"You're not disgusted?" She looks quickly into both of their faces, and a subtle tenseness in her posture eases. "Maybe you're not. But it -- it means we can't be together. In public. If he was married, he could divorce, but this, we can't ever. I've wanted children, I've wanted to live together, but I've always known we couldn't."

Arthur leans in. "I'm sure your family would be very upset," he says sympathetically.

Erika laughs brokenly. "Oh, they'd be furious. And he's a little famous, at least down here, because of his job. So of course we can't let anyone know. And I thought we'd both accepted that, and it would just go on the way it is now, even if it's not perfect."

"What changed?" Eames' expression is a carefully composed, genuine-appearing mix of concern and affection. Arthur knows it's false and that this is exactly the outcome Eames had wanted to provoke with his histrionics during the Kluwers extraction -- but he's still almost convinced, himself, by the soft frown on Eames' lips, the faint worry lines drawing his eyebrows together over his tender gaze. He's good, he's so good. Arthur feels an absurd sense of pride.

"He said he wants to free me," she chokes out. "To fall in love and have children with someone else, and to not have to 'hide my love from the world.' As if I don't know my own mind. As if I can't make that decision for myself!"

Arthur and Eames exchange glances as their server sets a glass of red wine in front of Erika. "Maybe a man who wouldn't let you make up your own mind about that isn't someone you want to be with," Arthur points out, though not unkindly.

He's a little surprised, honestly, that Kluwers took this tack. Arthur had thought, listening to him in the dream, that Kluwers might just keep stringing her along, or be more harsh about how he ended things. It seems as though maybe he'd actually taken in what Eames had said, and come to a conclusion about it. It's not quite an inception, but it was certainly a powerful form of suggestion.
"But I do," Erika says miserably. "I do want him, I always have, and I've made my peace with the rest of it. Even the girlfriends. I've dated, I've been with other men, and I've never felt the way I do about him."

"What do you think you'll do, sweetheart?" Eames asks.

She stares at the table, biting her lip, and finally shrugs one shoulder. "I don't know. What can I do if he won't let me come to him? I can't force it on him, but I can't see any other way to be. We've been together for so long."

Eames scoots his chair closer and wraps a comforting arm around her shoulders. She leans her head gratefully onto his shoulder and sighs, closing her eyes. He rests his chin gently against her forehead and looks at Arthur, his expression neutral.

Arthur looks at the picture they make, the way her long chestnut hair and rounded cheeks complement Eames' sleekly pomaded head and the short scruff on his face, how her wide mouth balances his even features and fine clear grey eyes. Arthur could feel jealous, he guesses; they're attractive together, and she clearly appreciates the physical comfort Eames is offering. But he doesn't. Maybe his experience in du Toit's dream is carrying over, too, helping him to trust Eames and tolerate Eames showing false intimacy with others.

Eames is still watching him. Arthur smiles wryly, letting Eames know it's ok, and the three of them sit in silence for a moment before Erika sits up again and dabs her eyes with a bar napkin.

"Thank you," she tells Eames, before turning unexpectedly to Arthur. "And thank you for loaning me his shoulder."

"Of course," Arthur and Eames murmur simultaneously, and Erika actually laughs as they blink sheepishly at each other.

"You two always make me feel so reassured... I'll miss you when you go," she says affectionately. "I like seeing how attuned you are to each other. It's good to know that can exist, and you can be open and public about it."

"Well, not everywhere we can't," Eames points out. "We're fortunate to live where we do. And it rather constrains where we can travel."

Erika nods thoughtfully. "But you're open about it at home. You can live together and come home to each other. And -- do your families know? Are they all right with it?"

"Yes," Eames says slowly. "Not happy about it, no. I wouldn't say that. But it's impossible not to love Tony, you know. They came around to the idea in time."

Arthur extemporizes. "My family is fine with it. They like Stephen. They respect my choices. They'd prefer a traditional wife and kids, I think, but they don't give us grief about it."

"I see." Erika chews her lip. "I think -- you reassure me because you understand, in a way."

Arthur only nods, but Eames looks pensive. "Perhaps more than you know."

She looks at him thoughtfully. "You're different today," she observes. "You seem down, both of you."

They look at each other. Arthur isn't sure what to say. Eames says quietly, "I suppose it's that our little idyll here is over. It's back to the real world for us, too soon."
"But you'll still be together, every day," she points out, confused.

Arthur can answer this one. "Of course. And living with him, it's good. It's everything I've wanted -- everything." He avoids looking at Eames as he says this, remembering their midnight conversation about dogs and mortgages, which seems ages ago. "But there's something different when you're on vacation, you know? Away from all of your responsibilities and just, daily life."

Eames' hand steals under the table and grasps Arthur's. He winks at Erika. "We're just being a little maudlin, duckie. Don't mind us."

She smiles a little sadly. "I guess you're in the right frame of mind to drink with me tonight, then."

Arthur holds up his non-occupied hand in mock alarm. "Not too much -- not like last time. I can't hold it like I used to be able to."

"Lightweight," she teases, and he agrees vigorously. Eames snorts, and she giggles. She tries her wine and makes a noise of approval.

"Can I ask..." Arthur trails off. She looks up expectantly while he tries to come up with a diplomatic way to phrase it. "What is it about him? That you find so irresistible that you're willing to give up a family of your own to be with him."

Erika's answering smile is understanding, though. "He can be a bit rude. I'm afraid he didn't come across very pleasant when you met him, and Matheiu and Diane were just awful; I don't know why. When we're alone, he's sweet, and kind, and loving, and he takes care of me. And he's generous. I don't make much money; all of my nice things, my little luxuries, are from him. You might not think it to see him, but he's funny, witty. And the way he makes me feel: he loves looking at me, touching me, and he shows me that. You know how it is?"

Yes, Arthur knows. Eames' hand tightens in his.

"No more about my problems, though," she tells them firmly. "You've already been very good boys and listened to quite enough. So, tell me, what was the highlight of this trip for you?"

Eames, thinks Arthur. Falling in love with Eames. He turns to look at Eames, not answering the question.

"We sincerely enjoyed the gracious hospitality of some lovely Afrikaner lady, who took pity on a poor rashy, itching wretch and showed him and his partner some marvelous evenings out on the town," Eames declares, winking.

It works; she laughs again, some of her characteristic twinkle flaring up again in her round brown eyes. "You're too kind, you flatterer. But really, what did you see or do that was unique to our country? What would you tell people to come here to see?"

"Well," Arthur starts. "We had a very interesting visit to a winery. And we adored our B&B in Mossel Bay, and the drive along the coast road was beautiful."

"Yes, there are some charming little towns up the highways inland too, weren't there, love?" Eames adds. "And we've extensively sampled every kind of fried sweet around Port Elizabeth. Our friend Lesedi, from the other night, is very fond of them," he explains.

"Your beaches, and the views from the coast towns, are amazing," Arthur offers. "I wasn't too excited about the evening we spent in a gentleman's club..."
"You do have some truly stunning views here," Eames interjects smoothly, kicking Arthur's foot under the table. "We took some lovely photos to remember them by. And the food has been quite good everywhere. I'd recommend it."

"We got a lot of good sleep during this trip. It was very relaxing," Arthur says in conclusion, and kicks Eames right back.

Erika watches the interplay between them, her smile widening and some of her usual vivacity returning to her features. "I'm so glad," she says, genuine happiness in her voice. "I know we're not really considered First World yet, but I love my country and I love to see visitors appreciate it."

Arthur feels bad about their doublespeak responses. "We really did have a wonderful trip," he tells her honestly. "I think I'll remember it forever." He grins at Eames.

She lets the subject go, then, and true to her word, doesn't bring up Kluwers again for the rest of the evening. Arthur is curious to see whether Eames will try to bring it up again, but he doesn't; he's agreeable and mildly flirtatious instead. Drinks turn into dinner, and it all passes very pleasantly.

Surprisingly, given her emotional state, Erika isn't nearly as drunk as the last two times they'd seen her off; they stand and watch, arms around each other's waists, as she makes it into a cab of her own volition and gives him Kluwers' address. She waves cheerily out the back window as the cab drives away, and that's that.

Eames sighs, and dips his chin down to rest on Arthur's shoulder. "She shouldn't let a man make up her mind for her, hmm?"

Arthur shrugs. "It doesn't seem fair to her, if she wants him that bad. I'm not sure this was the right thing to do, honestly."

"You agreed to help." Eames' voice is steady, not accusatory.

"I did," he acknowledges. "I'm not going back on that. But I didn't anticipate how much it would wreck her if he acted on it."

Eames is quiet. "Well, it can't be undone now." He pulls away and looks up at Arthur. "What time do we leave tomorrow, love?"

Arthur thinks. "Should be in a cab by six, I guess. I don't know how punctual this airport is."

Eames frowns, but doesn't argue. "Look, do you mind if we go back up to the room? Not for sex," he appends. "I just -- I don't want to share you, right now. And I'd like to say our goodbyes when we're alone, not in the airport."

"I have that long layover in Bonn," Arthur reminds him. "You can stay with me in a hotel for a few hours there. But I don't mind staying in tonight, too."

They return to the elevator bank to go back to their room. Arthur scans the lobby out of habit, but there's still no sign of the Matins. He's relieved, and since they're leaving so early the next morning, he figures it's safe to put it out of his mind.

Since they've showered this evening, Arthur decides to skip it in the morning. He strips down to his boxers and undershirt, sets an alarm for the morning, packs away all of his toiletries but his brush and toothbrush, and sits cross-legged on the bed watching Eames pack his bag.
"You look tense," he says suddenly, and Eames stops folding clothes to look up at him. "Do you want to come here? I'll rub your neck."

Eames looks thoughtful and nods assent. He pulls his shirt off and obediently sits on the bed in front of Arthur. His neck and shoulders are indeed unusually clenched, and Arthur presses carefully with his thumbs and the ball of his hand, trying to loosen the knots without bruising them.

"So tight," he scolds Eames lightly. "You must be aching."

"It's not my shoulders that are aching," Eames murmurs.

"Are you hurt?" Arthur asks, feeling a pang of alarm. "Was I too rough? I checked you, you seemed all right after --"

"My arse is fine, Arthur," Eames replies. "My arse is very happy right now. You were magnificent and considerate and I adored every second, and if you want to do it again tomorrow, nothing would please me more."

"Then what...?" Arthur is bewildered.

Eames turns to face him. His eyes are dark, and pride and vulnerability are warring in his face. "Are you going to make me say it aloud?" He doesn't explain, just pulls Arthur's hand flat against his chest, just above his left pectoral.

Oh.

Arthur leaves his hand there, feeling the steady reassuring beat under his palm. "What's the matter?" he asks softly. "Just the parting, or something more?"

Eames shakes his head and grimaces, self-deprecating and humorless. "I can't shake the feeling that you won't come," he says quietly, his voice cracking a little on the last word.

Arthur grasps Eames' chin, forces it up, and looks directly into his eyes. "I'll be there," he tells Eames with conviction. "Nothing would keep me away."

"I know that. I do. It's not a rational feeling. Just..." Eames' voice trails off.

"You trust me," Arthur reminds him.

"Arthur, my heart. I trust you and always have done. But I don't trust the world, I suppose," Eames admits, low and rough. "Your job could go wrong, your plane could stall out, bloody Cobb could call you. There are so many reasons why you might not make it."

Arthur is not good at this comforting thing, but Eames clearly needs it. "Come here." He takes his hand off of Eames' face, and wraps both arms around him instead. "I love you, and I. Will. Be. There. If zero gravity can't stop me, a pissant little job in Vegas and a couple of winter storms aren't going to." He kisses Eames' earlobe. "Trust me, ok? And trust... the world, or whatever. I trust that you'll still want me there."

Eames' arms tighten around Arthur. "I'll try, love. But it'll be long, without you."

When Eames lets go, Arthur kisses him quickly on the forehead, rolls off the bed and turns the lights out, then pushes Eames to lie down on his stomach again. Eames may not admit that his shoulders hurt him, but he's carrying himself so rigidly, it makes Arthur tense in sympathy. He straddles Eames' lower back and methodically focuses on probing and unwinding each knot.
It's not quite what he'd envisioned for their last night together, but it feels right, somehow; not sexual, but soothing, comforting, close. His hands sweep carefully over Eames' skin, memorizing the faintly raised shapes where some of the tattoos have slightly scarred. It's like reading Eames' body in Braille; Arthur hadn't noticed it before, and he's fascinated. He takes his time, and when he's done, Eames is limp and pliable under him.

Arthur eases himself down, strips off his own shirt, and lies next to Eames. They face each other, their heads on the same pillow, their hands and bent knees touching. Eames' body is silhouetted by the nighttime glow of Port Elizabeth's downtown, a faint amber light through the open window of their room. He watches Arthur silently, his eyes traveling slowly over every bit of Arthur's face, coming back to his eyes again and again. Arthur is struck again by the pleasure/pain of it, the sweetness of being here now and the bitterness in store tomorrow.

Arthur knows they need to sleep, but he doesn't want to miss these last moments together. He can sleep on the plane. There's something he wants to know, anyway.

"Hey," he says quietly. "Tell me what else you want to do with me, that you don't want me thinking is because of the sex clubs."

"It's bondage and dominance training, Arthur, not a 'sex club.'"

"Yeah, same thing." Eames' eyes narrow, and Arthur shrugs. "Or not. Whatever. Are there other things you're thinking of that you want me to know about now?"

"You were beautiful, tied like that," Eames begins after a moment. "Not just your body -- and that leather against your skin was stunning, it truly was -- but also how you surrendered to me, with such trust and pride."

Arthur's cheeks warm at the memory. "You want to do that again?"

Eames nods into the pillow. "I'd like to explore more along those lines, yes."

"No gags," Arthur warns.

"No. Nothing to hurt or humiliate you, love. Never."

Arthur nods slowly. "Go on."

"Perhaps tie your hands to the bed. Or see if you can hold them there on your own, without being tied, while I touch you. I'd want to see that, see you do that for me. And I'd like to blindfold you, some time."

"We can try it," Arthur agrees cautiously. That doesn't sound too bad. But he wants to be clear: "But I didn't like you sitting on my chest, or holding me down. I don't want to do that again. You can tell me what to do -- and we both know I might or might not do it -- but I don't want you to try to physically force me to do anything."

"That's exactly it," Eames says earnestly. "It's not about making you do something you don't want to. It's about me asking you, and you agreeing and allowing it. Voluntarily. You choosing to do what I ask, for no other reason than that you know it pleases me. It's love and trust and... aesthetics, Arthur. That's all."

When he puts it that way, it makes sense. Arthur will still have to think it over, but the faint unease he's been carrying around since he choked, that time, with Eames sitting on him, dissolves. "Have you done this before?" he asks.
Eames laughs, short and humorless. "Done it, no. Had it done to me -- yes. I told you, I'm not a submissive, but honestly, I don't believe I'm dominant either, at least not this way. This hasn't been my cup of tea with other lovers. I just... I love seeing you want to please me, and I like the way you looked doing it."

Arthur is quiet, absorbing this. He strokes gently down Eames' arm. "Thank you for bringing this up now," he tells Eames. "You're right. I would have wondered if it was some new trick you'd learned while you were being spanked or something in a club, and I wouldn't have liked it. I need to think about what you've asked, but I'm happy that you asked it, ok?"

Eames' face relaxes. "I'm glad." He curls his hand close against Arthur's bare chest.

Arthur sighs and rolls over onto his other side, snuggling his back along Eames' bare chest and legs and tugging Eames' arm over his belly. Eames tucks his face into the back of Arthur's neck, and they're quiet together.

Despite his desire to stay conscious, Eames' warmth and the embrace they're in lull Arthur steadily toward sleep. He's nearly drifted off when Eames whispers his name into his shoulder.

"Arthur."

"Mmm."

Eames' chest quakes in a silent laugh behind him. "You asleep, love?"

"No," Arthur mumbles.

"Yes," Eames contradicts him. "It's all right. It can wait till morning."

Arthur rouses himself. "No, tell me. Morning'll be," he yawns, "...madhouse."

Eames pauses. "Is there still no 'too much'?"

He has to think about that for a minute, map back in his tired brain to the conversation Eames is referring to. Puzzled, he squints into the pillow. "Hasn't been so far."

"All right."

Arthur waits, but nothing else comes. He turns his head as far as he can to face Eames while still spooned up against him. "All right? That's all?"

Eames nods solemnly into Arthur's hair.

"Nope. Spit it out," Arthur orders.

There's a deep intake and exhalation of warm breath behind him, and then Eames says, "I want to work more jobs together."

This is not what Arthur was expecting, but he's not averse. "You mean, like, a formal partnership?"

Eames nods again. "Like you and Cobb were all those years."

"That wasn't a partnership, it was just because he was too... you know what, never mind." Arthur is not going to think about Dom right now. He considers Eames' proposal. "With an architect, the two of us do have pretty much all of the bases covered for anything that doesn't require anything
out of the ordinary. We have a solid roster of chemists and architects to call on, and between us we probably have solid enough reputations to field our own teams as needed."

"I was referring more to wanting to spend more time with you than about the details of running future jobs," Eames mutters.

"You engaged the Point Man Brain," Arthur says matter-of-factly.

"Well, send him away," Eames grouses. "I want to talk to Arthur now, and see if he still feels I'm not asking for too much."

"No," Arthur tells him, his tone much softer now. "You're not. It's... I'd like that, actually. I was already wondering how we'd make things work, after your run is over and we both need to get out of London. I'll keep my ears open and see what comes up that we could both take on, ok?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" Arthur teases.

Eames grins against his back. "Yeah."
For a professional criminal, Arthur is embarrassingly conflicted about lying to his family. He hates the way his work feels like a toxin released into his childhood home, hates looking into his mother's eyes and describing completely fictitious places and people, obfuscating the real events and import of his life. He is uneasy about his parents' pride in his (fake) high-status job, and has to gird himself to answer their questions without showing his distress.

The dissonance between how easy he finds it to run a con on a mark, steal and analyze peoples' private data, and lie to them in their dreams, and how hard it is for him to come up with a simple story to perpetuate his family's pride in him, bothers him. He supposes that's a sign that he still has a functioning conscience. Or maybe it isn't, but he tries not to think about it too hard.

Late in the afternoon, he sits in the cozy, book-lined den of his parents' shingled little Colonial house on their snowy, tree-lined street and forces himself to describe elaborately made-up on-the-job incidents to entertain them. In response to questioning, he gives them a carefully constructed version of who Jonathan Kent is to him: how they met, how Arthur knew he was in love, where he is now, when Arthur will see him again, how they intend to make a long-distance globetrotting relationship work...

If she ever went into dreamshare, Marina Greenberg could put Dominic Cobb to shame as an extractor. Luckily, Arthur has years of practice fending off both Cobb and his mother, as well as the benefit of Eames' skill in creating the character. The story holds.

When she pauses for breath, he deliberately mentions the BDSM subtext of the production. As he'd known she would, Marina takes the bait. For several minutes, she thinks aloud, tripping from one subject to the next without stopping for air. She compares Prospero's treatment of Caliban to Petruchio's treatment of Kate, and then to the depiction of sexual violence against Lavinia in Titus Andronicus, and muses whether Caryl Churchill would approve. Eventually, she concludes that a contemporary production incorporating dominance and submission themes would be a sound interpretation of the work, and nods, satisfied.

Peter Greenberg only watches the two of them through his horn-rimmed glasses, letting the breathless flow of Marina's voice run over him without ruffling him and giving his son a faintly amused lift of his shaggy eyebrows. He knows exactly what Arthur is doing. He'd taught Arthur to do it, after all.

Peter has Arthur's narrow deep-set eyes and dark hair, though he's lax about keeping it trimmed and allows it to wave freely rather than slicking it back. His short beard is just this side of scruffy, and his wool trousers and heavy Aran sweater are characteristically rumpled. He is a soft-spoken man of middle height, patient and precise in his work and his words if not in his appearance. He is clearly curious about Arthur's life, but he's always respected his son's privacy, treading delicately near but not past his boundaries, which Arthur is grateful for.

Arthur has always got along with his father very well.
As for his mother, it's a whole other ball of wax, and a more complicated one. Arthur loves her, he truly does, and they've always bonded – as he'd told Eames – over their shared love of theater. But Marina is an extrovert and wholly unlike her husband or her son, seeming to thrive on drawing attention to herself and ratcheting up the energy of any space she occupies, in a way that sets off all of Arthur's cautious point man alarm bells. Her frazzled ash-blond curls (now greying) bob wildly around her face, their constant motion seeming to embody the restless energy of her mind. She tends toward the flamboyant in her clothing -- the vibrant paisley of her midi corduroy skirt tonight almost reminds Arthur of Kefilwe's sundresses -- and her lectures and essays are passionate to the point of aggression. Marina's shrewd dark eyes are piercing, and when she speaks her tongue is so sharp that a younger Arthur used to imagine her words cutting holes in the air. He sometimes thinks he developed his capacity for violence from watching his mother spar with rogue academics.

With Marina momentarily exhausted after her dizzy monologue, it's Arthur's turn to ask questions, and then he can relax into his real self again, the self that wants to hear about how the research for her book is going, admire the new additions to his father's collection of manuscripts, and smile at the photos of his cousin's new baby.

He loosens his tie, rolls up his sleeves, and helps Marina prepare salads for dinner, dicing tomatoes and avocados as a flank steak sizzles on the stovetop and the kitchen fills with the tangy scents of garlic and lime. Maybe he's provincial, but he has missed American food -- and having someone cook a meal for him. The South African cuisine had been filling and often delicious, but lacking in the sense of comfort that a personal touch conveys.

Considering how long he's been away, he seems to fall right into place in the house, moving around and next to Marina in the small room without collision, locating the utensils and dishes he needs without conscious thought. Or maybe it's just that this house doesn't change, he thinks. They'd moved in when Arthur was almost five, and while they've made certain upgrades to the framework over the past thirty years -- carpets, appliances, heating system -- the layout of the rooms hasn't altered a bit. The same tablecloth is on the dining table, the same curtains are in the windows, and Marina takes the same old cast-iron skillet off of the range with the ancient crocheted potholder that Arthur had made her in kindergarten.

Arthur notes this last and rolls his eyes privately, but doesn't chide her for using such a worn-out and probably unsafe old rag around the hot pan. They've had that discussion several times, and Arthur knows damn well that he'd inherited his stubbornness from his mother and not from his father; there's no point revisiting it.

He tells her about the African food instead, refraining from mentioning the pork boerwors or the shellfish he'd eaten (they know he no longer keeps kosher, but he's polite enough not to rub it in their faces), and exaggerating his description of the multitude of fried dough products he'd sampled, to make her laugh. She asks him about the casting in the South African theaters, and what he'd observed of the aftereffects of apartheid, and what the local LGBT culture was, and swats him on the arm when she sees him sneaking a slice of avocado out of the salad. It's easy, and affectionate, and something in Arthur eases, glad to be here and connected with her again. He plays so many roles in his life, and most of them are so complicated, that he sometimes forgets how good and pleasantly mindless it can be to drop back into the role of "son."

While the steak is resting, Marina loads Arthur and Peter up with plates and tableware and shoos them into the dining room. Once there, Peter looks Arthur full in the eyes for a moment, and then nods as if he's confirmed something to himself.
"You look content, buddy," he tells Arthur quietly, neatly tucking a folded napkin under the plate in front of him. "More so than I've seen you in a long time."

Arthur maintains his direct gaze. "I am, Dad. This is really... it's really good." A faint but genuine grin brightens those last few words.

Peter reaches out and briefly clasps Arthur's shoulder. "I'm glad." He has a way of smiling with his eyes without his mouth so much as twitching, and he gives Arthur one of these ocular smiles now. Arthur has always loved this expression on his father, and feels his own dimples responding to it. "Do you see this being a... permanent arrangement?"

"I don't know," Arthur says candidly. "I think I'd like it to be, ultimately, but it's still really new right now. We need to see how things are when we're apart for a while."

Peter folds another napkin and then just holds it, absently, while he formulates what he wants to say. Arthur waits. One of the primary reasons that his relationship with his father has always been good is that Peter's words have always been measured, even when Arthur was very small, and it is almost always worth waiting for them.

He can hear Marina humming to herself in the kitchen behind them, pans clattering into the sink and her quick light footsteps across the tile. The smell of the hot steak and fresh herbs and lime emanating from the kitchen makes him salivate suddenly.

"Treasure your time with him. I hope he'll be as faithful to you as you want him to be," Peter says finally, and moves a little awkwardly to resume setting the table.

Arthur isn't sure how to respond to that, but he's spared the need to say anything by the momentary look of alarm that crosses Peter's face in the next few seconds.

"Do something for me," Peter asks abruptly.

"...Sure," Arthur says, puzzled.

"Go open a bottle of wine before your mother remembers she has that lousy margarita mix in the back of the fridge."

Arthur laughs, and is lunging for the wine rack before Peter has finished the sentence. He's had his mother's margaritas before. They're terrible.

**********

It's early morning for Eames when Arthur, reverse-jet-lagged and unable to sleep, calls him later that night. He knows Eames will be up and prowling around, starting a pot of tea and getting ready for his morning workout. He tries to picture Eames' tousled bed-head and soft mouth, the warm, slightly musty smell of his pillow when he first stirs in the morning, but Eames feels far away and Arthur can't quite capture the memory he wants.

He debates internally, then presses the icon for video instead of for an audio call.

When he'd arrived in the afternoon and dropped his bags in his old bedroom, he'd taken photos of it: the narrow twin bed with its ancient headboard, Stephen King and John Grisham novels on the shelves, a land-line telephone still plugged into its socket, and carefully framed stills of *The Doom Generation* and Rollergirl on the sloping walls. The sturdy desk where he'd typed out college application essays on chunky IBM clones (long-since disposed of; Arthur doesn't leave electronic traces behind him, even on this quiet suburban street) now holds a small t.v. with a Playstation and
It's all very neat, spartan, nearly regimented. Arthur had kept it that way long before he had become a career criminal, and his parents haven't changed anything since he moved out.

He'd sent the photos to Eames without letting himself think about it too much, half-apprehensive, half-curious what Eames will make of them. *Letting you in, letting you see me.*

His heart pounds as the screen of his phone flickers and then refocuses on familiar eyes, fine straight nose, and the lush pink mouth Arthur had been imagining, leaking white foam and with a slim blue rod protruding from it.

"Jush a mo'," Eames says around his toothbrush. His phone clatters on a hard surface and its camera displays a dull grey ceiling with a yellowed light fixture. Arthur can hear him rinsing with water and spitting into the basin.

The image on the screen jags wildly again and then Eames comes back into focus, wiping his lips with the edge of a towel, his mouth spreading into a wide, pleased smile.

"Arthur," he purrs lasciviously, apparently oblivious to the facts that it's 6 a.m. GMT and there's a toilet tank noisily refilling two feet away from him.

"Alec," Arthur says, and lets himself grin, a little intoxicated with the sight of him.


"Like you didn't just moan my name instead of Aaron," Arthur retorts.


"God, don't make me think about your mouth," Arthur groans. Sense memories hit him like a hammer -- Eames' mouth wrapped around his cock, whispering over his nipple, his tongue flickering against Arthur's ear. He squirms.

Eames sees the squirm and his eyes go heavy-lidded and smoldering. Then he blinks. "Sorry, love. It's just -"

"I know. Me too."

They're quiet, looking at each other.

"You on your way out already?" Arthur asks.

"Yeah. They want me to drop half a stone before we open," Eames says regretfully. "Less lifting. More running."

Arthur sighs. "I don't get a vote in this, do I?"

Eames snorts. "Shall I tell the costume designer that my other half says I'm not allowed to slim down? That 'e likes me proper big an' bulky, 'e does?"

"If you put it that way, no." He does like the intimacy of that casual 'other half,' though.

"Thought not. On which subject, d'you mind if I prop you up somewhere while I dress?"
"Please."

The image on the screen wobbles and shakes and then steadies itself at roughly the height of Eames' neck. Arthur looks around the room with interest. This is the first he's seen of the inside of any of Eames' flats. He's not sure what he'd expected, but what he sees seems to fit Eames as Arthur knows him.

The queen bed has an ancient deep brown leather headboard, several squashy white pillows, and a heavy embroidered duvet covered in a sort of fishscale print in russet and gold, peacock blue and forest green. The floor is hardwood, old oak or maybe walnut, with a faded and threadbare Persian rug that could, but somehow doesn't, clash with the duvet. The wall facing Arthur is painted a warm cream and covered with several mismatched frames -- he can't quite make out all of their contents, but some appear to be candid photos and playbills -- and holds a massive chest of drawers and matching wardrobe, both in dark polished wood. Books are piled high on one of the two stout nightstands, nearly obscuring the chunky bronze lamp behind them, and Arthur is fairly sure that the wall he's peering from right now is overflowing with books as well.

It's a bit heavy and textural for Arthur's taste, but it looks comfortable, sturdy and masculine. He can see himself spending some time in this room.

"And how is your mum?" Eames asks, stripping off his faded sleep shirt and reaching for a long-sleeved, high-necked running shirt.

Arthur eyes the familiar mass of tattoos, hair and muscle, rippling as Eames tugs the shirt down over his head and arms, and then firmly puts sex out of his head. "I stood up to the third degree -- thanks for your help prepping for that. She demanded pictures, and recommended several feminist critical essays about the play." Then he laughs suddenly and a trifle bitterly. "She wanted to know if dating you was going to affect my security clearance."

Eames zips up the neck of his shirt and looks thoughtful. "Do you think it would?"

"How should I know?"

A kettle begins whistling in the background, and Eames darts out of sight without ado. A moment later, the whistling stops, and Arthur hears the clink of ceramic hitting a tile counter. Eames raises his voice, presumably from the kitchen. "Best find out, darling, if she's that fierce."

"I'll get right on that," Arthur mutters, as Eames returns to the bedroom and begins changing into a pair of running tights, layering a pair of looser track pants over them.

"What was that?"

Arthur sighs again. "Nothing." He just watches Eames for a few minutes. "Things are so... flat, somehow, without you here."

Eames stops rifling through a drawer and looks square at the camera, moving closer to it. "I feel the same," he says quietly.

"I just want to, I don't know. Touch you, I guess. Not just sex," Arthur adds hastily. "I miss the way you smell." He scrubs a hand fiercely through his hair, embarrassed. "I sound like an idiot."

"Not a bit," Eames assures him, watching him fondly. "Or at the very least, I'm every bit as idiotic as you."

"Cue love theme swelling in the background, as our two heroes gaze soulfully into each other's
"eyes," Arthur deadpans, and Eames laughs.

"I keep waking up, groping for you," he confesses. "I may have indecently assaulted a pillow or three."

"It took me forever to sleep in the hotel last night," Arthur admits. "Hoping tonight is easier, from familiar surroundings if nothing else."

Eames perks up. "Ah, yes. Your photos. That is your childhood room that you sent me, isn't it?"

Arthur turns the camera in a slow pan. "My very own."

"There's not much you there, is it," Eames says thoughtfully, rummaging through a drawer.

"I'm not sure there's much me anywhere in particular."

"Surely there's some place you've made your own?"

"Maybe the Dublin flat," Arthur admits. "You can tell me when you see it. But I don't exactly have an eye for decorating."

Eames pulls on a navy knit cap, using the phone screen as a mirror to tug it low over his eyebrows. It anonymizes him, and he looks almost menacing. Arthur considers this and decides that he likes it.

"And now you're all alone there in your little single bed. Such a waste."

"It's only three and a half more weeks," Arthur reminds him glumly.

"Impossibly long," Eames counters immediately.

"Too long," Arthur agrees, and their eyes lock again.

Something immense and fragile flares between them, across all the miles. Arthur half-reaches to touch Eames' face on the screen. He can almost feel the crispness of the golden stubble on Eames' chin and the warmth of his skin under it. His fingertips tingle.

Eames opens his mouth to say something, his expression soft and yearning. Arthur leans in to hear it, breath catching in his throat.

And then a distant timer dings, and the moment is broken.

Eames exhales explosively and his face closes up again, pupils contracting and the lines of his mouth going firm and neutral. He shakes his head ruefully. "There's my cuppa, ready -- I must go," he apologizes. "Shall I ring you later? Or do you want to try again on your tomorrow?"

"My tomorrow," Arthur says, amused.

"Till then."

"Until then," Arthur agrees, and Eames winks at him before the screen goes dark.

He sits still for a moment on the neatly made bed, staring blankly at nothing and feeling suddenly weary. The tidy little room with its outdated furniture and movie posters seems stifling.

Arthur stands, a bit jerkily, and begins mechanically unpacking his luggage into the small dresser
next to his bed. When he's finished, he brushes his teeth, washes his face, and takes off everything but his undershirt and briefs, holding Eames' face and voice in his mind the whole time.

By the time he flicks off the bedside lamp and lies down on the narrow twin bed, his exhaustion catches up with him, and he falls asleep only a few pages into his book.

**********

In the morning, Arthur accompanies Marina to the university in her tiny, ancient sedan. He often does this when he visits his parents, sitting in on their lectures and discussion sections and occasionally contributing to the discussion when it's a work he's familiar with. He hasn't been back to Connecticut very recently, and there had been a period of a couple of years while he was on the run with Cobb that he hadn't seen them at all, so he's happy enough now to spend a few days shuttling back and forth between their classes, eating crappy sandwiches in the faculty breakroom for lunch, and eavesdropping on their office hours afterward.

Marina has a faculty meeting before her first class, and Peter won't be on campus for a few hours yet, so Arthur orders a coffee and bagel in the student union, pulls out his laptop and his secure wifi hotspot, and has a productive time updating his various aliases' social media pages. He makes sure Tony Levinson's sites include reference to his South African vacation, and "checks in" to a San Francisco restaurant to lend verisimilitude to that alias.

When he's satisfied that all of his personal aliases are up to date, he pulls up Eames' credit card information and uses them to make some dinner and hotel reservations in Argentina and Brazil. He'll do the same when he gets to Las Vegas, and then send Eames' digital footprint off somewhere else -- Cebu, or Battambang, maybe. He makes a mental note to find out all of the languages Eames actually speaks.

Later that day, Arthur begins to regret his decision to stay on campus. He'd thought he could still fit in with the student body, but when he looks around, he sees that he stands out like the proverbial sore thumb. The students all seem incredibly young and gawky, even the earnest graduate student teaching assistants, who self-consciously call him "Arthur" and affect a sophistication he can clearly see is meant to impress him. Worse, some of the younger students evidently see him as a fringe benefit of taking his parents' classes and demonstrate an alarming sense of entitlement to his attention.

He texts Eames about it during a break between classes. Eames surprises him by responding immediately.

A: Three freshmen and one graduate student just hit on me.

E: And were you tempted?

A: No. I think they were just shooting for a better grade.

E: Bosh

There is a pause.

E: oh sorry was that you fishing for a compliment

E: Dearest insecure Arthur, you are

A: what!? NO
E: utterly fit, indeed ravishing, and any university student in his or her right mind would want to
shag you breathless

A: They're just kids. They make Ariadne look like an old wise woman

E: That takes some doing, seeing as she's all of, what, 26?

A: Exactly.

A: What are you up to?

E: Having dinner with Jane to talk through characterization after finishing our promo stills.

A: Jane?


Arthur's phone buzzes, and he sees that Eames has attached a photo. He opens it.

The woman in the photo is attractive and athletic, with a strong chin, dark piercing eyes, and a
somewhat grim smile. Her black hair is cut in a severe bob, and her body, encased in a fitted
leather motorcycle jacket and trousers, is toned and strong, with unexpectedly large breasts.

Spitfire comes to Arthur's mind. She reminds him of some of the working-class girls he went to
high school with, pretty and voluptuous and immaculately made up, but hot-tempered and prone to
periodic manicure-wrecking, hair-pulling, vicious catfights.

A: She looks like she could beat you up.

E: Funny you say that, they're having us do sparring as physical warmups.

A: Tell her your boyfriend will track her down and kill her if she hurts you

E: ...my *software programmer*?

A: Ok, maybe not.

E: Relax, darling. She's a lamb. You'll like her.

E: And her husband.

E: I'll send you the promo photos when they release them to us.

A: I'll let you get to it then. Cross your fingers I get through today without any more overtures
from Generation Z, plz

E: Righto

E: Heart

A: Heart?

E: Yes the emotion-con picture thing.

Arthur laughs out loud, not caring what the students still milling around him must think.

A: Got it
It turns out he is not so lucky. Three more girls, and two boys, make it unambiguously known that they'd like to hear his innermost thoughts about Tony Kushner or John Gower, privately, maybe at their place? And they'd be happy to make him dinner, of course...

Arthur declines each request politely, wincing internally at the thought of undergraduate "cuisine" and cheap wine.

That afternoon, he asks Marina to stop at a local department store on their way home, where he picks up a plain gold ring for his left hand in the hope that it might have a deterrent effect on young academic libidos.

Marina is obviously deeply affected but also uncharacteristically silent as she watches him slip it onto his finger outside the store. He catches her glancing at it from time to time as she drives.

"It's just to keep your students off my back, Mom," he says tiredly.

She nods solemnly. "I know, honey. I've just hoped for you to find someone you want to be with. To have something like that," she indicates his hand, "for real someday. Somebody you can make a life with."

He reaches for her hand on the steering wheel and squeezes it affectionately. "When I do, you'll know," he promises.

_It's not lying_, he tells himself. Whatever this is with Eames, it doesn't involve gold rings and "making a life" with him.

His father is teaching a late class that day, and arrives home after Arthur and Marina have already eaten. To Arthur's distinct embarrassment and equally distinct lack of surprise, Marina seizes his hand and waves it woefully at Peter's face as soon as he enters the living room. "It's just for show, Pete. Don't get too excited," she warns him.

Peter glances at Arthur's hand, and then his face, and the telltale pink of his ears. "The kids were coming on a little strong to him this morning," he tells Marina, slow and unruffled. "Don't hound him about it."

Marina sighs, with more drama than Arthur thinks the situation really calls for. "I just wish--" she starts.

Peter interrupts her. "Leave the boy alone, Marnie."

"It's not a thing!" Arthur reminds them both, a little bit stung by that "boy" but not wanting to go there right now. "Look," he removes it and slips it into his pocket, "it's gone. Can we stop talking about it?"

He's second-guessing the impulse to buy the damn thing now. He's had similar conversations with his parents before, and they don't end up in a place that any of the three of them feel good about.

It's not that he's bisexual. While they keep kosher and observe the holy days, Peter and Marina are Reform, and lifelong progressives, and if his sexuality had ever truly been an issue for them, they've never shared that with him. It's more that he's in his mid-thirties now and still a nomad, with no home (that they know of) except for theirs, and no prospect of settling down anywhere on the horizon. They're proud of his "career" with the government, but Marina particularly has become more vocal in the last few years about trading in the courier work for something that
would allow him to remain in one place.

Marina looks like she wants to say something else, but Peter stops her with a lift of his shaggy eyebrows.

"It's a sensible precaution," is all he says to Arthur.

Arthur changes the subject, and is grateful when they allow it to stay changed.

********

Late that night, Eames whoops with laughter when Arthur shows him this new piece of artifice, pulling the ring back on and waggling his hand self-deprecatingly at the phone's camera.

Then he asks Arthur to have a wank, come on the hand wearing the ring, and send him a picture.

After hanging up, Arthur debates complying with this request, but does it, and doesn't even demand that Eames explain himself. To be fair, he admits to himself, that's as much cowardice as anything else; he's not sure he wants to know.

To his relief, apart from thanking him for the photo, Eames doesn't mention it again.

********

He researches Jane Holden-Reeves, of course. Eames would have known that when he gave Arthur her name. He tells himself it's just garden-variety curiosity, but deeper down, he knows there's a tinge of jealousy driving him. Just an hour, tops, he thinks. ...Well, no more than two. But that's it.

Her online footprint appears to Arthur's practiced eye to be authentic. He's put together enough false online identities that he can spot the patterns, how carefully cultivated and slightly bland they can be. A real person - at least, one who has interacted with the internet since the mid-late 90's -- generally has an organically evolved web presence, visible on the deep web if not through generic search engines. Hers has the characteristic broken links, discarded social media profiles, ancient articles that lead nowhere, mis-identified images, and ill-advised candid photos of a genuine human being. She's clearly attempted to polish it over the years, but the older data is there for someone who knows how to look for it.

Jeannie Shaftoe was born in the suburb of West Footscray, just outside Melbourne in Victoria. She had some publicity as a young gymnast, but soon grew too tall or maybe too disinterested to pursue it professionally. She began acting professionally at 11. There are shots of a gawky, suntanned Jean Shaftoe in children's theatre productions, her already large breasts incongruous with the saccharine subject matter, and then later photos of Jane Shaftoe at 17, somewhat miscast as the ingenu or the insipid love interest. More recent promotional stills and professional head shots are better-groomed, brooding and sensual, confirming her maturity and emphasizing her athletic, toned form.

She'd attended the Institute of Dramatic Art in Australia, and most of her professional work was in Sydney and Melbourne before her marriage to polo player Francis "Frankie" Holden-Reeves just after her 23rd birthday. She adopted his last name and moved to Aldgate with him to begin pursuing a career in the West End.

By all accounts, Frankie Holden-Reeves has toned down his previously rakish behavior after the marriage, and they remain a cheerful and devoted couple. Jane regularly attends polo matches and spends her time between shows with her husband at his country house and stud farm in
Gloucestershire.

She's had a few minor BBC roles as well. Arthur watches the clips that are available, considering what he knows about the character of Kate and trying to imagine how she will fit into it. The few interviews she's done on camera reveal a still-broad Melbourne accent in her natural speech, but she's perfectly able to adopt a plummy Oxford drawl as well as the working-class Dublin accent he's accustomed to hearing around him when he spends time in his apartment there. Her personality appears to be warm and intense, and she's a very public patron of charities supporting domestic violence victims.

Arthur thinks she may not have the looks to become a starlet; she'd have more luck on television as an older, character actress, maybe. But what he can discern of her from this impromptu search is appealing, and she's pretty, even if she's not his type. He finds himself looking forward to meeting her.

*******

Over the next several days, Arthur (wearing his not-a-thing ring) attends a student production of Pterodactyls with Marina, amiably argues with Peter about football, shovels snow out of the driveway, visits his bubbe and zaydeh in their assisted-living facility, and makes a batch of raspberry-filled rugelach for his nephew's birthday party. He charms his parents' colleagues at a dinner party, continues fending off their students in between classes, and attends kiddush and a Shabbat service at their temple.

Throughout these events, he skillfully avoids Marina's requests for photos of his "new man," and dutifully reads the essays she hands him about Shakespeare and gender. She doesn't hound him about the ring, although he sees her looking at it. After the first day, when he'd been noticing its presence constantly, he'd nearly forgot that he was wearing it, and as a result, keeps it on for the duration of his stay.

Peter doesn't pry any further or reference their uncomfortable conversation. He keeps Marina's would-be inquisitions about "Wart's actor boyfriend" in check, and helps Arthur out by changing the subject or distracting her when he sees that she's starting to make Arthur crazy.

It's all very civilized and homey and not even remotely dangerous.

It's been over a week now since they'd touched last, a brief clasp of hands next to the Cafetiero in the Cologne-Bonn airport before separating for their flights to La Guardia and Heathrow, respectively. The fuzzing out of small details -- does the raven on Eames' chest intersect the cross on his shoulder, or are they distinct? Is it his right or left foot that has the weirdly crumpled little toenail? -- juxtaposes oddly with lightning-quick pangs of remembrance: the taste of sweat in the crease of a thigh; the warm intimate scent of their bodies together as they fall asleep; the way Eames' eyes can glitter with amusement sometimes in an otherwise perfect poker face.

They text -- and sext -- and there are even a few of the long, rambling, late night (for one or the other of them) phone calls of the type that Arthur thought he had finished with forever after college. It's simultaneously satisfying and frustrating. When they do connect, Eames does his best to devote his full attention to Arthur, and Arthur does his best to reciprocate, but with the time difference and the very different jobs they're doing right now, most often their conversations are unplanned and fleeting.

There are a lot of them, though. For all of Arthur's unacknowledged uneasiness that Eames would revert to type (or at least, the type Arthur had thought he was before Port Elizabeth) and fade away once they put most of a continent and a whole ocean between them, Eames has kept up a steady
It hasn't all been verbal, by any means. There have been several instances in which Arthur fervently thanks his well-trained and overly cautious brain for keeping him from opening any messages from Eames unless he's entirely alone. Eames has an eye for textures, light, and surprising angles, and even though it's obvious they're being taken with a camera phone, the occasional dick pics he sends Arthur are surprisingly professional-looking. Arthur can't remember the last relationship in which he'd found himself blushing so often. Or jerking off, for that matter.

Between that and staying in his childhood room, or maybe the time difference, he feels oddly like he's going through a second puberty. His metabolism goes haywire, driving him to eat ravenously and at odd times of day, and he feels gawky and achy and stretched-out like a teenager. It makes him irritable and unwontedly clumsy, and has him silently beating himself up in his head for not being able to control it and for the attention it draws to him.

Finally, Arthur is just too keyed-up to stay still; he paces his room and the chilly suburban Connecticut streets, castigating himself and his inability to just sit back and relax with his family, his brain spinning with the need to plan, execute, and put the next job behind him and then reconnect with Eames. He hadn't realized he would feel Eames' absence quite so keenly. He'd known intellectually, in an abstract kind of way, that he'd probably miss him; but he hadn't expected this visceral sense of wrongness. It's endearing and aggravating and a little worrisome -- because of course he and Eames can't be together 24/7 from here out, for the rest of their lives, forever amen. That's not possible given what they do, and it's not who they are, either.

At least, Arthur didn't think that's who he was.

He wonders if Eames is experiencing similar confusion.

That Thursday, he borrows Peter's car for a day and drives to Worcester, where he keeps a storage unit. It's a convenient location, an hour out of Boston or Providence and an hour and a half from the Greenbergs' home, far enough that he feels comfortable it's not putting them in danger if he's traced, but not so far that he can't make the trip there and back in an afternoon. It's rented under a pseudonym and contains only spare clothing, luggage, and legal, untraceable weapons, things that are useful but not irreplaceable.

In the privacy of the storage unit, he considers what Aaron Gershon, software programmer and sometime inhabitant of Dublin, would wear and carry. His customary messenger bag will be all right, but he'll have to trade in the Tom Ford and Brioni suits for something a little less distinctive; something a Californian-cum-Dubliner techie might realistically own. A pair -- or, heck, two -- of spectator boots will work well in the London rain... belts to go with them... the brown micro-check Canali... the slate-blue Ralph Lauren pinstripe... three shirts for each of them, and ties to go with those... wool trousers, cufflinks and waistcoats, sweaters and sweatervests... an overcoat... Much as he protests his distaste for London's climate, it does afford him the opportunity to dress as sharp as he likes.

He's delighted, in the process, to find a black cashmere scarf he'd thought he'd left in Tokyo, and a pair of vintage clock-face cufflinks that he thinks Eames might appreciate.

Finally, after a moment of deliberation, he throws in a leather jacket, a pair of stretch denim jeans and a couple of fitted, v-neck YSL t-shirts. You never know.

Arthur is efficient -- he's done this many times, now -- and after less than an hour of work, he has two boxes ready for a month's residence at Chez Kent, a single suitcase with what he'll need in Vegas (nondescript button-downs, blazers and light wool trousers that can be dry-cleaned or even
discarded if too saturated with cigarette smoke) and another for traveling between Vegas and Heathrow. A quick stop on the drive home for undershirts and briefs, and to post the packages to Eames' flat, and he's ready to go.

During dinner with his parents that evening, he makes his excuses to Peter (who merely nods, squeezes his shoulder, and murmurs "kol tuv") and to Marina (who scolds and cajoles him to stay longer and finally hugs him fiercely and orders Peter to take him to the airport because she just can't, Arthur, don't make me cry).

Arthur laughs and hugs her back and tells her not to be silly. He'll take a cab, like he always does.

He leaves Connecticut thirty-six hours earlier than he'd planned, feeling guilty for cutting his parents' time with him short, but elated at being that much closer to seeing Eames.

Two days later, Arthur perches on the edge of his desk, frowning absently at the phone in his hand. The air in the mostly-vacant office building he's rented for this job is hot, parched, and oppressively still. He'd felt sweaty in Port Elizabeth, but the Nevada heat is different. Drier. Every bit of moisture in his body feels as if it's being forcibly sucked out of his pores, whether by the hot desert air or the air conditioning that blasts through every building in the city.

-- Except this one. Not for the first time, Arthur regrets his decision to leave Connecticut early. In retrospect, he could have done much of the necessary research from there, instead of volunteering to come out here early to set up their temporary base. Even their extractor isn't here yet. It's just Arthur and the broken air conditioner and his phone that is, disappointingly, silent.

He does a quick, by-now-routine mental calculation; 2 p.m. in Las Vegas is 10 p.m. in London. Eames' rehearsals have been running later, and some of his "training" sessions have moved from the relatively slow daylight hours into what is apparently prime time at what Eames cheerfully refers to as "the dungeons."

Arthur wonders, not for the first time, what might lead a person to arrive at the conclusion that being flagellated is a prime way to spend a Monday evening. He knows Eames wouldn't; he's heard enough about Eames' submission sessions to see the genuine discomfort and mild distaste Eames shows for that part of the activity.

Although the ball gag photo had been... well. Eames' soft, full lips stretched around the hard black rubber ball, his eyes dark and his expression steely with defiance, gazing up at the lens through a fringe of lashes: Arthur wouldn't want to do that to him, but he won't deny it makes a very pretty picture.

He snorts aloud, the sound oddly echoing in the empty room. There's no point in standing here mooning about Eames when there's work to be done. Eames will call, or send an amusing bon mot, or a picture of his John Thomas, when he has time. Meanwhile, Arthur has some choice words to put together for the HVAC repairman, who's late.

"I was dreaming about you," Arthur says, the next morning.

Eames' voice on the other end of the line is a low, teasing purr. "Is that so? Should I be envying a projection?"

He's not somewhere private right now; Arthur can hear murmured voices in the background. He's
probably backstage at rehearsals. He likes to call Arthur then, hurried interludes between Petruchio's scenes, semi-private with the rest of the cast and crew in earshot.

"No, it was real," Arthur tells him. "I – It was a real dream, no Somnacin. Last night in the hotel room."

Eames waits a moment before letting "...and?" hang there.

Arthur debates internally for a moment whether he should share the details, but this is Eames. If you can't be honest with him, what are you doing with him? So he takes a breath, and says:

"Well, you were you, but you had a really skinny, circumcised cock –"

"--Very flattering, pet."

"You asked. -- And you were wearing beige lace panties ."

Eames is laughing softly, obviously trying to muffle the noise. Definitely backstage, then.

"--And then you took them off and you were jerking yourself off. You just came everywhere. I mean, it was everywhere. And I had this primal urge, I had to lick it off of you. Off your balls, mostly. I just crawled up your whole body, licking you."

He doesn't say, because he can't articulate the rawness of it:"Your skin was hot, a little sweaty and a little rough. Your body was thick and hairy and muscular and perfectly male. You smelled like come and salt and ball funk, and I was so turned on could have come just from touching you."

"Well," Eames finally says, amused, "I didn't call for phone sex, but I would enjoy hearing more about this fantasy of yours some time."

Arthur demurs. "That was pretty much it."

"Oh? And did you finish as well?"

Arthur intervenes before he can get any more graphic. "God, yes." He shivers minutely and involuntarily, remembering.

Eames chuckles, deep and a little throaty. "Stop blushing."

"I'm not." It's a lie. Or maybe Arthur is just too warm all over. The memory from the dream was so vivid as he narrated it: the sight and smell, the feel of Eames under his hands and mouth.

Eames is silent, which is uncharacteristic. Arthur waits. He stretches in his chair, triggering a satisfying series of snaps, crackles and pops along his spine, and allows a soft pleased exhale. Eames still doesn't speak.

Arthur gives in. "Ok. What's up?"

"Missing you," Eames says simply. "I thought you'd like to know it."

Arthur is touched, but skeptical. "That's all?"

"And here I thought you enjoyed me interrupting your research."

"Shut up."
Arthur can hear the smile in Eames' voice when he answers, and imagines his face: the deep crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the soft full curve of his lower lip. "As you wish."

"No, talk to me." Still holding the phone to his ear, Arthur pushes back in his chair and turns his head to see if the coffee pot has finished brewing. It hasn't. "I miss you. Wish you were here." He quickly amends: "Actually, I wish I was there. I forgot how much I hate this city."

"Damned with faint praise," Eames mourns, and Arthur laughs.

"If you were here I probably wouldn't mind it so much," he allows.

Eames makes an indelicate noise. "I'd just as soon avoid the place myself. Manufactured kitsch and fat, shouting Americans everywhere."

"That's true of most of this country," Arthur points out.

"Fair point."

"And the UK."

"Well, yes. But they're not Americans, are they."

"You racist bastard."

"Guilty as charged," Eames admits cheerfully.

Arthur smiles. "I love you anyway."

Eames makes that pleased purring sound in his throat that never fails to warm Arthur's cold little criminal heart. "And I you, American mine."

"Hey, just two more weeks."

Eames makes a pained sound. "Don't remind me, love. We've far too much to do before we're ready to open."

"Oh please," Arthur reproves. "Like you don't have the whole thing committed to memory already."

"Of course I do." He sounds vaguely insulted. "But the costume is form-fitting, and I haven't quite dropped all the weight I need to."

"I thought you were going to send me a picture?"

"Not until it fits properly," Eames says firmly.

Arthur sighs. "Fine."

There's a comfortable silence. The coffee pot in the kitchenette behind Arthur makes a distinctive gurgle signalling the end of its cycle, but he ignores it; he'll pour a cup when he's finished talking with Eames.

"Everything moving along on your end?" Eames asks.

"It should start to, today," Arthur tells him. "The team's supposed to be here late this afternoon and meet tonight. I'll probably text more than calling, from now on."
Eames grunts assent. "Probably best. Do call if you're alone though, darling. Talking with you is keeping me sane."

"Well, if it's your sanity in question...," Arthur says drily.

"Pardon the hyperbole."

Arthur pauses. In a quieter voice, he says, "To be honest, I've been kind of a wreck since I flew into New York. Jet lag hasn't hit me like this since... I can't even remember." And I can't stop thinking about you, and it's distracting me in all the wrong ways.

"What do you mean, 'a wreck?'" There's a new note of alertness in Eames' voice.

"Just been irritable. More than usual," he hastens to add, to forestall the inevitable. "Wanting to sleep at strange hours, having trouble focusing, feeling kind of lightheaded. Ditched my parents early to come out here and dehydrate myself for no good reason." He sighs. "I think I just need to take a break for a little while. I'm really looking forward to having nothing to do."

"Except me," Eames prompts.

"Of course."

"Mmm. Are things at least running smoothly so far?"

"Actually, not entirely," Arthur admits. He hadn't been sure whether, or when, to bring it up, but he's not going to lie in response to a direct question. "Yesterday the architect bailed. Karenna asked me to build instead of delaying the job, since I've done it before. That's the second time this guy has ditched a job I'm on at the last minute. I'm going to start taking it personally. Luis Cordero. Do you know him?"

Eames thinks for a moment. "Haven't worked with him. Heard the name."

"Yeah, well, he's an asshole. No great loss, really, but it has doubled my workload."

"And your payout?"

"And my payout," Arthur confirms.

"Hmm." Eames is quiet. "This is a bit worrying. D'you mind if I look into it?"

Arthur shrugs, forgetting that Eames can't see him. "If you want to. I'm sure it's just a coincidence, though."

"All the same, I'd feel better if I made a few inquiries."

"Just don't blow your cover," Arthur warns.

"I'd've forgot that if you hadn't reminded me, Arthur. I shall make a note of it straightaway."

Arthur rolls his eyes. "Asshole."

"Darling heart, I would love to discuss my arsehole with you some more, but my scene's up in a few moments," Eames responds abruptly.

Arthur wonders if someone is listening a little too closely on Eames' end. "Fine, go. I'll call you tonight or early tomorrow, ok?"
"Excellent," Eames says, airily adding a casual "Bisous" before hanging up.

Arthur turns his chair to face the window. The view is enticing, and he stands up and walks closer to observe it more clearly. The sun has been up for no more than forty minutes, and the sky is still a pale lavender, precursor to the saturated, almost neon blue of midday. The La Madre mountains in the distance are glowing with striated coral and russet and gold. The window is still cool to the touch when he brushes his knuckles across it, but he knows from experience that it will be warm a scant hour from now.

"That was very moving," a soft feminine voice drawls from somewhere behind him.

Arthur spins around, badly startled. Then recognition dawns even as his fists clench and his brain calculates the distance between him and the intruder, and he slows, relaxing a fraction. "Paloma."

Their forger for this job, not supposed to arrive until late that afternoon. She's slender and petite and not a physical threat to him, but his nervous system doesn't make fine distinctions like that when he's surprised.

"I nearly kicked you in the throat," he says flatly, adrenaline still zinging through his limbs.

Her doe eyes blink, then widen, and she takes a half-step back. "I'm sorry. I should know better than to surprise you."

Arthur huffs out a breath in assent, nodding once, and then consciously calms his breathing, staring at her.

"What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you until tonight. The others won't be here until after noon."

Paloma shakes her head noncommittally and moves closer, dropping her luggage on the floor and darting in on tiptoe to kiss his cheek in greeting. "I had trouble falling asleep last night. Figured I might as well catch an early flight and get started on this --" she waves her hand vaguely around the room -- "instead of lying awake for hours." She steps back, her pixie face alight with obvious curiosity.

Arthur debates internally for a moment, then gives in. He's worked with Paloma several times now, and they've slept together in a no-strings, celebratory way after more than one job. He trusts her at least a fraction more than most of his dreamshare peers, even if that's not saying very much. Since she's already heard whatever she's heard, he may as well find out how bad it is.

"How much did you hear?"

"Enough to agree with you that Luis is an asshole," she hedges, flashing a quick, appealing smile.

He glares.

She sighs and spreads her hands in a "what can you do" gesture. "You're seeing someone -- a serious relationship -- who works in dreamshare and knows what you're doing here. Someone based in the UK. I assume it's a man, since you don't generally swear at women and I know you swing that way sometimes. He's worried about Luis bailing on you. You hate Las Vegas. So do I."

Arthur watches her, careful not to confirm or deny any of her guesses. "That's all?" Not that he'd necessarily know if she was lying. She's a forger, an actor, and for all that they've been intimate together, he doesn't really know her tells the way he knows Eames'.
Paloma shrugs again, looking innocent. "No state secrets. Why? What did I miss?"

"Never mind," he warns her. "And keep your speculation to yourself."

"I've forgotten it already. Do you want coffee?" She trots toward the suite's kitchenette without waiting for an answer.

Arthur watches her and chews his lip, thinking. If she bothers trying to add two and two, the answer pretty clearly comes up Eames. On the other hand, Eames' aversion to London is pretty well-known in the dreamshare community, and there are a few promising young chemists coming up out of Edinburgh; it could have been any one of them.

She doesn't seem to have heard his dream, or she'd have been much more certain about it being a man he was talking to. He makes a mental note to swear a little at his teammates the next few days.

Paloma returns, placing a full cup of coffee on Arthur's desk as an apology. A splash of cream, no sugar, and a dusting of cinnamon, the way he likes it; she's remembered.

A faint smile plays along her wide mouth. She is slim and gamine, with short dark hair, large brown eyes, and long coltish legs making her appear younger than she really is. She lacks Eames' poker face, but the mobility and expressiveness of her features, constantly shifting from one thought or emotion to another, are almost as effective -- through sheer volume -- at concealing what's truly going through her head. She's not exactly attractive, but she draws the eye; really, she reminds Arthur of Mal, in the way she can be forgettably plain one moment and stunningly elegant the next, without ever settling into mere prettiness.

"You look tanned and rested." There's a faint trace of Southern drawl lingering around her r's and her drawn-out vowels, incongruous with her chic appearance. Arthur has always rather liked that incongruity.

He grins. "I was on a multiple-subject job in Africa, it took a few months. Got plenty of down time. Where have you been hiding?"

Paloma shrugs one shoulder. "Here and there. Waiting for something interesting to come along."

She sips her coffee and studies him over the rim of the cup. Then she says, unexpectedly, "It's me."

Arthur drinks his coffee and waits for her to explain.

"Luis," she elaborates. "He's avoiding me. I turned him down, after the last job we worked together, and he's refused to be in the same room with me since."

It's appealing to accept this reasoning, but something is still troubling him. "This is the second time he's done it, and you weren't working with me the first time," he points out.

A welter of emotions flash across her face -- rue, embarrassment, titillation, regret. "He knows you and I are sometimes... friendly," she admits.

Arthur takes this in. "He's going to have a hard time making a living in dreamshare, then," he says without thinking about the implications of that statement.

Paloma's eyes flare with anger. "That was crude, Arthur," she says coolly.

_Crap._ Having the forger angry with him is not going to be a great way to start this job. "I'm sorry.
"I didn't mean it that way," he apologizes immediately. "I just meant -- thinking with your dick is a terrible way to choose your jobs, and if he's going to extend that to the women he's attracted to and men he thinks they might prefer more than him, he's going to find himself sitting out a lot of work."

She thinks that over, staring out the window, and then eyes him sideways. "I do," she murmurs. "Prefer you." She bats her eyes ostentatiously, making a little joke of it, but he hears the truth in her voice.

*From the frying pan into the fire.* Arthur takes a deep breath. "LoLo, we had fun. And if I wasn't in a monogamous relationship right now, I'd be down for more during this job. But I am. Monogamous, I mean. Is that going to present a problem for these next couple of weeks?"

Paloma shrugs, her back to him, still looking at the La Madre range in the distance. "It won't for me if it doesn't for you."

"Then there's no problem," he says firmly.

She doesn't seem totally convinced, but doesn't press it. He thinks he might have handled this whole conversation better, but then he's not really sure how. At least she doesn't hold grudges. Even if she's sulky for a while, it will blow off, and the odds are high that she'll find another man happy to warm her bed if she wants to.

That makes him think of the king-sized mattress in his own hotel room, and he sighs. Being in his childhood bedroom had dampened some of the sense of emptiness next to him at night, but the huge expanse of cool, Eames-less sheets in his hotel room makes him keenly feel what's missing.

Paloma catches the sigh; he sees her head tilt slightly in his direction, an eyebrow faintly raised. Instead of pursuing it, though, she tips the coffee cup up to her lips sharply and finishes it all at once, then turns to ask him how he's set up the job so far.

Arthur can do brisk and business-like. He lays out for her the results of his research so far and some of his thoughts on designing the dreamscape, ignoring the fact that he's going to have to do this all over again tonight when the rest of the team arrives. She's as thoughtful and responsive as ever, suggesting refinements and shortcuts she'd picked up from her recent jobs.

By the time Arthur's stomach starts growling for something more substantial than coffee, they both have a list of tasks to complete independently, to be fleshed out and further developed once their extractor arrives. They part on good terms, Arthur to study the Wynn's blueprints and Paloma to trail the mark.
Karenna Nichols and Grace Cai arrive late that afternoon. While Grace is a chemist, this job doesn't require specialized compounds; she's here mostly to accompany Karenna, as she often does on low-risk jobs. Arthur has worked with them both before and rather likes Grace, who is several years older and plainer and exponentially less brusque than her baby-faced, hard-as-nails wife.

Karenna is more of an acquired taste, but she's very good at what she does and she and Arthur have always operated on a basis of healthy mutual caution and respect. A former litigator, she had left the practice of law after a horrific car accident resulted in a ruptured pancreas, multiple broken ribs, and the loss of her right eye. The same accident left Grace with a prosthetic leg, a shattered hip, and a lifetime legacy of pain. The young drunk driver who had smashed into their car going the wrong way up a freeway on-ramp had been wealthy, and well-insured, and they'd obtained a substantial settlement.

A pharmaceutical analyst by training, Grace had scoured her academic and corporate contacts for any word of a painkiller that wouldn't inhibit her partner's (or her own) mental faculties. Her research eventually led her to the proprietor of an illicit dream den, a chemistry genius who was not overly troubled by scruples, and she learned that dreamshare offered good money for an extractor and chemist team. She and Karenna are a rare "out" couple in the field, who only work together and are judicious about the jobs they accept.

It's bittersweet working with them, reminding Arthur of Dom and Mal's heyday. They had been so brilliant and inventive, the Cobbs: the most tragic cautionary tale in dreamshare. Karenna and Grace as a team lack the verve and casual magnificence of Mal's design, Dom's charisma and dogged determination, but they're smart and aggressive and efficient and they get results for their employer, time after time (their employer, in most cases, being a group of businessmen of Eastern European descent belonging to organizations that officially no longer exist in Las Vegas).

Besides, it amuses Arthur to watch Karenna at work. She's curvaceous and petite, with soft ash blonde curls, Kewpie-doll green eyes (one real, one synthetic), and rosebud lips that rival Eames' in their lush promise. The sugary exterior is a deliberate mask for an incisive intelligence, cultivated misanthropy, and casual, lawless brutality toward anyone who gets in her way. He's not attracted to her, per se, but he enjoys observing the tension between her facade and her truth.

It's a bit like watching Eames, he realizes abruptly, Eames with his sleek ex-pat, dandified image and devil-may-care drawl concealing the hard brilliance of his mind and the powerful, latent violence of his body.

Eames. It always comes back to him. Arthur sighs, closes his portfolio, and prepares for the team's evening meeting.

They order takeout Chinese from a little hole-in-the-wall off Old Springs Road and eat it family-style around the conference table in their suite. Between bites of spicy garlic pork and green beans, Karenna delivers a precis of their employer, its request, basics about their mark, and - to Arthur's surprise - the pay structure for each team member, including Arthur's receipt of Luis Cordero's share of the payout. Arthur contributes the results of his research thus far, and Paloma, savoring the last of the honey-walnut prawns, describes what she's been able to observe of their mark's routine and personal tastes.

Grace mostly listens, picking at her eggplant tofu and occasionally asking pointed questions in her faint Taiwanese accent, and then neatly summarizes everything they know at this point about
David Tsujimoto. Karenna uses the summary to organize each of their next tasks, including electronic and physical surveillance, the latter to be conducted in pairs and individually, to avoid drawing Tsujimoto's attention too strongly to any one person.

It's the first time Arthur has worked with an otherwise all-female team. After several minutes, he realizes that the dynamics of this meeting are subtly different than most. While Karenna is directing this job and will have the final say on all strategic calls, she doesn't automatically dominate the discussion the way Cobb does, and she ensures that the four of them have a consensus on each point before proceeding to the next. Paloma and Grace contribute their thoughts and ideas freely but not forcefully. They each listen carefully to each other's suggestions, and there's a whole lot less interrupting than Arthur is used to experiencing in a masculine or mixed-gender conversation. He finds himself unconsciously tempering his own approach, taking his cue from them.

While Paloma and Karenna are involved in a spirited discussion about how best to sedate the mark, Grace catches Arthur's eye and leans over toward him. "We appreciate your willingness to take over the architecture," she says approvingly. "Our employer is very eager to have the job finished soon."

"I'll do my best." Arthur keeps his voice equally low. "As long as he's not militarized."

Grace tucks a lock of her chin-length, salt-and-pepper hair behind one ear, frowning a little. "We have been assured that he is not."

"I'll do some digging on my own, though."

She regards him gravely. "We expected you would." Then her face brightens. "And speaking of building? Ariadne Demakis asked me to convey her greetings to you."

Arthur grins broadly. "When did you see Ari?" He makes a mental note to call her up sometime soon; she doesn't exactly need his mentoring, not anymore, but he's tried to ensure she always knows he's available for her.

Grace returns the grin, flashing even but slightly discolored teeth. "We had dinner with her in Chicago two weeks ago, and she was quite excited to learn you would be working with us. Unfortunately, she is working on a long term project at the moment, or we would have asked her to build for us instead of Luis."

Arthur can't help thinking how that would have been preferable on multiple levels. Although in truth, however uncomfortable the conversation with Paloma had been, he's probably better off knowing about Luis' aversion to him.

"What reason did he give for canceling?" Arthur asks, curious.

Grace picks up and considers her teacup for a moment before answering. "He would only say that he had a conflict. Not with whom, or when he had discovered it. Her shrewd dark eyes meet his again. "Is there something you're aware of that we should discuss?" Her tone is neutral, but she really wants to know; her eyes flick toward Karenna, then back, and linger a fraction of a second too long.

Instead of answering Grace directly, Arthur kicks Paloma's foot under the table. She breaks off mid-sentence and raises an inquiring eyebrow at him. "We should all talk about this."

"About what?" Karenna asks warily.
"Luis.” Arthur doesn't say anything else, leaving it for Paloma to elaborate.

Paloma places her chopsticks on her plate, slowly and precisely, then gives an exasperated sigh. "Luis is carrying a torch for me. I turned him down. He somehow found out that Arthur and I have an occasional... mutually beneficial arrangement, and apparently he cancelled a previous job with Arthur for that reason. Neither of us had realized or discussed it before this morning."

There is a brief silence. Grace raises her teacup to her lips, pauses, and then puts it down without taking a drink. Her face is impassive, her gaze sliding from Arthur to Paloma and back again before she turns to Karenna, awaiting judgment.

"Well, we're obviously better off without Mr. Thinks-With-My-Dick," Karenna says after a moment. "And I don't care who's fucking who as a rule, but I don't want you two screwing around on my time."

"We're not fuck-" Arthur starts, in the same instant that Paloma says "Don't worry, that's not happening."

They look at each other across the table, and then Paloma volunteers, a bit tartly: "Arthur has a boyfriend."

Arthur puts down his chopsticks and wipes his mouth, staring at her. Grace raises an eyebrow but doesn't comment.

Karenna shakes her head in disbelief, pale curls jostling around her ears, and leans across the table. She says, with exquisite precision and a surprising protectiveness: "Outing is unacceptable. You will apologize to Arthur." The "or else" is silent, but the cold anger in her face is eloquent.

There are so many reasons Arthur does not want to discuss either his sexuality or his relationship right now. "It's fine," he says shortly, while giving Paloma a gimlet stare so she knows it really isn't. "And yes, I do. So, you don't have to worry about me being distracted. I just want to get the job done and get out of here. If there's a potential problem with Luis, we all need to be aware of it."

Grace looks thoughtful, but not concerned. "Do you think he poses an actual threat to this job?"

Arthur spreads his hands noncommittally. "I haven't actually worked with him. I've heard good things about his architecture, but don't know him as a person. You'd have a better idea," he tells Karenna and Paloma.

Paloma shrugs. "I read his little tantrum as being more petty than dangerous. I don't think he has the contacts or frankly, the balls to interfere with you -" she nods first at Arthur, and then at Karenna "- or you." Her short, slender fingers toy with her empty teacup, and she adds: "Not to mention, with our employer."

Karenna looks swiftly at Grace, and they seem to commune wordlessly for a moment. "We'll proceed as planned," Karenna decides. "Unless anyone has other reservations? And Arthur, I hate to add any more to your plate, but can you arrange to do some sniffing around and see if there's any indication he's planning to interfere?"

_Eames can_, Arthur thinks. He doesn't have Arthur's skill with electronic snooping, but he has contacts in all sorts of places. "Of course," he agrees, and then frowns. "It's going to take time, though, if you want me to do that, build, and also do surveillance."

"The three of us will take care of surveillance. You do what you need to," Grace assures him, and
that seems to be that.

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*Call me when you can,* Arthur texts Eames, and then he settles down at the desk in his hotel room and starts roughing out a labyrinthine casino floor as the basis for the dreamscape. It's surprisingly pleasant to focus on the clean hard lines of a design for a change and let the minutiae of surveillance work lapse just for an evening.

It's a little more than three hours later by the time his phone makes a muted chirping noise, startling him out of his concentration. He fumbles it out of his pocket and swipes to answer it without looking, his "Hello" brusque and efficient.

"Morning, pet. Everything all right?" Eames' voice is low and purring, but his face on the little screen is clearly concerned... and more a little drawn. "I'm sorry, I've been tied up. Literally, I'm afraid."

Arthur rubs his aching eyes and sits back, suddenly conscious of the stiffness in his neck and hands, trying to ignore how the mere sight of Eames feels like a flood of cool water over his churning brain and tired body. "Yes. Maybe. Do you have bandwidth to help me dig up some information in next few days?"

Eames absently nips at a hangnail on his thumb, nodding. "I'll make time. Who and why?"

Arthur's body relaxes a fraction. "Cordero. Turns out he's pissed off that our forger rejected his advances, and apparently he's projecting some of that toward me as well. We're not sure if he has any plans to disrupt the job."

There's an infinitesimal pause before Eames responds. "That would be... Paloma?"

"Yes."

"And do you know why he's including you in this campaign?"

Without thinking, Arthur averts his eyes slightly, then curses himself for the tell. He meets Eames' gaze again and sighs. "It's just an occasional arrangement. Not right now, obviously," he adds.

Eames is silent. Then: "I see. Well." He suddenly scratches the tip of his nose and fidgets briefly. "I'll make some inquiries. Does anyone on your team know you're asking me to do this?"

"No," Arthur assures him. "I only told them I'd handle it. I'm handling it by asking you. They don't need to know that part."

"She's good," Eames says, after a pause. "You're in good hands."

Arthur can't tell if he's imagining a slightly plaintive note in Eames' voice or not. He raises one eyebrow. "I'd rather be in your hands," he says, but Eames won't be sidetracked.

"Arthur, perhaps-"

Arthur cuts him off there. "If this is what I think you're going to say, we agreed not to talk about it. Remember?" Eames closes his mouth again, and Arthur goes on. "You and I, we're ok. Don't... don't think about anyone else's hands, ok? The only hands that are gonna be on me before I see you again are my own."
The weary grey eyes on the little screen widen appreciatively, and Eames' lips slowly curve up into their most genuine, and coincidentally most charming, smile. "Tell me more," he demands.

They riff on that topic for a while, before Arthur remembers what else he'd wanted to tell Eames. He sits up straighter, letting the teasing grin fall from his face.

"No, I'm not gonna pull it out for you. Shut up a minute. We have a lead on a new job."

Eames gives him That Look, but Arthur doesn't take the bait. He waits, and after a moment Eames sighs and gives him a convoluted, sideways sort of resigned nod. "Go on."

"You've heard about the FIFA corruption charges?" Arthur asks. Eames nods. "Apparently the SARU had some good things to say about our, um, 'innovative research methods.' Their headquarters is in Zurich. I said I could meet them there in early May, but that our services are already booked through June. They seemed fine with waiting. Think you might feel like a trip when the run ends?"

"I could be talked into it," Eames says thoughtfully, leaning back in his chair. "These aren't the players this time, though, from what I hear. These are bigger fish. The officials and bureaucrats. They don't have regular physical exams - we'd have to arrange to isolate and sedate them the normal way. Could be tricky if there are several of them who all have unexplained blackouts."

Arthur chews his lower lip. "I didn't tell them exactly what we do, so I don't know at this point if we could count on FIFA's help in getting the marks into the dream. Honestly, we can probably dig up a lot of the information through research and some standard surveillance, and keep any actual dreaming to a minimum. But, you know, we don't have to take it if you're not comfortable with it."

"If I weren't comfortable, you could take the job and find another extractor," Eames suggests, one eyebrow cocked.

"I want to work with you," Arthur says, suddenly exasperated. "And I told you, I don't like being tested."

Eames raises both hands in an appeasing gesture, a defensive position at odds with the powerful musculature of his arms. "I'm sorry, darling. Bad habit. I did hear you."

They stare at each other for a minute. Eames huffs a breath through his nose and shakes his head, rueful. "I miss you," he says quietly. "More than I knew I would. Physically, I mean."

"I'm having a hard time sleeping on my own," Arthur admits. "The bed's too big and too cold without you."

"I think of you, at night," Eames murmurs. "What you'll look like naked in my bed and how you'll feel in my hands. All your lovely lithe limbs under me and around me, and... and the way you look at me when we're in bed together. As if the world utterly vanishes around us."


An answering warmth flickers in Eames' eyes. A faint flush rises in his face as he watches Arthur. "I want to take you apart piece by piece with my hands and my lips and my tongue." His voice is husky and deliberate. "Want to hear you pant and moan while I lick you open, and make you fuck yourself on my fingers before I slam every inch of my cock into your greedy little hole. Fuck you long and slow without mercy, until you can't control yourself and you're begging me to spend. And when I do, and it's dripping out of you, I'm going to lick you clean and then turn you over and suck you until you're coming down my throat. I'll make you come at least four times; five. I want you
limp and pliant and sated, and every inch of you wet with my sweat and my spunk, smelling like
I've been rutting on you for hours." His breath catches on that last.

Arthur is speechless, overtaken with cravings. Every word burns into his consciousness and he can see it all behind his closed eyes, feel the ghost of Eames' touch on his cock and in his mouth, the way his bones seem to liquefy at the touch of Eames' tongue hot and velvety on his hole. His ass contracts and throbs without warning, a brief, almost painful spasm, and his body rocks slightly with the surprise of it. He forces his eyes open again, inhales shakily, and lets Eames see the slow burning of his arousal, the pain and the intensity of it.

"Anything you want. Everything. I want it. I'm... I'm yours, Alec. So much." Arthur is suddenly aware that his lips are dry. He licks them and then swallows hard. He's almost frightened at how easily Eames can break him down like this, how powerful their connection is even with all of the miles between them.

"You're mine," Eames breathes, and he looks almost as wrecked as Arthur feels.

They simply look at each other for a few moments, silent. Eames is the first to come back to himself, his eyes and mouth losing their concupiscent openness and becoming taut and focused again.

"Mine," he repeats, simple and matter-of-fact. "So let's keep you safe, love, and see what I can ferret out about Cordero."

Arthur nods jerkily. He has to clear his throat before he can speak. "Let's... let's touch base mid-day tomorrow?" He looks down briefly, and his well-trained mind re-focuses on the architectural sketches on his desk and the tasks awaiting him. "God, I have so much to do." He looks up again. Eames' expression is shrewd and familiar, the Forger acknowledging the Point Man, and Arthur laughs even as he's mentally calculating how much sleep he can do without tonight to get a working maze completed.

"Back to work," Eames scolds affectionately. "And I've some calls to make."

"Love you," Arthur tries, pleasantly surprised at how easy and natural it's becoming.

"My heart," Eames affirms, soft and low, and the connection breaks.

Alone, Arthur stretches, hearing a series of snaps, crackles and pops along his spine. He becomes conscious of several things with rapid-fire precision: he needs to pee, his left foot is on the verge of falling asleep, and his right hand aches from the hours of drawing. And he's still semi-hard, his cock full and pleasantly snug against the zipper of his trousers.

He decides emptying his full bladder is a higher priority than jerking off right this second, and through sheer force of will manages to put Eames' words and his own physical reaction to them out of his head. After taking a couple of ibuprofen and enjoying a long, satisfying piss, he gets back down to work. He sets his standard scripts running on the mark's phone logs, checks the mark's professional and personal email accounts - he'd cracked the passwords while at his parents' house - and quickly snaps photos of his evening's work. The papers themselves he tears into inch-square pieces, to be discarded in public trash cans up and down the Strip; no point leaving them lying around for the housekeepers or anyone else to puzzle over. He makes a lengthy digital to-do list, a separate list of questions for Karenna about particular quirks she wants in the dream architecture, sends out coded queries to people who tend to know who's been militarizing who, and puts in some time tracking Luis Cordero's movements over the past several weeks.
Cordero appears to be in Florida at the moment, or at least his credit cards are. A little digging turns up the fact that his sister and brother-in-law live in Ocala in North Florida, which correlates with his most recent credit card purchases. He doesn't seem to be up to anything nefarious in Florida itself, but of course anyone in dreamshare knows how to make things happen through a proxy regardless of where they're at in the world. Arthur had learned this early on.

As the hour grows later, his focused research starts wandering down garden paths, and eventually he realizes that he's been completely sidetracked in the minutiae of Ocala's tourism industry (what there is of it) for more than twenty minutes. At 4 a.m., he closes his laptop and burrows wearily into the too-large, too-cold, too-empty king bed in his hotel room.

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The next few days are a grind. Arthur is a little uneasy allowing all of the physical surveillance to be done by his team members while he's cocooned in their rented office with his drawings, but it's unavoidable. A slapdash maze might suffice to entrap a grade school teacher, or a secretary, but David Tsujimoto is a trained architect and Arthur's mazes need to be both impeccable and undetectable. They will be; Arthur has been doing this for a long time, and he's as capable of building as he is with surveillance. Trying to do both at once is wearing on him, though.

With all three women actively tailing Tsujimoto, the team convenes in person only once a day, in the office suite or in bland chain restaurants. They arrive in various, unpredictable disguises: Kareenna's generous breasts spilling out of a plum satin cocktail dress, Paloma club-sleek in a tiny lace romper, and Grace demure in a midi skirt and twin set; Paloma slim and androgynous in menswear; Kareenna and Grace in matching tourist t-shirts, jeans and grubby sneakers.

The third day, they each arrive alone to the dingy cafe they've arranged to meet at. Grace is dressed in a long shapeless housedress and orthopedic shoes, her hair greyer and her face somehow more lined than it had been the day before. Kareenna, makeup-free in reading glasses and a dowdy floral blouse over faded high-waist jeans, appears calmly matronly. And Paloma, sporting side pigtails, plastic daisy earrings, and a short pink and yellow sundress over platform sandals, looks maybe fifteen, and definitely for sale.

"The Triple Goddess," Arthur muses as they seat themselves around him.

Paloma doesn't get it for a moment, then laughs out loud. Kareenna only smiles tightly. "Yes, I'm the Crone today," Grace agrees, a twinkle of humor in her dark eyes.

"Tomorrow I get to be Kareenna's nurse." Paloma sounds gleeful. "We have a wheelchair and everything."

Kareenna rolls her eyes and her mouth goes briefly sour. "Because I haven't spent enough of my life in a goddamn wheelchair. Now can we debrief so Arthur can go back to his designs? They're looking great, by the way," she adds, with approval.

Arthur nods in acknowledgment of the praise and opens his notepad. Next to him, Grace leans back against the cracked vinyl of the bench, folds her hands in her lap, and begins to deliver a dry, precise account of their mark's lunch meeting, including photos of the woman he'd eaten with. "He likes Asians," Kareenna concludes. "This is the fourth Asian woman we've seen him with."

"I can do Asian," Paloma says, confident. "It's all in the makeup. And I have the figure for it." She gestures vaguely at her small breasts and slim torso with a french fry before popping it into her mouth.
"Korean," Grace corrects her with a trace of irritation. "They have all been Korean women. Do you speak any Korean? Or Japanese?"

"We still don't even know if he speaks Japanese in his daily life," Karena points out. "Our employer most likely would have mentioned it, but I'll confirm that. And it may not be significant. He was speaking English with the one he was with last night."

"And the one from the club on Tuesday night," Paloma adds. "The one in the green dress, with the fake tits."

Karena snorts and gives a twisty sidelong smile to Grace. "Crammed right up under her chin and probably solid as rocks. About as subtle as a sledgehammer."

Arthur experiences another fleeting, internal pang of regret that he's not assisting with surveillance. "He doesn't use Japanese in his email or social media messages, at least," he contributes.

Grace considers this, then points out: "They have all had long hair, too. You'll need to find a good wig, if we're going to sedate him in a seduction context."

Paloma grimaces, her face a fleetingly perfect portrait of adolescent disgust. "Wigs."

"You'll wear it," Karena tells her. "It is not a question. "There's a place on Maryland Parkway. Go after we're done here, Grace can take your late afternoon shift with the mark. You'll want the human hair type, not the synthetic crap."

Arthur's phone vibrates discreetly in his pocket, and he slips it out just enough to see the alert: "Stephen L. has sent you a message." His code name for Eames. He risks a quick peek at the message itself, and promptly wishes he hadn't.

Do you recall when you said "if I need to get pissed on or something," and we both laughed?

Arthur stares at the screen dumbly. A thousand pictures flash through his head, none of them good, and none of them remotely erotic. He lifts his eyes, trying to clear the images from his mind, and realizes that Grace, next to him, is unobtrusively attempting to read the screen. He flips it over, and she meets his gaze with candid curiosity.

He stands up and excuses himself to the restroom so he can respond to Eames without three pairs of inquisitive eyes (well, two and a half, anyway) observing him as he does so. It's grubby, and smells as if it's been only halfheartedly cleaned for the past several days, but it's private.

...Yes. What about it?

Had to safeword out of a scene. Narrowly avoided getting soaked in lady wee. This submission bit is pure bollocks.

Arthur can't process this right now. He sends a frowny emoji, then: Are you ok? Is that normal?

There's a pause before Eames replies. She seemed to find it so. I'm alright, only bemused.

I'm in a meeting. Do you need to talk about this right now or can it wait?

It can wait, Eames says. But there's something odd going on with your architect, which is actually why I rang.
You didn't ring, you texted, Arthur types automatically. Then he sighs at his own pedantry and erases it. I'll call you on my way back to the hotel. About 45 minutes?

Yeah, cheers.

He tucks his phone back into his pocket and returns to the table. His teammates give him varying degrees of side-eye, but don't remark on his abrupt departure, and apparently they've decided that Paloma needs to learn a few basic Korean and Japanese phrases and work on developing a Korean woman forge for the mark. She'll return to the office suite and go into the dreamspace under Arthur's supervision while he continues to work on his digital research on Tsujimoto.

Through the rest of the meal, they refine the plan. Paloma will approach Tsujimoto in a club and slip a sedative into his drink, accompany him outside for fresh air when he gets woozy, and offer to drive him home. Their employer has arranged for Kareenna to "borrow" a city cab for the evening, and she and Paloma will wrangle him into the cab and back to his hotel suite where Arthur and Grace are waiting, along with a heavier sedative. They'll do the extraction there. In the morning, he'll wake up with a hangover and only a hazy memory of the woman he'd met the previous evening.

By then, of course, they'll all be very, very far away.

In the dream, Kareenna will pose as a senior representative of a rival casino owner trying to entice Tsujimoto into a joint venture for a new complex. Escorting him through the casino grounds, she'll be called away for a moment and ask him to hold her portfolio of confidential documents. Paloma, in her forged persona, will approach and ask him if he's the architect that designed the Wynn, make suggestive comments about the secret rooms she's heard it contains, and chatter about his work on other casinos. If they're lucky, the plans will end up in the portfolio.

"If not, we'll tie him up and torture it out of him," Kareenna decides coolly. "But let's try it the subtle way first."

As they leave the restaurant, Paloma falls into step with Arthur. "I took a cab here. Can I drive back with you? Since we'll both be working in the office anyway."

He shakes his head. "Kareenna told you to go buy a wig," he reminds her. "I don't have the time or the inclination to watch you try on wigs. And I have a private phone call I need to make while I drive."

"Fucking wigs," she says again, and rolls her eyes like the teenager she's dressed as. "Fine. I'll be there in an hour or so."

That seems a little overoptimistic, but maybe not. Arthur doesn't really know anything about wigs.

Paloma trots to the edge of the block to try to hail a cab, and Arthur takes a moment to admire her from behind. Between the short sundress and strappy sandals, her legs are long and beautifully slender. He knows from experience just how limber they are, too.

...But that's all past. He settles himself behind the wheel of his rental car and calls Eames.

No answer.

"It's me," he says shortly. "Call me back."

Eames doesn't respond at all during the twenty minute drive back to the office suite. Peeved,
Arthur tries calling a few more times, and checks his email, text messages, and even his various Facebook accounts (at red lights), but Eames seems to have inexplicably evaporated into the ether.

*Probably off getting pissed on,* he thinks sourly. That sets the unpleasant imagery going in his head again, and he's uncharacteristically distracted when he pulls the car into the dark corner of the garage.

When it happens, it catches him off guard. He's locking the car, his mind still preoccupied with Eames' lack of response, when he hears an audible and horribly familiar click behind immediately behind him. Something hard is pushed forcefully into his lower back and a low voice, redolent of menthol cigarettes and recent acquaintance with an onion, whispers fiercely into his ear. "GO AWAY, AND STAY AWAY."

Arthur's well-trained brain immediately jettisons all thoughts of Eames and begins cataloging the threat: A man, slightly shorter than Arthur himself, but broader across the torso. The arm that's in Arthur's peripheral view is thick, muscular, and covered with wiry golden hair. His voice is what Arthur thinks of as Generic American, no detectable accent. He's holding either a handgun or something that makes a sound very like a handgun's manual safety switch, pressed firmly into Arthur's left kidney, although he doesn't have the stance of someone who's imminently preparing to fire. The man has been sweating, but it's a clean sweat, and into clean clothes. *A professional,* Arthur thinks. *Muscle for hire.* Not a junkie, but not former law enforcement either or that safety would still be on. Unpredictable.

He forces his voice to remain calm. "Away from what?"

Between the parked cars, and with the man pressed so close behind him, Arthur doesn't think he can get to the gun in his waistband before the man can stop him. An elbow to the face, perhaps... but this man feels tensed and observant, and the gun boring into Arthur's back makes any sudden movement risky as hell. He holds his body still, ready to move if he gets a chance.

His assailant barks out a fragrant laugh. "I ain't saying a name. You know who."

Unfortunately, Arthur doesn't, which presents a dilemma. Is this about the Tsujimoto job? Was this guy sent by Cordero to warn Arthur away from Paloma? Has Mathieu du Toit tracked him down? Or is this, perhaps, one of Eames' ex-lovers wanting Arthur off his turf? The possibilities are wide open.

He's not going to quiz this thug -- he senses that this encounter is more about delivery of a message than about immediate (or permanent) physical violence, but he'd be foolish to antagonize his captor and escalate the situation if he doesn't need to.

"I might have an idea," he allows, his mind racing.

The pressure on his back eases slightly. "Be smart, boy. Go away, and there won't be any more trouble about this."

Arthur nods cautiously, ticking off more details on the list in his mind. *Older than me. Maybe in his mid-fifties. Possibly former military? He doesn't want to rough me up, just scare me away."

But he's wrong about that. He senses the beginning of the movement behind him but it's too fast for him to block it. The hard steel knob moves away from his lower back and swings wide, and then the right side of his head sings with a powerful, metallic shock that sends him staggering to his knees before blossoming into sizzling pain. He cries out involuntarily and crumples, clutching
his right ear, which is slick with hot liquid. Black roses bloom in his vision and he closes his eyes, reeling and nauseated.

He faintly feels his phone start buzzing in his pocket, but he's too busy trying not to pass out to answer it. His attacker is disappearing, heavy footsteps thudding swiftly out the door and around the street corner.

The garage is stuffy with the desert heat, and Arthur gulps in huge shuddering lungfuls of hot, exhaust-flavored air before involuntarily retching up his lunch. Wiping his mouth, he climbs dizzily to his feet and leans against his car. His head feels like a volcano has exploded inside it, and his right hand is dripping gore.

Indeed, the entire right side of his body is festooned with drips and blotches of crimson. Wincing, he gently touches his fingers to his temple; his cheekbone; the side of his head. His earlobe is split and bleeding enthusiastically, and there's a swelling gash in his scalp just above the ear that's doing its best to add dramatic color to his ivory linen shirt, but there doesn't seem to be any more significant exterior damage.

The pain, though; the searing, red heat of it. He stands very still, still leaning against the car, and tries to just get his breathing under control so that maybe, maybe he can move. His stomach roils again at the thought.

His phone buzzes insistently in his pocket. He pulls it out, more to make it stop making noise than from any organized desire to communicate with whoever is on the other end. He notes, with a detached distaste, the bloody fingerprints he's leaving on the clean glass surface as he swipes the screen to answer. He holds it silently to his left ear.

"Arthur?"

"Fucker... ambushed me," Arthur manages to say, which only increases the pain in his head. He winces. "I... he... M all right."

"You sound concussed, not all right!" Eames' voice is dark with rage. "Cordero called in a favor. I'll be calling in a few of my own to make him regret it. How bad is it? Are you alone?"

Arthur steels himself before speaking again. It doesn't help. "Hit... side of my face with ... a gun. Hurts like mother... fucker. But I'm standing. Office is. Two floors up."

Eames sounds faintly relieved but no less angry. "Well, find an elevator and get up there. Is someone there with you? Where is Karenna?"

An elevator. Arthur squints, carefully turning his head. He usually takes the stairs, but yes, there's an elevator in the lobby. Too bad he looks like something from Night of the Living Dead. "I can't go in there," he objects, even as he begins cautiously to shuffle toward the lobby entrance.

"I'm calling Karenna," Eames says grimly. "Stay on the line."

"No," Arthur replies forcefully. The movement makes his skull throb, and he immediately regrets it. "No," he says again in a lower voice. "How do we explain that? You're in... Cebu right now. Paloma will be here soon."

Eames' breath into the phone is explosive, aggravated. "I don't care about that! I care fuck-all for my reputation if you're bleeding out in some wretched office park in bloody Las Vegas!"

"I'll call her, Alec. I just, I need to get up there first. Stop yelling."
Eames stops. In the ensuing silence, Arthur halfway wishes he'd start again, so that neither of them have to listen to Arthur's ragged, pained breathing. He stifles a whimper.

He's been hit in the head before, in dreams and in real life. He's been tortured in dreams, in fact, though the worst he's been through in waking life are fists and a couple of glancing knife wounds. The application of hard metal objects directly to the human skull has not previously been part of his experience, and he's wishing very hard that things had remained that way.

Eames' breathing on the other end of the line is quick but even. His fury and anxiety, though silent, are like a tangible presence next to Arthur, helping propel him forward. Like so many other things about Eames, it's both aggravating and weirdly comforting.

"I'm in the elevator," Arthur reports as the door closes behind him. He's grateful that at least nobody else was present to see him enter it, and this building doesn't have security cameras; that had been one of the reasons they'd chosen it.

His reflection in the mirrored surface is horrifying, but he can see that the gashes in his scalp and ear are relatively small, and already bleeding less enthusiastically. Although that's not going to save his shirt.

"Check the room before you go in," is all Eames says.

"Yes, Mother."

Eames doesn't dignify that with a response.

The elevator dings and the doors open. Arthur carefully walks down the corridor, and listens at the door to their suite for a full minute before trying the doorknob. It's still locked, and he fumbles in his pocket for the key. There's a bad minute when he thinks he might have dropped it in the garage, but no, there it is.

He opens the door slowly, slips in with his gun drawn and ready, but a quick inspection tells him there's nobody else there. With the door locked behind him, he can relax a fraction. "I'm going to put you down for a minute," he tells Eames. "I'm getting ice and towels."

"Take me with you," Eames disagrees. "If you pass out, I'm calling Kareenna, and every other contact in that area too, to come check on you."

Arthur huffs, but acquiesces, setting the phone down on the cracked Formica countertop next to the microwave in the tiny kitchenette. He carefully swabs his scalp and ear with soaked paper towels, relieved to see that the bleeding has already greatly slowed. When fresh towels start picking up nothing more than faint pink, he rummages in the freezer and fashions an ice pack. The cold stings his broken flesh, but it will make the swelling to go down.

The rudimentary first aid kit has ibuprofen, and he takes three pills with a glass of water, then strips down to his boxers before finally collapsing on the tiny couch in the suite's entry. No point getting the blood on his shirt and pants into the fabric of the couch or the carpet.

"I'm still alive," he announces.

"I want to see." Eames must have been biting his lip to shreds to avoid scolding, Arthur realizes. "Put it on video call."

"There's no need--" he protests, but Eames insists. Arthur eventually gives in, letting Eames look his fill at the flesh wounds and then at Arthur's pupils until Eames is satisfied that Arthur might
actually survive this little encounter.

"You'll do," Eames says briskly, and then: "Tell me what happened."

Wincing as he shifts the phone close to his ear again, Arthur collects his thoughts and gives Eames a succinct description of the altercation in the garage.

"Why didn't you just text me what Cordero was up to?" he asks Eames wearily, at the end.

Eames lets out a long, indrawn breath. "I didn't have any kind of detail about what he had planned, only that he'd contacted some small time unsavory characters down in Arizona about bollocking up your job. I imagine your employer will be able to make that problem go away, if my people don't get to him first."

Well, that's fair enough. Arthur should, in fact, have been more alert. "When I drove in, I was distracted. Thinking about you being pissed on," Arthur admits. "It... wasn't pleasant."

Silence on the other end of the line. "It didn't happen," Eames says, sounding tired himself now. "Thought you'd have a bit of a laugh over it. I stopped her before she was, er, in position. And I'm untied and free and done with the bloody trainings from here out. Just rehearsals and publicity, and then we'll open, and then you'll be here and I can keep you safe."

There's palpable desire there, mixed with impatience and regret and ruefulness and a faint thread of amusement: very Eames. Arthur sits with it for a moment before consciously letting go of his anger at both Eames and himself. "I'll call Karenna," he assures Eames. "And send Paloma out for some more clothes before I go back to the hotel. These are a total loss."

"Keep one of them with you, will you?" Eames says in a rush. "For my sake. And keep your eyes open, pet. Please. If anything happens--"

"Yes," Arthur agrees hastily, before Eames can finish that thought. "I mean, I'm sure they're going to say the same thing. We'll work in pairs from here out."

Eames sounds slightly mollified. "Do. And I must dash, for a costume fitting, but let me check your pupils again before I go."

Dutifully, Arthur holds the camera up to his eyes. "I'm fine," he repeats. "Paloma should be here any minute. It's stopped bleeding. Go do your fitting."

"This is going to age me, worrying about you," Eames grumbles. "All right, love. My heart. Be safe." And then the screen flickers, and he's gone.

Arthur carefully tilts his head against the back of the stiff little couch, consciously relaxing the muscles of his scalp and neck. The adrenaline rush has worn off and his body aches with repressed tension. He's not ready to bend over his drawings again, so he forces himself to repeatedly run through the maze in his mind instead. It hurts to think, but the focused repetition helps calm his parasympathetic nervous system, and his breathing and heart rate finally even out.

He's still sprawled there, mentally revisiting each twist and turn of the maze as the ice melts, when a key jiggles in the locked door and panic sets all of his nerves jangling again. Paloma is through the door, all long legs and bright colors and perfume, before he can rise.

When she sees him, reactions flash across her face in rapid succession: surprise, fear, apprehension, and a tinge of sexual interest. Arthur remembers belatedly that he's wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs and an ice pack.
"What happened? Are you hurt?" she asks, dropping the large shopping bag she's carrying, and then she's kneeling next to him on the couch and deftly prying his hand and the dripping bag of melting ice away from his head. Cold water trickles down his shoulder and over his chest, and a nipple hardens reflexively. "Who did this?"

Arthur waves her away, politely but firmly, and wipes the errant moisture from his skin. "I was attacked in the garage by hired muscle who told me to 'stay away' but not from what. Ea-- one of my sources notified me, too late, that Cordero is calling in favors to try to mess with the job."

Paloma closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose, taking a deep breath. "Madre de dios. Karenna's going to throttle us both and Grace will disappear the bodies. Did you get a look at him?"

"Cordero is your crazy stalker, none of this is my fault!" Arthur reminds her. "And no, he clipped me from behind with a gun and took off. It doesn't matter, though, Cordero's the one we need to go after."

Paloma swears under her breath and digs in her garish purse for her cell phone. Grim-faced, she texts their teammates a succinct summary of what's happened.

When she's finished, their eyes meet in shared rueful recognition of the situation. Arthur breaks first. "Look, I need you to go down and get me some clothes. These are unwearable. There's that mall down the road, just pick up something cheap. Take my rental car and my gun. There's cash in the wallet in my pants over there, and the keys." He doesn't think the muscle will come back to this building -- he's made his point to Arthur already -- and if Paloma's going to be out in the streets on his behalf he wants her to have some means of self-defense.

She frowns with distaste at the blood-spattered heap of shirt and pants on the floor, but obediently plucks his leather wallet from the back pocket of the pants and removes a couple of bills from it along with his key ring, then tucks them and his Glock into her shiny pink vinyl purse.

"Twenty minutes," she tells him. "You're all right here? Grace is on her way now."

"I'm fine," he assures her. "Be careful, LoLo. Stay around people. You know the drill."

The look she gives him is part affection and part exasperation. "Arthur, I know the drill. Lie down now, sugar. I've got this." She leans unexpectedly and drops a quick, light kiss on the top of his head, well away from the injury. "See you in twenty."

There's not much he can do other than obey. The ibuprofen is kicking in, but his head is still a giant throbbing ache, and lying perfectly still with his eyes closed is really the only option in front of him.

The next thing he knows, the door is opening again, and Grace's now-familiar halting step is moving slowly but steadily through the entryway. "Arthur," she greets him, her accent perceptibly more pronounced than usual. "No, lie still. Karenna will be here shortly and you can tell us both at one time." She sinks carefully into the folding chair across the room from the couch he's occupying. "We have, needless to say, notified our employer. They are not at all happy with Mr. Cordero."

"Neither am I," Arthur mutters.

"It will be dealt with," Grace tells him. "But first we must evaluate the prospects for continuing the job in light of this new wrinkle."
"I like to take care of these kinds of matters myself," Arthur informs her, and then stops. He doesn't want or need a field trip to Florida right now. He wants to finish this job, get on a plane, fall into Eames' deliciously inked and muscled arms, and turn his aching brain off for a few hours or weeks.

Grace is shaking her head, though. "Our employer also prefers to handle these matters itself. This is a personal offense to them as well as to you. They would like to make a statement that... discourages interference with their objectives."

Cordero will be killed in a highly unpleasant, messy and visible manner, Arthur translates internally. Well, he's not in a mood to argue with that at the moment. His head hurts, he'd been terrified, and he'd thrown up on an expensive pair of shoes down there in the garage. And you worried Eames, he thinks. That's not Cordero's worst sin here, but it's not the least, either, not in Arthur's eyes.

"He's in Ocala, Florida," he informs Grace. "As of last night, anyway."

She nods acknowledgment, pulling her phone back out and transmitting that information to someone. Arthur doesn't really care who. He usually avoids doing business with the Mob and its offspring, but he knows at least that he can trust the organization to clean up messes like this. And then they can do the job, and he can leave this stifling heat behind and relax in London. Parks, and museums, and cold foggy grey days and trains, and Eames in his bed and inside his body and all around him...

Damn it, maybe he is concussed.

Grace, silently watching him now, seems to have the same suspicion. She rises and limps over to him, peering at his pupils just as Eames had done. She silently holds a single finger in front of his face and slowly draws it from side to side, up and down, watching his eyes track the movement. She frowns slightly and opens her mouth to say something.

"No doctors," Arthur cuts her off.

Her eyebrows quirk up and she "tsks" at him. "You'll go if Karenna says you go," she disagrees. "But you don't have to go immediately. We will monitor you tonight."

Paloma, thankfully, forestalls further argument on this point by appearing with a handful of rustling shopping bags, which she drops on Arthur's lap. "T-Shirt Emporium's finest," she announces. "I passed on the booty shorts and mesh tank tops, although I think you could have carried them off."

The clothing she's purchased is cheap and nondescript, thin navy gym shorts and a grey t-shirt with the Las Vegas logo. There's also a baseball cap and a pair of flip flops, a little too big but they'll fit in with Arthur's new outfit better than his barfed-on brogues. He stands and unselfconsciously pulls on the shirt and shorts. They're starchy and have a faintly unpleasant odor, but at least he'll be able to leave the suite wearing more than his briefs.

Grace looks amused. She's still attired in her frumpy housedress, which is maybe why she doesn't actually say anything, but Arthur knows she's thinking something snarky about his lack of sartorial splendor. He meets her gaze, then deliberately lets his eyes drift over her outfit. She smiles outright then.

Paloma had unobtrusively been watching Arthur dress, then become distracted by a text message. She looks up from her phone to catch the silent exchange between Arthur and Grace. "Yeah, neither of you is a prize right now," she agrees drily. "You're going to have an ugly bruise, Arthur,
that's why I got the hat."

"He has a slight concussion as well," Grace informs her.

Paloma perks up at this. "I can stay with him tonight," she offers. "To wake him up and keep an eye on the symptoms."

Arthur is grateful for her desire to help, but finds this prospect slightly alarming given the way she's been ogling him. To his relief, Grace is already shaking her head before he can say anything. "No. You'll stay with Kareena until the job is finished. I will stay with Arthur. We'll go together to retrieve your things from your room and move mine to Arthur's."

Of all of them, Grace has the most actual medical training, and Kareena is more than able to protect both herself and Paloma, so this makes sense. Arthur thinks briefly about the fact that his room has only a single bed, but then, it's a king; Grace can make up her own mind about whether she wants to share it or make other arrangements. He doesn't particularly care either way, unless she snores.

Paloma shrugs, pert and pretty. "Suit yourselves. Will Kareena want to continue the job or put it off?" she asks Grace.

"We will discuss it together."

When Kareena arrives, they do. She's radiating a precise, icy fury. Not, thankfully, at Arthur, or even Paloma, but at their soon-to-be-late erstwhile architect.

"Our employer has agents en route to taking care of Cordero as we speak. Thank you, Arthur, for the location, you saved us some time there. We've been asked to delay for one day while this situation is dealt with. What kind of problems will that present for anyone?"

Arthur's heart sinks. A day's delay means missing dress rehearsal of *Shrew* and will cut his ability to make opening night uncomfortably close, but he remains determined to conceal the identity of his lover and his post-job plans. "It's not great," he admits. "If there's any way around it, I'd prefer to speed it up, honestly."

Karenna stares at him. "Arthur, you're concussed. You won't be able to go into the dream at all, much less two days from now. We have to make alternate plans."

Bewildered, he tries to process this. "But the design..."

She shakes her head in disbelief, then explains slowly, as if to a child. "You will not share a dream with any of us while you're concussed. I will not allow it. If you try to dream, none of the three of us will accompany you, and you will be restrained until we have completed the job. If you behave, and if your brain is not actually bleeding, you'll take Grace's place protecting our bodies while we do the job. You're going to spend the next three days teaching her the maze, and she's going to spend the time monitoring your condition."

Grace and Paloma look as surprised as Arthur at Kareena's words, but nobody argues with her. They really can't. Everyone has heard stories about the early military dreamshare experiments, when subjects were sent into dreams while high on hallucinogens, and made to share dreams with diagnosed schizophrenics, people in comas, and others with severe head injuries, just to see what would happen. Dreamshare can be unpredictable enough when the dreamers have clean, neurotypical, undamaged brains capable of building and sustaining a lucid dream. Physically damaged brains, or those in highly altered states, are a wild card. Some are able to compensate, but
others can be unstable, lapsing into terrifying chaos under the influence of the Somnacin. The experimental program had been shut down after more than a few suicides. If Arthur's brain is bleeding he has no business inviting anyone else into his head.

Karenna looks slightly more sympathetic as she sees his realization dawn. "I'm sorry, Arthur. It's damned bad luck for you, but we'll proceed. You'll be compensated, of course."

Arthur waves that off. "Is there any flexibility on the extra day?" He's miserable at the thought of not keeping his word to Eames, and at spending any more time in this hellhole of a city than he has to.

She shakes her head. "Not really. You need time to teach Grace the maze, and we all need time to make sure there won't be any more surprises from Luis. As soon as we get our employer's permission, we'll do it -- I believe we're ready apart from switching the dreamer from you to Grace -- but it's most likely going to be three days out."

He spreads his hands in unhappy acceptance. "Then let's get to work."
He'd be fine -- truly he would -- if he wasn't so damned dizzy all the time. He's well enough to argue vociferously with Grace and Kareanna about not seeing a doctor, and to prevail on that point, but they succeed in keeping him confined to his hotel room for a full 36 hours. This is due less to sincere acquiescence and more to the unpredictable vertigo attacks that send him staggering to his knees and on occasion, into walls, when he tries to walk more than ten feet at a time.

It's maddening to be trapped in the room, tottering between items of furniture, forced to rely on room service, and ordered to bathe in the tub like a child when he really just wants to stand under a glorious downpour of hot water and actually wash his hair. He's really not in a position to argue, though. Get the job done, get on a flight to Heathrow.

Arthur fixes grimly on that mantra and tries, over and over, to conquer his concussion through sheer force of will.

His eyes had been painfully light-sensitive for the remainder of that first evening; the three women murmured worriedly in the doorway of his darkened room while he curled miserably into the bed, a pillow over his face, but the dangerous sensitivity had disappeared overnight, to everyone's loudly expressed gratitude and relief. It's just the vertigo, now, and a dull throbbing ache when he turns his head and the broken flesh of his scalp tautens under the sterile bandage. He's going to have a hard time hiding the bruise, but least it hadn't needed stitches.

Grace doesn't leave his side, monitoring his symptoms with brisk efficiency every hour and a half, and massaging his neck and shoulders at regular intervals, kneading the stiffening muscles with impersonal firmness. They put the enforced proximity to good use, going over the elaborate mazes for the dream first on paper and then in 3-D modeling on Arthur's laptop, until Grace can reproduce them without significant errors.

Arthur cleans and reboots the PASIV and explains the logic behind his design and checks up on his digital surveillance of David Tsujimoto's accounts, and frets and fumes and (carefully) paces, and observes her replication of the dreamscape for what feels like fifty times by mid-afternoon the second day.

"You may use the phone, you know," Grace tells him, after his phone buzzes ten times in a span of three minutes.*** "If you would like to call your... person. I can step outside the room."

"You're not supposed to be alone either," Arthur reminds her, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. She's no doubt as sick of being stuck in this room all day as he is. She's been the best possible roommate for this situation, quiet and unruffled and wholly uninterested in him in any kind of sexual way, and he should be grateful -- he is grateful -- but his coping ability is running low. He manages a grudging "thanks, though."

Grace gives him an almost maternal look. "Is this your first male lover?"

She did not just ask me that. He slumps back into his chair and digs the heels of his hands into his eyebrows. "No, he isn't. And I'm not in need of wise old lesbian counseling."

She doesn't look offended, only interested. "Paloma says you're in love with him."
"Paloma needs to mind her own business."

"She took the job expecting it to be her business," she points out.

At this, Arthur finally snaps. "Yeah, well, it's not. And it isn't yours, either!" He picks up his pencil and turns resolutely back to the sketches they've spent the morning studying. He's never going to work with women again. "Can we drop it?"

Grace shrugs. "As you wish."

It's unintentional, of course; how could it not be? There's sympathy in her deep brown eyes, and no malice in her voice or expression. It's not as if she could have known the meaning of the phrase to him and to Eames, or how cruelly the sudden flash of desire and ... is it homesickness? ... grips him at her words. It's painful, nonetheless.

She sees something in his reaction, and relents. "I am sorry, Arthur," she says kindly. "You're correct, it's not my business."

Get the job done, get on a flight to Heathrow.

"Let's just..." he shakes his head and exhales slowly. "Do you want to try to create it in the dream?" It won't exactly be solitude, but close enough.

She mulls this over, her narrow brown eyes looking into the distance. "Walk me through the video slots section one more time first, please."

He does, and then she does go into the dream, and the five minutes of silence and alone time (and the ability to finally read and respond to Eames' texts without risking a pair of prying eyes over his shoulder) go a long way toward restoring Arthur's frayed temper. When she wakes up, there are glitches to iron out, questions to answer, and no more personal questions.

Karenna and Paloma, holed up together in what had been Karenna and Grace's room at the Venetian, seem to be faring better. Neither are approached by or even observed by other assailants or their associates, as best they can tell. Karenna assures them that what their employer had done to Cordero should be sufficient to deter any additional interference with this job and that they should each consider themselves to have a sort of "aura of protection" for the indefinite future.

Arthur isn't sure he wants to be protected or even particularly remembered by their employer. Karenna hadn't gone into detail, and Arthur hadn't asked for any, but he knows that an example has been made. Eames confirms, via texts, that his contact's contacts' contacts who had alerted him, however generically, to Cordero's plans before the attack on Arthur are aware of Cordero's spectacular demise, and that all interest in the dreamshare and associated underground circles in Paloma, or Arthur, or this job, has gone prudently silent.

Eames also doesn't volunteer details, for which Arthur is grateful. He really doesn't want to know. In truth, he's just sick of the whole subject, the pathetic stalking scenario, the inescapable fact that Arthur's sex life, hitherto private, is now a topic of discussion and speculation in his professional community. He has no real regrets about sleeping with Paloma, but the rest of this job and everything about it can go suck a dick.

Get the job done, get on a flight to Heathrow.

By the end of the third day, Arthur is able to walk unaided, as long as he keeps it slow. The vertigo has largely disappeared, and extra-strength ibuprofen keep the headache at bay. There's not much he can do about his lacerated ear or the bruise on the side of his head, which is an alarming dark
purple in color and painful, though fortunately mostly hidden by his hair. He waits, and texts trivialities to Eames, and erases all traces of the job from his laptop, and fidgets, until Karenna notifies them that she and Paloma are en route to the club in the taxi their employer has borrowed for them.

The abduction goes without a hitch. Karenna and Grace keep a phone line open so that Arthur and Grace can hear everything that happens in the taxi. Arthur paces -- carefully -- and frets, while his partners chatter about their post-job plans, their voices light and carefree but with an underlying current of tension. And then Karenna breaks off abruptly in the middle of a sentence and says, tersely, "Go time."

Arthur stops pacing and sits next to Grace on the edge of the bed. They silently stare at the shiny black oblong of Grace's phone in her hand, the speaker turned up as high as it goes, and their end of the line muted. A car door opens, and there's a series of rustling, creaking noises as Paloma and, presumably, the mark fumble their way into the back seat.

"Evenin', folks," Karenna says pleasantly. "Where are you headed this evening?"

There is the briefest of pauses, and then Paloma asks "Oh, David, I am sorry. Which hotel was it again?" Her voice is high and a little breathy, very unlike her ordinary speaking voice. Grace nods invisible approval at her accent; Arthur smiles faintly.

"Th.. th' Wynn," David Tsujimoto slurs. "Numb' two. Twenny... twinn' thrre..."

Paloma clucks in sympathy. "The poor man," she coos at Karenna. "He's had just a little too much to drink tonight. The Wynn, please. We will make sure you get home safe, baby," she adds sweetly.

"Twe.. inny three," Tsujimoto finally manages.

"The sedative is working just as it should be," Grace whispers to Arthur.

"Ma'am, if you think he's going to vomit, please let me know and I'll stop the car, aright?" There's a realistic note of alarm and resignation in Karenna's tone, even though she knows that the sedative he was given is unlikely to cause nausea. "You can find a paper bag for him in that compartment behind the seat. Sir," she says more loudly, "you tell your lady friend if you're gonna throw up, ok?"

Tsujimoto only grunts in response. Arthur feels a twinge of pity. They need him to be mobile enough to walk out of the club and through the hotel lobby, so the sedative by necessity is slow to take effect, but the results are a long period of disorientation and grogginess. It's a realistic approximation of extreme alcohol intoxication, and ideally, that will be how Tsujimoto remembers it.

Paloma and Karenna make small talk for Tsujimoto's benefit throughout the short drive from the club to the hotel, repeating Paloma's backstory of why she's visiting Las Vegas and where she's from. If any of it sticks, and Tsujimoto is suspicious when he wakes up in the morning, he'll be looking for her in all the wrong places.

After several minutes, when they've exhausted the canned backstory and veered into the best places to buy shoes on the Strip, Arthur is pretty sure he hears a light snore or two in the background. "He's not supposed to be out yet, is he?" he asks Grace.

She shakes her head. "No. But dosing can be imprecise when it's administered in a drink, since we
don't know how much of it he actually consumed." She doesn't look concerned, though. They've planned for Karenna to offer to assist Paloma and help Tsujimoto through the lobby and up to his room -- while the meter's running, of course. If he's so far gone he can't walk on his own, the incongruity of a Vegas taxi driver leaving her vehicle shouldn't occur to him.

That's the plan, anyway.

Arthur is relieved, and can see that Grace is too, when Karenna announces they've arrived at the hotel. The snoring from the backseat is deep and steady now, and "Yunseo" gratefully accepts the offer from the "taxi driver" to help walk Tsujimoto up to his room. Apart from the dream itself, this is the trickiest part of the job -- none of them want the hotel management to interfere with or even pay much attention to the triad stumbling through the lobby and casino.

Grace rises and offers a hand to Arthur, pulling him from his seat on the bed. He smooths the bedshead and picks up a garish Ed Hardy backpack, pulling it onto one shoulder. The plan is for the two of them to be poised near but, of course, not actually in Tsujimoto's suite, until Karenna and Paloma get him inside and onto the bed. Arthur, who's wearing the cheap crappy tshirt and gym shorts Paloma had picked up to replace his bloodstained clothing after Arthur's embarrassing lapse of professionalism during the incident in the parking garage, slips a pair of brightly colored earbuds into his ears and cranks up the volume on the Chainsmokers. He tugs the brim of a Cubs ballcap down low over his face, and saunters out of the room toward the elevator lobby, pausing at the vending machine to rifle through his wallet for enough change for a Diet Coke. Assuming Tsujimoto and his handlers make it up to the twenty-third floor without incident, Tsujimoto shouldn't get much more of an impression of Arthur than a generic douchey twentysomething tourist.

Once he's in position, he hears Grace's voice trailing down the hallway, speaking harshly in Taiwanese as part of an imaginary phone conversation. She's decked out in her middle-aged-Asian-woman-poker-player finest, a short spangled black jacket over an ill-fitting beaded magenta cocktail dress, glitzy sunglasses covering half of her face and inappropriately gaudy earrings jangling. It would be nigh impossible for Tsujimoto in his sedated state to remember anything other than her accessories or her caustic speaking voice.

Arthur waits, fidgets, pretends to contemplate his beverage choices. When he hears a murmur of softer female voices under Grace's pretend diatribe, Paloma cooing encouragement and Karenna unwontedly polite and deferential, he takes a deep breath and begins feeding dimes into the vending machine. He encounters them in the hallway, Tsujimoto barely holding himself upright and supported between the two petite women. Arthur steps aside to let them pass, cracking open the plastic bottle and swigging down a mouthful of the cold, sparkling liquid before continuing toward the elevator lobby.

Behind him, he can hear Paloma asking for Tsujimoto's room key. So far, so good.

Grace and Arthur ride up a single floor together and wait. Three minutes later, Grace's phone pings with a text, and she glances at it for only a second before nodding silently to Arthur to accompany her back to Tsujimoto's suite.

Paloma has the door cracked open for them, and Arthur can hear Tsujimoto snoring before they reach it. Inside, Karenna is arranging the PASIV on the king-size bed next to Tsujimoto's unconscious body. Paloma closes the door behind them and then unselfconsciously strips down to lacy underwear, replacing her skintight, strappy club dress with tailored trousers, ankle boots, a sleeveless cashmere shell and a silk scarf. She unpins the long wig with a sigh of relief, tying it in a knot and folding her dress around both it and her tiny sparkling sandals.
Karenna and Grace quickly follow suit, stashing their erstwhile personas in Arthur's godawful backpack and replacing them with a plain raglan tee over pegged jeans and a long embroidered navy shift, respectively.

While they change, Arthur doublechecks the PASIV, snapping clean trochars into four lines and readying alcohol swabs for his teammates' arms. They arrange themselves carefully on the bed around Tsujimoto, and he moves to assist them with the insertion, swiftly taping the tubes and blotting away blood drops. When they're all hooked in, Karenna nods once.

Arthur presses the button. The women, and Tsujimoto, dream.

As soon as they're out, Arthur sets his Glock on the dresser within arm's reach and quickly changes his own clothes, forcing the disguise elements down into the bulging pack and tugging on an undershirt, a light grey merino sweater, and beige chinos over brown loafers. It's not his favorite look, but Arthur is nothing if not an experienced traveler, and he has no desire to spend a minute more under TSA scrutiny than he absolutely has to. His messenger bag holds his laptop, notebooks, passport, and a clean undershirt and briefs; everything else of value has been shipped to Jonathan Kent's London flat, and everything not of value discarded in anonymous public bins. Karenna and Grace, who are flying out of Laughlin instead of Las Vegas, will dispose of his gun and the backpack during their drive to the airport. Their employer will have collected the borrowed taxi by now, and is on standby with a car to chauffeur Grace and Karenna to their employer's offices.

He keeps one eye constantly on the dreamers and both ears attuned to the slightest sound both in the room and the hallway outside. Their faces are calm and immobile, their breathing deep and even. For Arthur, who is usually grimly focused on holding the dream together while simultaneously playing his assigned role(s), supporting the extractor, and dispatching rogue projections with ruthless violence, it's a strange feeling to be sitting passively on the sideline without any way of knowing whether this job is in the process of succeeding or failing: a kind of purgatory.


Grace's eyes fly open. She looks quickly at Arthur and begins disconnecting herself from the PASIV line. "It went well," she confirms, sitting upright and running one hand through her hair, mindlessly reordering it. "He was quite calm, actually."

Arthur hands her her cane, and she's up, slipping on a pair of sturdy leather clogs and then winding her PASIV line back into the case before Paloma and Karenna come awake.

Arthur moves swiftly around the room with a clean cloth (the shoe buffing cloths in the hotel's toiletries kit are actually great for eradicating fingerprints), removing all signs of their presence and turning off extraneous lights. Tsujimoto will wake up fully dressed and with no indication that his delightful companion "Yunseo" or anyone else was ever in his suite.

Paloma quietly fills Arthur in on the details -- everything according to plan, Tsujimoto evincing no suspicion, he's actually kind of an interesting guy, too bad he was a mark -- while Grace tends to her wife. Karenna allows Grace to withdraw the cannula, press a gauze pad to the wound, and slide a pair of lowcut sneakers onto her feet, without sitting up or even opening her eyes. She says nothing at all, but Arthur hadn't expected her to. She's holding the details of the architectural plans firmly in her mind, and she'll spend the next several hours with a representative of their employer and a trained architect, translating the plans into something their employer can use. Arthur, who has put more time into building than his attorney-turned-extractor teammate, would have been a better candidate for this, but for the possible brain bleed.
Of course, the late Luis Cordero would have been even better suited for the role, if only he hadn't been such a jealous asshole.

Arthur scowls at the thought, then shakes his head when Paloma cocks her head inquiringly in his direction. "Nothing. You ready?" They'll share a cab to McCarran, then go their separate ways. He doesn't know where she's headed, any more than she knows his plans, other than that she's flying out of the international terminal while he's flying domestic (McCarran to La Guardia, then JFK to Heathrow -- he hates adding the extra time, but it's better to be safe).

She nods and picks up her sleek brushed-leather handbag and small overnight bag. Arthur waits for Grace to finish cleaning Tsujimoto's arm before quietly asking if she needs anything more from them.

Grace doesn't answer, but Karenna, sitting on the edge of the bed, shakes her head, her eyes still closed and her blonde curls bobbing around her face. "No. Go." Her voice is clipped but not hostile. "Thanks," she adds, as Arthur and Paloma move toward the door.

Arthur opens the door with the little buffing cloth covering his fingertips, then tosses it to Grace. "The room's clean," he tells her. "Take care of her, and be in touch tomorrow, right?"

"Take care of yourselves," she responds. "We will be in touch. Enjoy your... rendezvous."

Arthur looks back sharply, but her voice is warm and there's a twinkle in her eye. He smiles, a little sheepishly, and walks out the door.

Paloma is watching him with a shrewd expression, but seems to have finally figured out that teasing Arthur isn't going to get her what she wants; she says nothing about Grace's parting comment, merely falling into step beside him. In the lobby, she catches his free hand with hers, grasping it firmly, and that's fine, they look like a nice average young couple on their way home from Sin City, don't they? It isn't the hand Arthur wants, but there's only 25 hours between him and Eames' deft, sturdy, unmistakably masculine hands; he can afford to be a little generous with the slim, lovely, disappointed woman next to him. He clasps her fingers and grins down at her, hoping she feels the same sense of relief and freedom at the job's termination as he does.

"So, how much did you win?" he asks her as they wait together in the taxi queue outside the lobby doors.

Paloma shakes her head, a meditative look on her face. "I think I lost more than I was prepared for, this trip."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Arthur replies blandly. "Maybe next time you'll be luckier."

She squeezes his hand and smiles ruefully. "I'm not sure there will be a next time. I need to spend some time licking my wounds before I, um, play any more games."

Being no stranger to unrequited longing, he feels a pang of sympathy at that. "I am sorry, Lo," he murmurs. "I didn't realize."

"I know," she acknowledges. "And I didn't say anything, so I've nothing to cry about. Anyway, we both know these things never work out in our line of work," she adds.

Arthur abruptly disengages his hand, irritated by the veiled allusion to his relationship Eames. "Well, we'll see about that."

They don't talk during the cab ride, mindful of the driver's presence. Inside the airport, Arthur
wraps a brotherly arm around Paloma's slender shoulders and bends to give her a chaste kiss on her hairline. "Be well, LoLo. Go find yourself a distraction. Maybe you should try Tokyo?" he suggests, hoping she'll appreciate the joke.

Paloma smiles gamely, if a little wanly, and hugs him back. "Japanese guys are kind of hot," she admits. "I mean, based on my existing small sample size. I'll have to conduct a more rigorous study to be sure."

Arthur chuckles. "Rampage safely, Gojira."

She socks him in the upper arm, not hard, but not too gently either. "Goodbye Arthur," she says, not meeting his eyes, and walks away.

He watches her go, wondering if he'll ever see her again, or if she's going to avoid him from now on. He wants to process all of this job, including the awkwardness with Paloma, with Eames, when they have downtime, but isn't sure it's a safe subject to broach. Less, he admits to himself, out of a concern that Eames might feel threatened -- Arthur intends to use every word in his vocabulary, every inch of his body, and every second they're together making sure Eames knows just how much Arthur belongs to him and to no-one else -- and more from a disinclination to hear Eames' own stories or to imagine Eames in anyone else's hands.

Well, he has two long flights, a subway journey, and a whole day to decide what he wants to do about that. He turns around and heads slowly for the line at the domestic security checkpoint.

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When the "use of approved electronic devices" restriction is lifted, Arthur slips in a pair of earbuds, opens his laptop, and settles in to consider The Taming of the Shrew. He's downloaded an annotated text, as well as video clips of some of the most well-known scenes and several academic articles Marina had recommended.

Given the length of the flight, he'd splurged on a first class seat, and the seat beside him is (thankfully) empty, so that he has relative comfort and privacy. He skims the text first, then goes back through the annotations, and stops in the middle of Act III to eat lunch - a vegetarian pasta that's surprisingly good, and a glass of wine to wash down more ibuprofen with it, along with a trazodone to help him sleep. His head is definitely complaining, but he thinks several hours of sleep will clear up the last of the vertigo.

After finishing the annotations, he watches the first several video clips. The costumes and overacting mar the Taylor-Burton version, in Arthur's opinion, but he's fascinated by the various interpretations given the characters in the snippets of stage productions he's saved. One or two of them hit on a vein of eroticism that the the text itself doesn't necessarily convey. From the way Eames has described this production, that vein will be tapped in full. He can't wait to see how Eames evokes it.

Eventually, the trazodone kicks in, and he allows his eyes to close and his body to relax.

Arthur dreams about dreaming, revisiting the casino maze of that afternoon's job, walking the perimeter of the Wynn with Mal at his side. His head is bleeding again, dripping gore on their conjoined arms and her soft woolen dress, but neither of them pay much attention. The sounds of the slot machines and televisions around them are muted, and the gamblers and casino staff take no notice of them.

"And so you are one half of a whole now, are you not?" she asks, her voice low and lovely, wise
grey-green eyes meeting his with affection and a trace of mischief.

"He's all the things I'll never be," Arthur admits. "He makes it seem so effortless."

"It is dangerous to place him on a pedestal, Arthur," Mal admonishes him. Oh, he's missed the way she says his name, her accent clipping the "th" and lengthening the "u" in the final syllable.

They stop walking, and he turns to look her squarely in the eye. She's in one of her plainer guises at the moment, her brown hair tumbling in careless waves around her face, her eyes large and knowing and free from any makeup. She looks like a suburban housewife, and like a priestess in a temple, at once that maternal and that remote. "Like you and Dom," Arthur suggests.

Mal laughs. "I suppose so, yes."

Arthur frowns, puzzled. "But Eames is still alive." Something about what he's just said feels wrong, under the circumstances, but he can't quite tell why that is.

"That has nothing to do with it," she tells him, patiently. "Hurry, you must finish the job."

"But I'm not supposed to sedate him!" Arthur looks around for Paloma, but she's not there. He can't see Grace or Karenna either, though he knows somehow they're watching him and waiting for him to... what? He looks down, and he's holding a syringe in his left hand. He can't remember the mark's name, and he looks around wildly.


"Wait!" he calls after her. "I need you to..." Something, he isn't sure what. "Please stay."

She pauses and looks back at him, questioningly.

"I think I love him," Arthur confesses to her. It seems important that someone know that.

Mal's smile is gentle. "He loves you, too," she tells him. "For all his dissembling, he is certain of that."

"Ok," he says slowly. Then: "Mal? I miss you so much." He's a little horrified to feel tears springing to his eyes. And then she's there, her slender arms wrapped around him, her face pressed into his hair, comforting and soothing, the light lemon verbena fragrance that always clung to the air around her filling his head.

"Dearest Arthur," Mal whispers, stroking his hair maternally. "Let yourself be loved. Be a lover. In the end, it is all that matters."

Arthur shudders and lets the tears come, clinging to Mal's slim figure. He is unsure what exactly he's letting go, but somehow knows he needs it; and she lets him. When it's over, his mind feels cool and empty, at peace. The casino around them has metamorphosed into a silent, opaque, lemon-verbena fog, and the pressure of Mal's arms around him grows lighter and lighter until it isn't there anymore, and he's alone.

He closes his red, swollen eyes against the mist. When he opens them again seconds or days later, the world around him is bright with electric lights. He's strapped into his seat, and the faint background noise of the casino has become the sound of the jet engines again. Disoriented, he touches his face and his ear, but there are no tears or blood there. And Mal is gone.

He takes a deep breath. The dream-images and words are flickering and disintegrating in his mind,
but the feeling of having been close to Mal, comforted by her, is still strong and thrumming through his limbic system.

As always when he thinks of Mal now, Arthur takes a moment to grieve her anew. She had been so beautiful, so vibrant, so integral to her family, and her sudden brutal death had left a smoking crater in all their hearts. A piece of Arthur's life had disappeared with her, and the nightmarish, chaotic couple of years on the run with Dom and Dom's own wild grief - and Dom's vicious projection of Mal, cruel and anguished and utterly unlike the real Mal in any way - hadn't given him space to find closure with her death.

When he feels more settled, he tries to puzzle out the dream. The anxiety over the job that's just completed is self-explanatory, particularly since he'd had to sit out the extraction itself. And the catharsis of that good cleansing cry is probably due to that as well, coupled with the long month of separation from Eames and all of Arthur's trepidation about whether the connection between them will still be there when he lands at Heathrow. He's less clear about why his subconscious had presented him with the object lesson of Mal and the consequences of putting a lover on a pedestal, but her insistence means it probably deserves some additional thought.

Not right now, though. God, he's weary.

A little more than six hours have elapsed since the flight departed JFK. That's five more hours of sleep than Arthur had actually counted on. It's not enough, by any means, though he'd managed to fit in a few more hours during the flight from Las Vegas to New York, and he thinks he can at least manage to be functional by the time they land. He's ready to stop moving for a while, and the thought of a solid month in London, in a home instead of a hotel, is almost as tantalizing for him as the thought of Eames being there with him.

He uses the restroom, washes his face and hands, and returns to his seat, mulling his options. There's Wi-Fi access on the plane, but he doesn't want to use it for any sensitive work or access to traceable accounts. And he's disinclined to spend the next four hours analyzing Shrew, when he'll be watching it in... his tired brain tries to calculate all of the time zones they have yet to cross... eight more hours? No, seven, assuming he makes it through the customs queue before the play's over. In the end, he settles for an audiobook and a pencil and paper, idly sketching strange loops and Escherian objects.

Arthur forces himself to remain in audiobook-brainspace through deplaning and customs, letting the words wash over him, putting one foot in front of the other calmly and deliberately... although he can't quite keep a low zing of adrenaline from shooting through his nervous system from time to time, which eventually settles down into an irritating tic in his left shoulder. He texts Eames to let him know he's landed, gulps down more ibuprofen with a cup of black coffee from an airport kiosk, then heads downstairs to the Tube station to locate the Piccadilly line.

The weather, when the train emerges from underground, is cool and foggy but not actually raining, the sky grey and dotted with soft woolly clouds as far as Arthur can see. He mentally runs through the wardrobe he'd shipped to Eames' flat, adding a scarf and gloves to the pinstriped Canali suit he hopes isn't too badly wrinkled. By the time the train pulls into the Russell Square station, the sun is almost entirely gone, and he's glad for his sweater as he navigates the long-memorized route to Eames' flat.

It's only a few blocks before he's finally standing at the wood-framed glass doors of the large converted Victorian mansion block. The exterior is brick and white stone, weathered but not ramshackle, the street around it quiet and residential but for a pub on the far corner. He enters the door code Eames had given him, and eschews the elevators in the back of the lobby for a narrow
door just off the entrance, revealing a cramped and winding stairwell. Up three flights, a left, a right, and he's standing in front of a heavy oak door, unadorned but for a peephole and a small brass rectangle inscribed with "J. Kent" and the number 318.

Arthur pushes 8, 3, 5, 1, 7, and turns the knob, and then he's inside.

Eames isn't there, of course; he'll have been at the theatre for an hour at least, dressing and costuming and doing whatever it is that actors do to warm up. Arthur is going to have to hurry if he wants to get there before the play begins.

He gives the front room a quick once-over out of habit, noting the juxtaposition of dark wood, sturdy leather furniture and sleekly modern electronics with traces of cozy femininity. A faded floral quilt is tucked under the coffee table, a pastoral scene in an elaborately carved mahogany frame hangs adjacent to a Modigliani nude next to the window, old-fashioned chinoiserie plates sit primly on a shelf above the enormous flatscreen, and an oddly fussy and delicate little painted Baroque sideboard supports a laptop computer and portable scanner. Arthur notes, but files away for future consideration, the eclectic wealth of books and objets d’art that fill deep mahogany bookshelves behind the battered Chesterfield.

The rest of the flat reveals the same strange disparities. The kitchen is modern, airy and geometric, filled with stainless steel appliances and a long granite sink, but the dishes in the glass cabinets are downright dainty, all roses and gilt trim and better suited for high tea with the Queen than a bachelor flat. The walls of the entire flat are laden, though not overloaded, with modern (and in some cases, erotic) photography side by side with antique maps, woodcuts, and plates from natural history texts. The heavy trestle table jutting out from the kitchen (how did he even get that into the flat, Arthur wonders) holds elaborate ormolu candlesticks, a rough earthenware bowl of fruit, and a grim selection of tactical combat knives that Eames is evidently in the process of cleaning and repairing.

Bemused, Arthur makes a note to ask Eames about his decorating inspiration. If there's a theme here, it's eluding him, although he has to admit that the effect of the whole is remarkably harmonious; the flat looks lived-in, the home of a man who cares a great deal about his creature comforts and not at all about what a visitor might think of him.

The master bedroom at the end of the hall is familiar to Arthur from their video chat sessions. He switches on the lamp next to the door and drops his bags on one of the sturdy leather club chairs under the window. Eames has stacked his various shipments on the worn Persian rug in there, and Arthur is not entirely surprised to find that they've been opened and rifled through.

He is surprised to find that the very suit he'd planned on wearing has been neatly pressed and laid out on the bed for him, along with a pale violet shirt that he's never seen before but nonetheless fits him beautifully, and the various other accoutrements of a well-dressed modern man: a silky bamboo undershirt, belt, briefs, socks, finely woven charcoal-grey muffler, leather gloves and a lambswool Ivy cap. His derby brogues have been cleaned and polished and are tucked just under the edge of the bed.

Arthur is absurdly touched.

In the en-suite bathroom, Eames' thoughtfulness is in further evidence. Arthur's toiletries and cufflinks are laid out on a shelf on the vanity, and a new toothbrush, still in its packaging, lies atop a clean, folded towel on the edge of the sink. Gratefully, Arthur strips off his traveling clothes, wastes a few frustrating minutes trying to figure out how the tankless water heater works, and then scrubs himself head to toe, quickly but very thoroughly.
Fifteen minutes after first entering the flat, he's fully dressed and out the door, heading for the Tube and making short work of an apple he'd snatched from the bowl on the table. He's glad of the hat and gloves almost immediately, as the sun is well on its way down and the air on his still-wet hair and clean skin is noticeably cooler. It's warmer in the Tube station, and he has time to buy and chug a bottle of water before the train pulls in and he jostles his way onboard with seemingly half the population of London.

Eames has somehow become abruptly more real again to Arthur by virtue of Arthur having been inside his home and the fact that they're on the same continent again, the same country, the same city, soon to be the same building. All of the trepidation and anticipation he'd successfully staved off during the grueling cross-country, cross-Atlantic travel is hitting him like a brick wall now. What had been a sweet, faraway yearning for reunion back in the states is now an unavoidably imminent faceoff, and Arthur's been around long enough to know that fond daydreams don't always pan out when confronted with another human being in the flesh. If this was all a pipe dream, or something he's been investing with more meaning than Eames, he's going to find out within the next few hours. It's maddening, really, to know he's this close and that he's going to have to watch and listen to Eames for those few hours and be utterly unable to touch him or even get near him. Eames, at least, will have something to do during that interval. Arthur's just going to have to wait.

He's also becoming increasingly aware that one small apple and the painkillers and coffee he'd had at the airport are not going to be enough to sustain him through a two and a half hour play, and he desperately hopes there will be an intermission, and some sort of refreshments other than alcohol. He's pretty sure he'll be able to stay upright, but he's less sure about remaining composure.

Arthur is the first person off the train at Blackfriars, and gets lucky with a cab just outside the station. The short cab ride through the crowded streets only serves to key him up even further, and by the time the cab pulls up outside the brightly lit theatre, his heart is thudding in his chest.

He joins the will-call queue, and the fact that the ticket is there, waiting with his name on it, is oddly calming. He thanks the pretty young Asian man who'd fetched the ticket for him, and navigates carefully to his seat in the lower gallery. Eames - or whoever assigns the tickets, though Arthur suspects Eames had a direct hand in it - has placed him just outside the pit, closer to the stage than to the back of the house. It's a better seat for observing the actors up close than for taking in the whole production at once. He stares, fascinated, at the set, and wonders what concealed corners of the wings the actors might now be peering from. Eames must know he's there, although he hasn't replied to Arthur's text. Try as he might, though, he can't detect any human figures on the stage.

The lights dim slightly, and the hum of the audience around him fades. Arthur leans forward, eager for the play to begin.

Chapter End Notes

*** 1) You up, love?

2) cos I am

3) costume lads finally finished P's wedding outfit and it's a stunner

4) pure black leather head to toe
5) makes me feel rather a panther

6) here's a shot of one of the wrist cuffs. the studs are quite striking, don't you think?

7) Jonathan Kent Has Sent You A Picture

8) {closeup: a man's midsection in tight black leather trousers; a masculine hand, surmounted by a thick, three-inch-high, generously studded black leather cuff, grips just the base of a very long, very thick, and very erect penis, clearly outlined under the leather with its head just barely peeking out of the waistband}

9) the old queen'll pitch a fit if I get my plebian bodily fluids inside his precious costume, but i

10) wanted you to see it and know I am thinking of you
Let Me Feel Your Heartbeat (Grow Faster, Faster)

Arthur isn't entirely sure what to expect. He's avoided all of the pre-opening press, not wanting his first experience of Eames on a stage to be influenced by a stranger's opinion. As it stands, he knows what the two leads look like, has a decent grounding in critical theory of the play, and a recent refreshment of his knowledge of the text; that's all. With the rush from the airport and Eames' flat, he hasn't even had time to flip through the little program to take a look at the other actors.

From Lucentio and Tranio's entrance, he's relieved; this production is in excellent hands. Slender Lucentio reminds Arthur of a younger Hiroshi Saito, his triangular black eyes expressive under tilted brows and the broad high planes of his face seeming to have been carved from golden oak -- though Saito would never have allowed his features to assume such a vacuously cheerful expression, or worn a suit with that preppy windowpane pattern. *Frat boy, on track to join daddy's law firm or maybe an investment bank*, Arthur diagnoses the character.

The manservant Tranio looks to be about fifteen years older and forty pounds heavier, hailing from a Mediterranean climate. He's dressed well but plainly in shirtsleeves and vest and a leather baldric, with a long mop of curling black hair tied back with a rawhide thong. He looks on Lucentio, and the audience, with half-amused, half-jaded eyes gleaming darkly over piratical stubble as he urges his master to abandon strict study of philosophy and use their time in Padua to enjoy time with friends, music and poetry.

They're well-cast and well-trained, but they're not who Arthur is here to see. He cranes forward when Baptista enters with Kate and Bianca and her suitors, his eyes fixing on Jane Holden-Reeves - and then sits back, startled and a little dismayed. The vibrant sensuality he'd expected from her photos is nowhere in evidence, her features pinched and sour and her chic black bob pulled sharply back into a knot. Her full lips have gone tight and grim, her sunkissed tan become sallow, and her grey broadcloth dress is severe, almost nunlike, cut to obscure rather than accentuate her curves. She snaps and growls her lines, wielding words as weapons and her appearance as a shield.

Her sister Bianca is a doe-like vision of femininity in gilt-edged silk, with a luminous deep amber complexion and wide-set hazel eyes, and dozens of variegated micro-braids twisting around her head like a garland before falling gracefully down her long back. She'll look stunning next to the handsome young Lucentio, Arthur thinks, although it's already clear that she's far more intelligent than her erstwhile suitor. She poses demurely next to her father, but her expression is just a trifle too sweet, her lashes betraying sidelong glances at the men and a tiny triumphant smile directed at Kate. Arthur approves of the casting and direction; productions that portray Bianca as simpering and naive have always struck him as lazy, when there's so much more that can be done with the character.

Next to his daughters, Baptista Minola is shorter and stockier but, to Arthur's eyes at least, no less attractive. The actor is a solidly built man in his fifties, with thick black hair brushed straight back from his face and neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper facial hair shading to pure white at the edges. His heavy brows are as dark as his hair, and underneath them, his hooded brown eyes eloquently express both affection and exasperation for his incorrigible shrewish daughter.

Arthur only has eyes for Kate, though, listening to the dialogue with half his mind while the other tries to envision Jane Holden-Reeves next to Eames, how her energy will play off of his. The two of them will make or break the play with their chemistry. She's good, very good, radiating a profoundly bitter rage at the world around her and her father most of all, a woman clearly too
intelligent for the world she finds herself in, and chafing at all of its restrictions and imperfections. But she doesn't overplay it, as many shrews do, instead inviting the audience's sympathy and, yes, pity.

And then she's gone. Biondello, Lucentio, and Tranio end the scene and exit, and Arthur sits up straighter, gripping the sides of his chair, because, oh, Eames. He's there -- he's right there, perhaps only fifty feet away, and Arthur fairly quivers with longing, watching the little farce of Petruchio's entrance.

God, he looks good. He looks fantastic. His hair is longer and rakishly disheveled, and he's grown out his stubble again, just a bit; it gleams russet-gold in the stage lights. They've dressed him in a snug-fitting, open-collared white shirt and skintight denim, which could have seemed boring on a different body. The tattoos and slabs of muscle straining against the thin fabric of the shirt, and something coiled and intense about his stance, make it look wolfish instead, although there's a fugitive hint of vulnerability around his eyes, particularly when he mentions Petruchio's deceased father. Interesting, Arthur notes, and mentally files it away to ask about later. He leans forward, unconsciously, drinking in the sight and sound of his partner, only halfway hearing the words he's saying. It's almost torture, having to sit there and merely watch.

Eames' voice is as expressive as it's ever been. He purrs and flirts, snaps out orders and grows eloquent in exasperation, and Arthur's heart sings in his chest at the familiar intonations. There's a flash of real violence there when Petruchio slings Grumio to the floor, a crack in the facade of control he's displayed thus far; the audience perceptibly flinches, and Arthur is forcefully reminded of that little interlude in Port Elizabeth, Eames standing half-naked and dominant over Arthur's kneeling body and ordering him to strip. Eames has drawn himself up in a similar way, taller and somehow heavier in his body. Arthur, like the rest of the audience, responds with fascination and not a little apprehension.

The scene proceeds, with all its pretenses and double-crossings, and then it's Kate and Bianca again. When Kate slaps her sister, the power and suddenness of it echo Petruchio's lashing out at Grumio in the preceding scene. It's a splendid setup to her introduction to Petruchio, and when the two of them are left alone on stage, Arthur is spellbound watching them spar with each other. The sparks of chemistry between them, coupled with the highly physical nature of the scene as they prowl around each other like wary tigers, make him uneasy, but he can't take his eyes off them.

Kate hisses and snarls, attempting to dominate the rude stranger who's intruded on her self-imposed captivity. Petruchio's words and face convey nothing but blatantly feigned sincerity and delight, but his gaze rakes hotly over Kate's body and he crowds her, using every inch of his physical presence and the throaty growl of his voice to propel her around the stage.

At "Marry, so I mean, sweet Katherine, in thy bed," Kate retreats too far, catching the back of her knee on a chair and tumbling gracelessly backward into it. In a flash, Petruchio is looming over her, pushing one knee down between her own and forcing her head back sharply by tugging her hair. Her breath catches, and he holds her there for a moment, her throat bare and vulnerable and her eyes locked to his, before his grip softens and he abruptly pulls the pins from her hair, which spirals out from its severe knot to tumble around her face as he finishes the speech. Petruchio steps backward to look at her and she simply sits, breathless and mute, until he abruptly straightens and strides to the door to greet Baptista and the others.

It's often played as a very sexual scene, there's nothing new about that, but Arthur is impressed nonetheless at what they manage to convey. Kate's rude wit and eventual strange acquiescence, Petruchio's calculated self-possession wavering slightly with flashes of clear attraction to the woman defying him - it's really a perfect setup for the trials that lay before them both.
The dynamic continues through the disastrous wedding scene. Kate's wedding dress is the same severe cut as her grey dress, but it's of ivory brocade rather than broadcloth, and her face and hair -- still down in loose waves -- are softened by a modest veil. Having been forewarned by both the text and Eames' photo message about Petruchio's wedding outfit, Arthur preemptively flinches on her behalf. Eames' reappearance richly rewards this apprehension.

The costume designer has a definite flair for dressing Eames. This costume, like those before it, fits beautifully and emphasizes the confident masculinity of his body. In the midst of the embroidered pastel gowns and the modestly cut suits of the other characters, the black leather makes Petruchio appear alien, unpredictable, menacing. His tattoos, expanded into full sleeves by application of what Arthur hopes is only temporary ink over and around the real ones, add a depth of characterization more visceral than any mere clothing might effect. The sleek leather pants and fitted vest, the motorcycle boots and heavy studded cuffs and belt, are both a calculated provocation and a statement of the character's self-possession. Eames wears it as if it were a second skin, neither acknowledging its strangeness nor emphasizing its sexuality, though he evidently notices Katharina's -- and Tranio's -- eyes on him, favoring the latter with a wink and a broad grin that Tranio unselfconsciously returns.

Jane Holden-Reeves manifests Katharina's bewilderment and outrage gorgeously, her eyes never leaving Eames as she tries again and again to read what's behind Petruchio's bizarre behavior. Throughout the despicable "taming" sequence, as his behavior becomes more sadistic, her shrewishness morphs into a weary sort of despair. Petruchio, for his part, evinces some of the same weariness, though never in her sight. His speech at the end of Act IV, Scene I, is often read in triumphant tones, but Eames, or possibly the director, has chosen to use it to emphasize Petruchio's own lack of enthusiasm for the practices it describes. His lines "And in conclusion she shall watch all night: / And if she chance to nod I'll rail and brawl / And with the clamour keep her still awake," are more resigned than gleeful, making clear his true desire to move past this game-playing and meet his new wife in a spirit of domestic harmony. It's an interesting choice, and makes the character far more palatable than he's usually played.

When Kate finally realizes what he wants from her, her entire body changes, releasing a tension that Arthur hadn't even seen her holding, and there's a hitherto-hidden sensuality in her voice and her bearing as she repeats "I know it is the moon." Petruchio, his eyes boring into hers, tests her again, and she confirms it more boldly: "What you will have it named, even that it is / And so it shall be so for Katherine."

There's a different dynamic then in their interactions, a sense that they are united, conspirators, in sync with each other now that they both understand the rules. Kate's unhappiness and confusion melts away, replaced by a new kind of relaxation and confidence as she obeys Petruchio's spoken and unspoken orders. For his part, Eames' entire being increasingly radiates certainty and desire. As they exit with Vincentio, he tips Kate's face upward by grasping her chin, and she melts against him as if awaiting a kiss that does not come. They hold the pose for a moment, then Eames nods his approval, a faint smile curving his full lips charmingly, and walks into the wings. She watches him, evidently pleased as well as flustered, and hastens to follow him.

At the end of the next scene, Petruchio catches Kate's arm as she goes to leave the scene, and entreats a kiss. Kate demurs, startled, then begs for it: "I will give thee a kiss: now pray thee, love, stay." His eyes widen at that "love," and then Jane kisses Eames with what seems like real ardor, not even protesting when his hand runs down her body and trails down her buttocks, pressing two fingers in for just a few seconds when he reaches the very lowest curve. She pushes her body back against his hand, and he pulls away from her mouth but twists his fingers more deeply against her core, his eyes half-lidded and dark with desire. Kate whimpers and closes her eyes, her hips stirring in an abbreviated arc. Petruchio withdraws his hand and, studying her face, presses those
same fingers to her lips in a shushing gesture. She promptly opens her mouth and bites down on the fingertips that fall inside, but gently, her eyes daring him to move. He laughs aloud and strokes her jaw with his thumb, then pulls her own hand to his mouth and kisses her knuckles, one-two-three-four, his eyes telegraphing an unspoken promise: *Soon.*

Arthur inhales explosively; he'd been holding his breath without realizing it. Again, the frankness of the attraction between Kate and Petruchio leaves him both uneasy and aroused. His mind darts back to old jobs, watching Eames seduce marks both in and out of the dreamspace, recalling Eames' arm around Erika in the little hotel bar the night before their departure. He knows, intellectually, that Eames truly means little to none of his habitual flirtatiousness, that Eames is a superb actor onstage and off and that 99% of the touching and petting and purring he routinely engages in is manipulation and nothing more. His heart is having a little trouble remembering those things, though, as he watches Kate and Petruchio together.

Here at the end of the play, there's an almost palpable connection thrumming between them, their eyes straying to each other even as they speak with the other characters, the way they lean slightly in one another's direction at all times in a wordless sort of anticipation of the next moment they'll draw near to each other. Petruchio bites his lower lip, watching her; a small triumphant smile inhabits Kate's face, deepening ever so slightly when Petruchio meets her eyes. That they're going to, frankly, *fuck,* and very soon, is telegraphed with every gesture, every glance they share. Arthur has seen this play several times, but can't remember ever being so keenly aware that he's watching public foreplay.

The audience around him is spellbound, responding to the open eroticism with quickened breath and minute shifts in their seats. The woman seated next to him grasps for the hand of the man at her other side, twining their fingers together. In the pit, other couples lean closer to one another, women unconsciously part their lips, men splay their programs open on their laps. Despite the chill in the air of the open theater, a number of faces are flushed and warm, fingers tugging their scarves loose or pushing long hair back from bare necks.

Kate's final speech at the banquet is an extended invitation to her bed. Jane's hair is fully down now, and her gown is of a plush velvet, intricately tied around the bodice and with a long, deeply gored skirt and sleeves. The sallowness of her face in the first scenes has given way to a rosy blush, and the grim crimson slash of her lips has softened to a plump, ripe berry.

She boldly, publicly, exults in her submission, saying what she does not because she means it, but in recognition that Petruchio wishes to hear it. At "*thy lord, thy king, thy governor,*" there is an arch humor in her voice, she speaks directly to Petruchio before turning her attention back to the women she is nominally addressing. The word "husband" holds a thrill of joy that has been missing from her character till then; the word "sovereign" a deeper pleasure. She approaches Petruchio from behind as she continues speaking, possessively stroking the musculature of his arms and shoulders as she describes how a man

\[
\text{commits his body} \\
\text{To painful labor both by sea and land,} \\
\text{To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,} \\
\text{Whilst thou li'st warm at home, secure and safe;} \\
\text{And craves no other tribute at thy hands} \\
\text{But love, fair looks, and true obedience--} \\
\text{Too little payment for so great a debt.}
\]

At "thy hands," Kate trails her own hand down Petruchio's chest and belly, stopping just short of his groin. He turns to fully face her. The look she gives him is fair indeed and the nature of the
payment evident. Bianca looks troubled, Baptista stricken; Biondello and Hortensio appear titillated; Lucentio and Vincentio turn away, discomfited by the impropriety, while the Widow glares daggers at the back of Kate's head. But Kate is not finished.

I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
Where they are bound to serve, love, and obey.

She is not even looking at the other women, now, but has eyes only for Petruchio. At "obey," he points silently to the ground next to his feet, and she drops gracefully to her knees, the rich burgundy velvet of her gown puddling around her on the stage floor. He lays one heavy hand on her head, then runs it through her dark hair and down the back of her neck, which she bows before raising her face to his again. There is a glitter of approval in his eyes and an expectant smile hovering on his full lips, but he remains silent, waiting for her to continue.

Kate speaks from kneeling, that same faint expression of triumph on her face:

Why are our bodies soft and weak and smooth,
Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,
But that our soft conditions and our hearts
Should well agree with our external parts?

Eames' body has that ineffable aura of control again, somehow; he seems taller, heavier, more present than before. Petruchio's hand moves from the back of Kate's neck, to her collarbone, then he brushes his fingers across the tops of her breasts and abruptly tugs at the string holding the top of her gown closed. It sags, opening into a deeper V between her breasts and falling slightly off her shoulders, though not revealing any R-rated flesh. Kate's figure nearly swoons at his touch, but her voice continues, amused and even and mock-submissive, as his hands more boldly move over her body.

Baptista and Vincentio look furious. Hortensio stirs and removes his hat, holding it not-quite-casually over his groin. The Widow rolls her eyes and pours herself another glass of wine.

Bianca, on the other hand, stares open-mouthed in shock and dismay, not at the display of sexuality but at hearing her once-shrewish sister espouse the values she herself had so recently cast away in disdain -- and at the power of the connection between Kate and her husband, making all of her flirtation with Lucentio seem pale and shallow. Behind her, Lucentio slips one arm around her waist, trying but failing to move with the authority Petruchio commands so easily. She freezes at his touch and bows her head away from him, her mouth twisting in an echo of the bitterness Kate had evinced at the beginning of the play. His arm falls and he steps back, crestfallen but evidently not knowing what to do differently.

But Bianca and Lucentio, and indeed every other person on the stage, might as well have been on another planet as far as Kate is concerned. She has eyes only for Petruchio:

Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband's foot,
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease.

There is a challenge and surrender in her eye and voice; an invitation, desire. She slides one hand up his thigh to just beside his groin with unmistakable longing and intent, her dark eyes hungry and lips parted, making abundantly clear exactly what sort of ease she is offering him with that hand.
Above her, Petruchio’s voice is thick, his breath a trifle short, his eyes lidded with sensuality. “Come on and kiss me, Kate” he orders, pulling her up by one elbow. She does, with ardor, which he returns in equal measure. There is applause and blushes all around, in the theater as well as on the stage, but Petruchio and Kate ignore it all. His face is taut with equal measures approval and lust and anticipation.

Then: "Come, Kate. We’ll to bed." He caresses her chin, and she seizes his hand and kisses his fingers hungrily. Petruchio delivers his final aside to the other men, though his attention is not on them but on his wife. He wraps an arm around her waist, half-lifting, half-crushing her against him, his mouth on her neck and face and hair, and she swarms eagerly against him and around him as they carom around the stage and finally, blessedly, off into the wings, fairly mauling one another all the while.

Arthur doesn’t even hear the last few lines of the other actors. The raw display of sensuality and ardor is having its physical effect on him, as it evidently has upon the rest of the audience; his cock is an aching rod in his trousers, and his face is burning. But it’s his emotional response that has him reeling.

On the one hand, that’s Eames, Arthur’s lover, his eager hands and mouth on Kate’s full enticing breasts, his fine grey eyes alight with humor and affection in a way Arthur recognizes all too clearly, the chemistry between him and the lovely woman in his arms sparking like summer lightning. On the other hand, it’s Eames, and a part of Arthur is thrumming with pride and awe and bone-deep satisfaction because Eames did this, Eames left an audience of hundreds of people flushed and open-mouthed and aroused, Eames commanded the attention of every man and woman in the theatre and left them breathless with longing. And he’s Arthur’s, he belongs to Arthur, it will be Arthur in his bed tonight and for weeks to come.

Of all his lovers, Arthur can’t quite recall anyone who has evoked such intensity of conflicting feelings. He wonders if it will always be like this, if the odd mixture of anxiety and fulfillment and wonder and exasperation and tenderness and sheer bone-searing lust will ever settle into a steady everyday kind of love. There isn’t anyone who gets under his skin quite like this man, his incisive, intelligent, dangerous and headstrong, fierce and loyal and unpredictable partner.

The crowd gives Eames, and Jane, a standing ovation. Arthur stands too, and claps until his palms sting.
As the audience begins to file out, Arthur remains standing, uncertain about what he's supposed to do now.

"Mr. Gershon?"

He turns. One of the ushers, a pleasant, grey-haired woman in what looks to be her early sixties, is smiling at him from the end of the row. He nods cautiously.

"Mr. Kent asks if you would care to join the cast backstage."

The uncertainty drains from Arthur's frame. "Very much. Thank you." He follows her through a small door next to the lip of the stage.

Backstage is a warren of tiny hallways lit by bare bulbs, the walls papered over with playbills and prop lists, and paper nametags taped onto the doors. The cast, in various stages of undress and still heavily made-up, are chatting in doorways with their admirers and each other, while stagehands bustle about matter-of-factly.

The usher makes an abrupt left and stops in front of a closed door labelled "KENT."

"There you are, sir." She knocks briskly on the door before trotting away and leaving him standing there alone.

Arthur has imagined this moment a hundred times. There's the variant where Eames is cool and distant, fallen back into his sardonic and callous dreamshare persona, mocking Arthur's devotion; the variant where he's naked and oiled and hard and he drags Arthur to a convenient couch and they're having sex within the space of a minute; and the variant where Arthur shows up and Eames is locked in a steamy embrace with Jane Holden-Reeves, who laughs at Arthur and slams the door in his face.

What happens is none of those things. He hears a chair pushed back, then footsteps in the tiny dressing room. The door opens to a sweaty, disheveled Jonathan Kent, stripped to the waist and grimacing slightly as he loosens the clasps of one of the heavy studded bracelets on his arm. His eyes are heavily made up and the blusher on his cheekbones is garish in the unforgiving electric light. The effect of the makeup and the vista of naked, tattooed skin in these close quarters is a bit overwhelming.

"Come in." He steps aside so that Arthur can squeeze into the small space next to the clothes rack. "Shut the door." He leans in and drops a quick peck on Arthur's cheek as Arthur slips past him, and that's it; that's their hello.

Eames -- no, not Eames, Kent -- drops heavily into the tiny folding chair in front of his mirror and begins carefully wiping off the stage makeup with cream and a dry cloth. "That's a wicked bruise. Your head all right now?" he asks, glancing at Arthur through the mirror.

Arthur nods dumbly. He feels out of place and at sea, crammed into the corner of the stuffy little room while the man he's come all this way to see just isn't here. Obviously he's physically present, and Arthur can smell Eames, traces of sandalwood, citrus, and cigarettes now overlain with notes of raw leather, wintergreen, and sweat. But the man talking to him right now is Jonathan Kent, and Arthur can't tell if his Eames is gone or never existed in the first place.
His heart drops into his stomach as he's hit by a wave of exhaustion and regret.

"I'm here." He looks, a little hopelessly, into Eames' face in the mirror. His eyes meet Jonathan Kent's, a stranger's eyes, which are surrounded now by an oily grey slick of half-dissolved makeup, and his heart sinks a little lower.

Kent observes this, and then he does something oddly familiar: he sits up straight, leans slightly toward the mirror, looks intently into his own eyes, and concentrates. His face metamorphoses, somehow becoming Eames, or at least a nightmarishly greasy, chimney-sweep version of Eames. When he looks back at Arthur he's Alec, again; Arthur's thief, his partner, his lover.

Arthur's heart, suddenly buoyant, threatens to float right up out of his body. He leans forward and grins, helpless and relieved.

"You're here." Eames turns toward Arthur, his face contrite and affectionate under the wreck of the stage makeup. "My heart, I'm sorry, truly. Let me get this rubbish off me and I'll greet you properly. It's the very devil."

"I don't care about that," Arthur protests, but Eames shakes his head vigorously.

"It's ghastly stuff, and you're perfection in that suit; I don't want it on you." He rubs his mouth briskly with the now particolored cloth. "Thought I'd have time to get it off before you made it back." He beams at Arthur, his gaze running up and down Arthur's full length with approval. "I see you managed to stop by the flat."

"I had barely enough time. But I wanted to make a good impression on your... people. And thanks for pressing the suit for me, and for this shirt."

Eames drops the filthy facecloth in a bin by the dresser, mists his face generously with toner, and goes to work with a clean cloth. "I thought you might appreciate it." He winks at Arthur and adds matter-of-factly: "Don't think I don't want to maul you, love, but we've not enough time here and now."

Arthur blanches. "I wasn't expecting... I mean..."

Eames whoops with laughter. "I saw your face when you were watching me, out there. I know what you were thinking. If you were dreaming of a passionate dressing room shag, come tomorrow night and I'll do right by you. But tonight being opening, we're expected to mingle with the donors at the cast party." He tosses the cloth into the bin and stands, turning toward Arthur. His face is shining and pink, his features his own again. "At least, I am," he amends. "And I'd like to show you off."

Without further preamble, he's up and moving toward Arthur, and Arthur finds himself wrapped in an engulfing embrace, crowded against the back wall of the tiny room, being kissed in that whole-hearted, all-encompassing Eamesian manner he's ached for during the past few weeks. He surrenders to it entirely, taking in Eames with all of his senses, feeling all of his nerve endings wake up suddenly as if Eames' mouth had triggered a switch inside him. God, how he's missed this: the way their lips fit sweetly together like puzzle pieces, the way stepping into Eames' arms feels like coming home.

The faint trace of mint in the air turns out to have come from whatever Eames had been chewing before Arthur arrived backstage, and his toner is scented with lime and lavender. Between that and the vigorous makeup removal, Arthur is grateful that he doesn't have to think about tasting Jane Holden-Reeves on Eames' face or breath. Something else is slightly off, though, and it nags at him,
breaking his concentration. When they pause for air, he realizes he's been craning his neck, and suddenly he knows what the difference is.

"You're taller."

"Not a bit." But Eames' eyes have gone shifty. He drops Arthur's hands, stepping back and away from him.

Arthur steps forward, facing him again. "Well, I know I haven't shrunk." He frowns, tilts his head, and puts his arms around Eames' shoulders. There are a few inches of height there that he knows weren't present before. "Definitely taller."

"Hmmm," Eames says noncommittally.

Arthur isn't giving this up. "Alec."

Eames gives him a flat unfriendly look and says nothing.

"What is it?" Arthur considers Eames' figure, his costume, and then he laughs, nudging one solid black knee-high boot with the toe of his shoe. "How many inches have you got in there?"

"Two and a half," Eames finally admits, defensively. "Jane's a tall girl and she was sulking about having to wear flats."

"I couldn't tell just looking at you. They just look like club boots. They did a good job with them."

"Hush, you."

"I don't care. Just come here and kiss me some more."

Eames doesn't need to be asked twice.

Five minutes later they're both achingly hard and breathing heavy, rutting their still-clothed lower halves fiercely against one another, the universe having condensed down to the diameter of their bodies together. Arthur's hat and muffler are on the floor, or maybe on the moon; his shirt and waistcoat are open to bare his chest and torso, and his hands are all over Eames' naked back and arms, frantic to get their fill of every curve and plane of muscle and bone -- hell, every freckle -- that he's been missing. The only sounds in the world are their panting breaths, low groans and ecstatic whispered phrases of pleasure, and the frantic slick noises of their mouths joining, again and again.

Eames is working one hand into the back of Arthur's pants, and doing something wonderfully lewd to his undamaged ear with his tongue, when the door to the dressing room flies open squarely into Arthur's back. He stumbles into Eames, who executes some sort of twisting side-leap maneuver and manages to land upright, supporting Arthur by one arm and banging the door closed again with the other. Arthur staggers to the nearest wall and collapses against it, panting.

"You daft cunt, Frankie," Eames bellows. "Sod off, man! You can't just barge in here."

"I am sorry!" a plummy tenor voice apologizes from the other side of the door. "Jane asked me to fetch you, there're patrons waiting on you."

"Jane didn't ask you to cockblock me, now, did she?" Eames opens the door just enough to let him glare at the man in the hallway, but not enough to reveal the straining crotch of his leather pants.
"Truly sorry, mate. I didn't think you'd be... Oh! Oh, hullo! You must be Aaron! I'm Frankie!"

Eames and Arthur exchange a look. "Uh, hi," Arthur calls through gritted teeth. He has a terrible case of blue balls at the moment, not to mention an aching kidney where the doorknob had bashed it.

"We've been waiting just ages to meet you!" Frankie calls enthusiastically, bobbing and craning around Eames' head in the doorway to try to get a glimpse of Arthur, who turns his back, fumbling with his shirt buttons and trying to slow his breathing.

"Not until he's got his clothes on," Eames tells him firmly. "Run along, tell Jane we'll be there in a moment."

"Cheers," Frankie agrees, and bounds off down the hall with one further "Sorry!" echoing behind him.

Eames shuts the door and turns apologetically to Arthur. "All right, love?" His face changes when he sees Arthur's grimace of pain, and he takes Arthur's arm, tugging him to the chair before the dresser. "How bad is it?"

"It's mostly my balls. He got me pretty solid in the back with the doorknob, though."

Eames gently turns Arthur around and deftly tugs his shirt up in back, probing the sore area gently. "You'll have another splendid bruise come morning," he says unhappily, and shakes his head. "Honestly, he's a great overgrown puppy. And how's your head, love?"

"I'll be fine," Arthur insists. "In a few minutes. Do what you need to do."

Eames reaches reluctantly for the leather vest, slings his arms through it, and starts hooking the buttons closed one by one. "I'd best get out there soon if we don't want him thundering back here and breaking the door down. You can stay in here, if you like. Or go back to the flat." He sniffs thoughtfully under each arm, and then rummages in the mess of bottles and containers on the dressing table for deodorant.

Arthur twists his back experimentally, and begins putting his own clothing back in order. "No, I'll come with you."

"Of course." Eames' eyes are still faintly concerned.

"Oh!" Arthur remembers suddenly. "Hey, you were..." He shakes his head, inarticulate. "You're amazing, you really are. I knew you would be, I never doubted it, but you were even better than I'd imagined. You had the entire theater hanging on every word and most of them breathing heavy, too. I thought they were going to swarm the stage during your curtain call."

Eames ducks his head, pleased, and then he says, simply, "Thank you, Arthur." His smile is crooked but genuine, its warmth so palpable that Arthur thinks he could almost bask in it. He'd forgotten how good this could be, being the sole focus of Eames' considerable attention; being wanted, admired, loved by this particular man.

Eames finishes the last button and tugs the hem of the leather garment down snug across his hipbones. He checks his reflection in the mirror as the smile fades. "Managing Kent and Petruchio at once is challenging," he warns, a shade apprehensively. "And I must stay Kent, while we're at the theatre. I'm still here, underneath, but -- please don't take any starchiness on my part as reflecting on you or why you're here."
Arthur nods. "I know that. I just wasn't ready for it, earlier."

Eames looks relieved. He steps close to the mirror again and does his concentration thing again, and there's something indefinable but obviously different about his face when he turns away.

Arthur straightens his wrinkled tie and tucks a few stray hairs back into place, and takes Eames' proffered hand.


"Aaron."

"Jon." It comes more naturally this time.

Their fingers intertwine. Eames bends and brushes his lips gently over Arthur's. "I'm going to kiss you all night," he murmurs, "you're gorgeous, and you're here, and you're mine. I can't wait to--" and he kisses Arthur once more for good measure. Then he pulls him forward, through the maze of backstage corridors and toward the set.

The cast party, Eames explains as they walk, traditionally takes place on the set itself, and all of the cast are expected to participate. It's not a party in the true sense, more of a fringe benefit for the wealthy patrons of the theatre and the company. Prominent donors, respected elderly directors, and potential producers sip champagne and take the opportunity to flirt with and ogle the talent, all of whom remain in costume, although most of them will have removed or toned down their makeup.

They walk onto the stage hand in hand, and Eames pauses to pass Arthur a sparkling flute of champagne from a side table before taking one for himself.

Without letting go of him, Eames heads directly toward a small knot of costumed men downstage. Arthur is introduced to Allan (Baptista) and Nayeed (Hortensio), Marc (Vincentio) and Charles (Gremio). He responds to each of them with the confident, friendly informality of a native-born Californian. He's spent enough time with Cobb, and Cobb's family, to pull it off successfully.

There's a moment of awkwardness when Nayeed asks about Arthur's split earlobe and bruised temple, but Eames smoothly lies about a domestic mishap with a cupboard door, and apart from candid expressions of sympathy all around, that's the last of the concern about his injuries.

Eames keeps an arm lightly around Arthur's shoulders, and after they've exchanged the requisite pleasantries, he tugs Arthur away from the group and toward the actors playing Bianca and Lucentio, who are deep in conversation with an older woman in a simply cut but elaborately embroidered celadon gown and jacket, with exquisitely groomed white hair.

"If we're separated and Charles tries to corner you, cough loudly and I'll come rescue you. He's an old lech and you're rather his type."

"I can defend myself," Arthur assures him.

"Suit yourself." Eames shrugs. "Remember I offered."

Either the champagne or the exhaustion of his transcontinental flight hits Arthur at this point, and he slumps a little against Eames' now-slimmer but still substantial bulk. He tries to concentrate on Eames' introduction to the white-haired lady (Carmella something, a Duchess of somewhere -- he doesn't quite catch it because he's trying to stifle a sudden deep yawn just as Eames mentions her title) and to the actors, Regan (Bianca) and Russell (Lucentio). The uncharacteristic deference in
Eames' manner as he does this escapes Arthur entirely.

He accepts an air kiss from Regan and a firm handshake from Russell, and then offers his hand to the older lady, who pauses for a microsecond before putting out one gloved hand and pressing his fingers lightly.

"Aaron Gershon," he says pleasantly. "Nice to meet you." Her face looks vaguely familiar, but he can't quite place it or connect it with her name. A character actress on TV, maybe.

She looks strangely relieved when she hears his voice, for some reason. "It is a pleasure to meet you as well. Are you enjoying your visit to London?"

"I just arrived tonight -- I'm visiting Jon, here," Arthur indicates Eames. "I really enjoyed the play. Did you?" He can see, in his peripheral vision, Eames and the other two actors exchanging glances, and wonders what he's missing.

"Quite." She smiles briefly but doesn't offer him any further conversational opening. He's about to ask her how she's involved in the theater world when Regan pipes up with a question about, apparently, some charity she works with, and she turns politely but perceptibly away from Arthur again.

Eames takes his arm and promptly hauls him away toward the far side of the stage, his shoulders quaking and his face purpling with unreleased laughter.

They're intercepted halfway there by Jane Holden-Reeves. She's still wearing the loose, sensual velvet gown from her final scene, but her face has re-assumed the pinched, shrewish expression of her first scene. She marches directly up to them, stopping them both in their tracks, and stabs a finger at Eames' face.

"Jonnie, that was horrid of you," she scolds, sotto voce, and flicks his left ear hard with a long, crimson-manicured fingernail. Eames yelps and covers his ear, giving her an injured look, but doesn't retaliate.

She turns to Arthur apologetically. "It's all right, luvvie, no-one expects an American to know how to greet Them properly. But he might have warned you." She props her hands on her hips and glares at Eames on Arthur's behalf.

Arthur's tired brain finally connects the white-haired woman's faintly familiar face with her faintly familiar name, and with her title, and he's abruptly fully awake again.

"No. Oh, no." He can feel his ears going pink. "Jon," he accuses Eames, pleased that the name rolls easily off his tongue even in his embarrassment.

"I didn't know she would be here. I didn't recognize her from the back, she's done something different with her hair. And as you said," he appeals to Jane, "he's American. It'll hardly trouble her."

Jane's gimlet gaze bores into him. "You know one of Them always comes to an opening, derr brain." She goes to flick his ear again, and he ducks. She turns back to Arthur and her face softens, her accent taking on its carefully cultured aspect again. "Aaron, I'm Jane. I hear you've met my husband already -- and I am so sorry about his intruding on your reunion, he's quite ashamed. I'm anxious to meet you properly, and get to know you truly, when you've recovered from all of this." She gestures sweepingly across the stage. "Shall we lunch tomorrow? Is that too soon?"
Arthur looks to Eames for help with this onslaught.

"Perhaps the day after," Eames suggests. "Give him a chance to get over the jet lag."

"Ta. Come over to ours around 11 then?"

Arthur nods, and Jane grins. "I must finish my rounds." She kisses Arthur on the cheek; she has to bend down to do it, he notices. "You've got a pash rash, sweetheart," she whispers, and Arthur puts a hand to his face, stricken at this new humiliation.

"He's darling. You must take better care of him," she orders, and then she's off, smoothly intercepting a middle-aged, curly-haired man just making his way past them. She sweeps him away into conversation, and then they're alone again.

Arthur gives Eames a flinty look. "Is there anything else I should be warned about?" He's pleased that his voice remains even and calm.

"No, nothing more. And I am sorry, love. I wouldn't have dragged you over if I'd realized she was there. I shall let you take it out on my hide when we get home tonight. Or my arse."

This very public proposition flummoxes Arthur enough to shut him up, which had undoubtedly been Eames' intent. He's not going to turn down the offer, though. He exhales and nods assent, and Eames's eyes twinkle before he leans down and very quickly flickers his tongue into Arthur's ear again.

Arthur shivers and bows his head, trying not to make the jolt of instant arousal too obvious. "Come along," Eames cajoles, taking his arm. "Let's get you another drink, hey?"

For the next hour, Arthur is deftly steered by Eames up- and down-stage and introduced to Timotha Jacks, the show's director; actors Elisavet (Widow), Finlay (Biondello), and Dante (Tranio); and finally to Archibald Greer, a dark, wizened little gnome of a man whom Eames addresses with the utmost respect. He looks approximately 200 years old and is at least partially deaf, but apparently he's the costume designer responsible for the stunning leather ensembles Petruchio wears throughout the play. He looks Arthur frankly up and down when they're introduced, cackles, pokes Eames in the hip with a gnarled finger, and addresses him in a thick brogue that takes Arthur a few minutes to parse.

"Did he just call me a 'nice bit of tail,'?" Arthur demands under his breath as soon as Greer turns away.

Eames shrugs innocently. "I can't imagine why he'd say such a thing." He reaches down and gooses Arthur, who jumps, but only a little.

Greer's polar opposite, Timotha is tall, glacial, androgynous, and abrupt. She's easily five inches taller than Arthur, dressed nattily in a fitted navy pinstriped pantsuit and stunning cherry-red Louboutins. Something about the way she looks at Arthur seems to say that she sees right through his disguise and that she's disappointed, but not surprised, by how poorly he's constructed it. Also that she's fully capable of driving a stiletto heel into his forehead if he attempts any of this dream-thief nonsense around her, thank you.

"She's terrifying," Eames agrees, although not where she can hear him. "Don't take it personally, love, she can't actually read your mind. She just likes to look as though she does."

Arthur has attended his share of stage-door meet and greets, in company with his mother, but he'd never quite looked at it from the point of view of the cast or crew. He can see now that there's a
difference in the way they interact with each other and the way they interact with members of the public. There's an easy camaraderie, a language of glances between the members of the company that's not quite present when they speak with the invited attendees. After his disastrous introduction to Regan and Russell and the white-haired lady, an unspoken agreement seems to swiftly coalesce among the rest of the cast, and as he continues to be introduced, he's surprised to find himself included firmly on the company's side of the "us vs. them" that this party-that-isn't-a-party is all about.

"They've heard all about you," Eames admits when Arthur comments on this. He smiles and winks at a pair of overdressed society matrons who are making their way toward him. "Don't fret, I kept to the profile we worked up. And Frankie's been running his mouth about finding us in flagrante delicto, I'm sure. You're one of us, now."

Arthur groans. "Great. So they think I'm an idiot American who tried to fuck you five minutes after walking backstage, and I've been walking around all night with beard burn all over my face. I'd thought maybe we could manage not to offend your coworkers this time."

Eames looks amused and takes a sip of champagne. "You'd have to suck off a live donkey in the middle of Trafalgar Square before you'd offend this lot, love."

Ignoring Arthur's horrified reaction, he strides briskly toward the approaching women and introduces himself, allowing each of them to kiss a cheek. They leave lurid lipstick prints on his stubble, and Arthur makes a firm mental note to have Eames use that makeup-eradicating cream again before they go to bed.

"Ladies, welcome!" Eames says brightly, and accedes to their request for autographs, smiling an empty smile and politely flirting with them on autopilot. They chirp at Eames, stroke his tattoos, and giggle, obviously envisioning themselves to be both alluring and daring. After they've both begged a selfie with him, he excuses himself and returns to Arthur as they mince away, twittering at each other.

Eames wearily surveys the bustling, chattering mass of people around them, apparently looking for his next target. Arthur leans against him and watches the crowd, wavering slightly as he again feels the full effect of his ten-hour flight, the full day of work he'd put in before even getting on the plane, and the lengthy play.

Several feet away, a trim, elfin man with white-blond hair and a beautifully cut suit of deep viridian suddenly spots them, and his face lights up with outsize delight. He breaks off his conversation with Regan/Bianca and trots toward them.

"For God's sake, introduce yourself before you start snogging people," Eames scolds, sounding more resigned than alarmed. The blond man blinks sheepishly and bobs his head apologetically. "Francis Holden-Reeves," he announces in an all-too-recently-familiar tenor, seizing Arthur's hand and pumping it cheerfully. "Call me Frankie. I'm Jane's husband, you met Jane earlier tonight? Katharina?"

Eames watches them, his eyebrows creased good-naturedly. "He knows that, mate. Aaron, Frankie. Frankie, Aaron Gershon, my partner."
"It's a pleasure," Frankie burbles at Arthur. "And I apologize again for, you know, earlier! He is lovely--" to Eames. "And so well put together. This is Canali, isn't it?," he asks, turning back to Arthur and fingering the arm of his suit. "Late last season? It's an excellent fit on you, and that color shirt with it is brilliant."

"Frankie is a clothes hound," Eames explains.

Arthur nods. "Yours is very well cut, too. I was admiring it earlier. Who's the maker?"

Frankie looks down dubiously at his exquisite clothing. "I think this one is Huntsman. It's ages old, though. I've been thinking of having some new ones made. Have you been to Savile Row? Jonnie mentioned you were a snappy dresser."

Arthur hopes Frankie isn't proposing a mano-a-mano shopping trip. He's likeable, certainly; Arthur can see why Eames is responding to him with tolerant amusement, rather than anger, despite his having bowled them over, invaded their privacy, given them both blue balls, bruised Arthur, and related the whole story to what appears to have been the entire cast of the play, all in less than an hour. There's obviously little to no real malice in him; he's just immediately exhausting.

"It's a little out of my price range," he demurs.

"Hmm." Frankie runs a critical eye over Arthur's frame. "Come along with me and we'll see. I think a Kilgour would fit you beautifully. But I won't keep you now. Jane said you're coming for brunch day after tomorrow, we can talk about it then. I just wanted to officially meet you beforehand."

"It's good to put a face to your name," Arthur replies. Then, mindful of both Aaron Gershon's "Californian" background and of how Frankie had initially approached him, he goes in for a hug. Frankie reciprocates enthusiastically, claps Eames on the back, and is off, already talking animatedly to a trio of women passing by them.

"Jonnie?"

Eames looks lofty. "For members of the gentry only. Upstart American entrepreneurs are required to use my formal name."

Arthur is not going to take that lying down. "Percival," he mouths silently, looking straight into Eames' eyes and gambling that he won't get tackled for it this time, not here in front of everyone.

Eames doesn't dignify that with a response, just turns away and crosses his arms. He's not really angry, though: Arthur can see him trying to hide a smile, even as he resumes scanning the crowd to see who else he needs to make sure he greets tonight.

"Um," Arthur says. Eames looks at him inquiringly. "Did I just agree to purchase a bespoke suit?"

"Possibly." Eames thinks back over the conversation. "Well, yes. I think you may have." He takes Arthur's hand again, but keeps looking through the other faces on stage with them.

Arthur yawns again, unable to stop himself. He's tempting fate by trying to remain upright and make conversation at this point, he realizes. Drinking more champagne on an empty stomach isn't doing him any favors, either.

"Jon." Eames turns easily as if Arthur has called him by this name forever. "Can I go back to your
dressing room and wait there? I don't think I'm going to hold up much longer out here." The single, tiny folding chair in the cramped room isn't exactly appealing, but at least it will be quiet there, and Arthur has years of experience snatching sleep in improbable places.

Eames' brow creases with concern. "Of course you can. But come with me and let's see if the green room is empty instead. You'll be more comfortable there, and there's food -- I really should have thought to feed you instead of rutting on you."

"I wouldn't have let you. I wanted to touch you more than I wanted to eat," Arthur disagrees. "I still do. But yeah, food would be a good idea."

They manage to escape the increasingly crowded stage without any further entanglements. Arthur follows Eames around a corner, down a half-flight of wooden stairs, and through a baize door into a blissfully silent, shabby little room, crowded with broken-down, slipcovered couches and rickety tables which hold, Arthur is relieved to see, trays of bread and vegetables and bowls of dubious-looking dips. The sandwiches are skimpy and wilted and the *crudité* is soggy, but it's real food.

"It's picked over, but better than nothing," Eames apologizes. "There're mixers and water in the fridge."

"I'll manage just fine. If you're sure it's ok for me to be in here."

"They know who you are and that you've been traveling all day; no-one will bother you. I'll do my best to wrap things up." Eames seizes Arthur's hand and kisses it. "Then we'll go home."

"Home," Arthur agrees fervently, liking the sound of it.

Eames kisses his hand again, gazing fondly at Arthur over his knuckles, and then leaves, closing the door behind him. His boots clomp briskly up the little stairway and then he's gone.

Alone, Arthur is suddenly reeling from exhaustion. He picks out the least-dodgy-looking of the sandwich rolls and some cherry tomatoes and snap peas, supplements this with a piece of snack-sized cheese from the fridge, and collapses onto the nearest couch with his plate. There's a television on the wall, and a remote hanging next to it, but he's enjoying the silence too much to distract himself with drivel.

He eats steadily, chases the meager meal down with a bottle of tonic water, and then slumps down into the cushions, promising himself that he'll only close his eyes for a minute or two before rejoining Eames outside.

He's startled awake some indeterminate time later by rapid footsteps entering the room, followed by the creak of the refrigerator door. Cupboard doors open and close, ice clatters into a glass, and liquid splashes in after it.

"Oh, dear," a low baritone voice exclaims dramatically, as Arthur stirs. "Do ignore me, I'm awfully sorry to have bothered you." He doesn't sound very sorry, though.

With a sinking feeling, Arthur sits up, rubbing his eyes, and realizes that his quiet little sanctuary has been invaded by the elderly Charles/Gremio.

The greybeard actor sips his drink and looks Arthur over frankly. "Care for a G&T? I'm told I mix a wicked drink."

Arthur, disoriented and dismayed, declines politely. He wishes Charles would take his drink and go away again, but Charles seems to take Arthur's verbal acknowledgment as an invitation. He
slouches comfortably on the arm of the couch, one leg carelessly sprawled only five inches from
Arthur's knee, and wants to know about Arthur's flight, and how long he's staying, and where he's
from.

Arthur answers as monosyllabically as possible without being actively rude, while his increasingly
muzzy brain tries to figure out how he can extricate himself without actual violence or another
social faux pas. Charles clearly has no such concern, and is either too drunk or too determined to let
Arthur's demeanor deter him from continuing to inch closer and closer to Arthur's body as he
chatters. The ice in his glass rattles as he uses it to emphasize a point, and his other airily gesturing
hand is clearly going to land on Arthur's arm in a second.

Fortunately, heavy footsteps sound down the stairs outside before Arthur has to take any drastic
action. With a surge of gratitude, he hears the door swing open, and the footsteps pause.

Charles' eyes flick guiltily past Arthur to the doorway, and he stands up, moving a step away and
standing bolt upright.

"Ah-ah," Eames says with an edge of real menace. "Mustn't touch."

"I was just getting to know your friend."

"My partner is exhausted. Was sound asleep, by the look of him." Eames folds his arms and
draws up to his full height, aided by the extra inches concealed in his black boots. "And, not least,
he belongs to me, which you'd do well to remember in future. Now get out of here."

Charles gets out of there.

Eames finally looks directly at Arthur, and Arthur has had enough. He is thoroughly sick and tired
of English people, and their rudeness, and their bizarre behavior, and most of all, of being treated
like an inanimate object.

"Stop talking about me in the third person!" he snaps. "Fuck." He digs the heels of his hands into
his eye sockets, pressing to stifle a growing headache. "I can't do this. I'm sorry, I really need to
sleep. Let me get a cab and I'll see you when you get home."

Eames kneels and gently removes Arthur's hands from his eyes, rubbing them soothingly and then
kissing them again. "I was coming to take you home, darling. Let me just change into civvies and
we'll be off, and tucked into bed before you know it."

Arthur fixes on that word. "Bed. Oh god, bed." It's enough to get him up and off the couch.
Eames snags a bottle of water from the green room refrigerator, then wraps an arm around
Arthur's waist and guides him through the backstage maze to his dressing room.

"Drink it. All of it. And sit, there." Arthur obeys, grateful for the direction. He's too tired to even
leer at Eames as he efficiently exchanges the tight black leather costume for a pair of charcoal
trousers, a navy muffler and an ivory silk sweater.

Eames starts to pull on a long woolen overcoat, then frowns. "You didn't wear a real coat, did
you?"

Arthur shakes his head, not particularly caring. "Doesn't matter."

But Eames drapes the heavy garment over Arthur's shoulders. For himself, he plucks the leather
jacket from Petruchio's first scene off of his costume rack and wriggles into it. It's a snug fit with
the sweater underneath. "Remind me to bring this back tomorrow."
He leads Arthur up and out the front door of the theatre and around the corner to hail a cab. Although they only have to wait a few minutes on the cold street, it feels interminable to Arthur, as does the fifteen-minute ride home. He dozes against Eames' shoulder, the warmth of Eames' body and the wool coat combining with the motion of the car to lull him to sleep.

He's vaguely aware of Eames paying the cabbie when the car stops, and then helping him out of the cab and holding Arthur more or less upright against him while he unlocks the front door.

They step inside, or at least, Eames steps, while Arthur stumbles.

"I'd carry you if you'd allow it," Eames suggests.

Arthur straightens up. "I can walk by myself."

Eames looks dubious. "Right."

Arthur narrows his eyes. "Go on." He flaps a hand toward the elevators.

"At least take my arm."

This strikes Arthur as a reasonable compromise.

They make their way slowly to the bank of elevators, and then down the hallway, and finally into Eames' flat. Eames pauses to relock the door, take off his shoes, and pour a glass of water, but Arthur trudges straight toward the bedroom, shedding pieces of clothing all the way, and not bothering to turn on a light. He doesn't care. He'll have it dry cleaned later. Bed.

The bed is heaven. The pillowcase is soft and crisp, the sheets clean and cool against his bare skin, the duvet a pleasant and soothing weight. "I'm never getting out of this bed," he announces.

"That's going to put a crimp in our social life," Eames calls back, and clicks off the light in the front room.

Arthur hazily registers the bathroom door closing, and water running, and then Eames moving around the hallway and into the dark bedroom, and finally Eames' weight settling into the bed next to him.

"My heart," Eames whispers, moving closer to Arthur and rolling his groin, his cock already semihard, up against Arthur's thigh. He's not wearing anything either, and his bare skin radiates heat.

"Love you," Arthur whispers back. His cock doesn't even twitch, even though he's been waiting for this moment for weeks now. He's just too tired. "Finally here." He fumbles for Eames' hand under the bedclothes.

"I love you. I've wanted you so badly."

"I can't fuck you right now." Arthur pushes his flaccid penis against Eames' naked hip, and Eames laughs softly.

"I thought as much. May I touch you? Or do you just want to sleep?"

"No, touch me."

Eames gently kisses Arthur's face, his mouth, his neck, and Arthur sighs and kisses him back, little more than brushes of their lips on each other's skin. There's no heat behind it, only a wordless tenderness, their bodies melting closer and closer together in the dark until they're
breathing as one.

A thief's fingers, intelligent and deft, trace Arthur's hairline, his eyebrows, the curve of his cheekbones; move through his hair, encircle his neck; skate delicately across a nipple and tap lightly over each rib.

When Arthur fails to protest these liberties, Eames' hands sweep slowly and luxuriantly down Arthur's back, moving carefully around the bruised area, and then, more tentatively, the curve of his ass.

Arthur finds that he's not too tired after all.

When he'd jerked himself off, alone in his bed, across the Atlantic and a whole continent ago, his fantasies had run the gamut of all of the most ardent, erotic acts they'd engaged in over the SARU job. He'd mined his memories for the most blatant, lewdest moments of sensuality between them, a pornucopia of sounds and senses, images and scents.

This, here and now, isn't that at all. It's slow and sweet, quiet and nearly breathless. Eames keeps touching and kissing him everywhere, reverently, as though Arthur is a fragile object that might shatter if he makes a wrong move. He embraces Arthur with his whole body, pressing the skin of his feet, his knees, his belly, against Arthur's skin, his hands and lips moving gently over Arthur's face and down his chest.

Even as his hands grow bolder, he studiously avoids delving too deeply into the cleft of Arthur's buttocks, or touching Arthur's cock directly, until Arthur takes his hand and puts it there himself so that Eames can feel how hard he is.

Eames stills and then shudders, once, with the effort of not reacting, and his cock throbs against Arthur's leg.

"I want you," Arthur breathes. "Can we just--"

"Arthur, yes. I've been aching for weeks..."

But he doesn't finish the sentence. Kissing his way down Arthur's torso, his hands preceding his questing mouth, he pauses with his cheek pressed to the crease of Arthur's groin, his breath hot and quick over Arthur's straining cock.

"Yeah?"

Arthur's breath stutters in anticipation. "Oh god, yes." He doesn't think he'll last long at all; they've been too long apart, and their closeness now is dizzying.

Eames sinks full down on him and groans deep in his throat, and Arthur shivers at the sensation. His mouth is hot, plush and silky around Arthur, the slippery suction and the expert slide of tongue along his length sheer bliss. Wordless affirmations and low noises of rapture erupt from Arthur's throat, unbidden.

From the deep contented noises Eames is making down there, he's almost as pleased as Arthur.

"You sound like... a dog... with a bone," Arthur murmurs, breathless and grinning, pushing deeper into Eames' throat with a gasp.

Eames shakes his head and pulls off slightly, his lips brushing over the tip of Arthur's cockhead. "You're here. If I could have any wish it would have been this. Just this." And then he really goes
to work.

Arthur strokes Eames' hair and abandons himself to the sensations and sounds of Eames’ mouth around him, the weight of Eames' chest on his thigh, the warm funk of musk they're both starting to emit as their bodies heat up.

Images of the play, of Eames, dominant, his muscular body so starkly outlined by the skintight leather, and of the audience's reaction to him -- the frank admiration and desire, the yearning in their eyes when they looked at him -- flicker through Arthur’s mind. He thinks with pride, *But he's mine, and then I belong to him.* Both thoughts have their own erotic frisson, one of possession, one of surrender, and he plays them against each other, back and forth, as he rocks and arches his hips.

It's so tender and dreamlike, Arthur feels like he could keep doing this for hours, even while part of him is drifting away. He doesn't want it to end, but he doesn't want to lose consciousness, either, so he intentionally increases the rhythm, thrusting deliberately into Eames' willing mouth.

Eames strokes Arthur with one hand and cups Arthur's balls with the other, rolling them gently, suckling faster and harder, and Arthur tightens his hand in Eames' hair. When he lets himself go, the pleasure is so intense it's almost painful, searing his nerves with sweetness.

Eames stretches his neck up and back, panting and wiping his chin. "I have been" -- he searches for the right word -- "famished for you."

"Me too," Arthur agrees muzzily. When he makes a halfhearted effort to sit up, Eames pushes him back down, and swarms back on top of him, kissing Arthur's hair, his ear, his face.

Arthur wraps his arms around Eames' broad back and traces his tongue up the line of his throat, nipping softly at his jaw, reveling in the salt-sweet taste of him. "Do you want me to?"

But Eames is shaking his head. "Like this." He slots his body against Arthur's more deliberately, his cock hard and already leaking where it's pressed between them. He thrusts his hips, gently but firmly, finding a steady rhythm almost at once, his kisses sweet and lingering but his big hand gripping Arthur's side with a bruising possessiveness.

Arthur rides it with him, welcoming the rough drag of Eames' thigh against his own now quiescent cock, the bulge of heavy muscle in Eames' arms and shoulders under Arthur's greedy hands as Eames rocks them both in an escalating rhythm. He leans his head back against the pillow and Eames licks his throat, fierce and ravenous, pumping his hips harder, his cock an iron rod against Arthur's belly.

"Do it," Arthur encourages. "Come on, come for me..."

Eames growls and buries his teeth in Arthur's shoulder, then socks his body hard against Arthur's and stiffens. His hips jerk twice, three times, and Arthur feels a convulsion and sudden wet heat where Eames' cock is driving against his skin. Eames shudders and slumps, his body going boneless and sliding slightly to Arthur's side so that Arthur isn't bearing his whole weight.

They lie there, panting and tangled, sticky with sweat and spunk, their heads pressed together, idly stroking each other's skin and hair. After a few minutes, with a grunt of effort, Eames sits up and fishes for the duvet, then tugs it up over both of them and turns to nestle Arthur's head onto his chest.

In his exhaustion, the simple gesture almost undoes Arthur. "Alec."
"Hmm?"

Arthur doesn't quite know what he wanted to say. His consciousness is rapidly being overtaken by a sweet dark wave of oblivion. He rallies briefly. "It's so good with you."

Eames stills under him, but Arthur can feel his heart beat faster. "And with you." He doesn't say anything else, then, only letting the press of his cheek and the sweep of his lashes against Arthur's forehead tell him *goodnight, my love, my other half*.

"*My other half*," Arthur agrees drowsily, and he's asleep before he can register Eames' blink of surprise.
We Can Do the Tango Just For Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The heavy curtains don't admit much light, but Arthur's body is still on Las Vegas time, and the pale glow emanating from the very edges of the window is enough to set off his internal alarm clock. He transitions from sound asleep to wide awake in an instant.

The room he's in is cool and dim. Arthur blinks, letting his eyes become accustomed to the low light so that he can get his bearings. He can make out large, solid pieces of dark furniture along one wall, and the glint of book jackets along the other, and there's a faint scent of old leather behind his head. A delivery truck is beeping a block or so away, faint but distinct in the otherwise quiet morning air.

London; Eames' flat; Eames' bedroom.

Eames' bed.

Having established where he is, he takes inventory of his person: he's naked, and his back is sore, low down, and the hair on his belly and groin is matted with dried fluid. The bed is unfamiliar and overly giving, but he's deliciously warm under a goose-down duvet, and his knees and hands are touching the sleep-hot flesh of another bare body. Deep, regular, not-quite-snores are issuing from the depths of an oversized down pillow next to him, and the warm air that escapes from under the duvet when Arthur rolls over is fragrant with dried sweat and saliva, soap, semen, and musk, a uniquely compound Arthur-and-Eames scent that only exists when they've been spending hours skin to skin and breath to breath. He breathes it in deeply.

Much as he'd like to fall asleep again, he won't be able to until he gets up to pee. He tries to inch out of the bed without disturbing Eames, but Eames, as ever, is a light sleeper, and Arthur has no more than grasped the duvet before Eames stirs and begins groping for him.

"It was the nightingale, and not the lark," Eames murmurs into Arthur's shoulder, fumbling his hand up Arthur's torso and then settling a heavy arm over his chest in a proprietary manner that would have been gratifying under any other circumstance.

"It was the lark," Arthur disagrees, trying unsuccessfully to get out of the bed again. "Let me up."

"Believe me, love, it was the nightingale." Eames' arm tightens around Arthur. His eyes are still closed.

"I thought you didn't like getting pissed on." The arm hastily disengages. Eames makes a faint sleepy grumbling noise and rolls over in the other direction, pulling Arthur's pillow over his own head. Arthur takes a moment to admire the curve of Eames' naked hip, the sculpted musculature of his back and buttocks, before tugging the duvet up to cover him fully and padding swiftly toward the bathroom on bare feet.

After attending to business, he washes his hands quickly, chilled by the cold damp air in the flat. Eames apparently isn't a big believer in indoor heating. Then he remembers the sketchy little flat in Mombasa, cooled only by fans, and Eames' refusal to allow Arthur to shut the windows and use the air conditioner in the Port Elizabeth cottages; maybe Eames just doesn't do forced air, in general. That isn't going to work for Arthur; if the rest of the month is this cold, they'll need to find
a space heater or some other compromise.

As he dries his hands, his gaze falls upon the reflection of the shower door in the mirror above the sink. Two minutes later, he's standing under a gloriously strong spray, feeling the ache in his lower back and shoulders loosen under the hot water, and sighing with pleasure as he massages a luxuriant, orange-lemongrass lather through his hair. That shampoo is a key note in Eames' unique scent profile, along with the sandalwood deodorant and the beeswax pomade he favors, and the faint aura of tobacco that seems to hang about him whether he's been actively smoking or not.

As he rinses his hair and face, Arthur thinks back to Eames' little monologue about scent and familiarity and comfort, about how Erika's scent was the key to gaining Kluwers' trust, and Eames' insistence on investigating the products she used so he could completely replicate her in the dream. He remembers, too, the day he and Eames had finally confessed their longstanding attraction to each other, the hours of unspoken olfactory conversation between them, and how surprisingly intimate (and disconcerting) it had felt to steal Eames' scent and wear it on his own body. He looks forward to that intimacy, this time -- and at any rate he fully intends to be next to, on, under and inside as much of Eames' bare skin as he can manage, for the rest of this day and the next several besides.

...And after that? They'll have to see how this works for them. Arthur knows what he wants, or at least what his heart and his body want, but his stubborn, analytical brain is much less certain about whether they can sustain the trust and intimacy they've built thus far. They'll both need to find the next job, and the next, and the one after that, whether together or separately. This past month had been hard on him, and he's already not looking forward to the next separation. He hasn't forgotten, either, Eames warning Arthur away from his "messy life," and he doesn't have a good sense yet of what kind of mess Eames was trying to avoid. There will be time to figure that out, he hopes.

Upon emerging from the shower stall, he spots a navy flannel robe hanging on a hook behind the bathroom door, and hesitates only a minute before pulling it on. It's too big for him, really, made for a broader build, but it's warm and soft and Eames-y and impossible to resist. He cinches the waist tight, squints at his wet hair, and decides he's too tired to care how he looks right now. He does care about his still-cold feet, though. Arthur slips back into the bedroom and eyes the amorphous pile of his luggage in the corner. It's going to be unavoidably noisy trying to locate any specific item of clothing in it, and his discarded dress socks from last night are too thin for warmth.

He thinks for a minute, and then treads quietly to one of the large chests of drawers next to the bed, trying to remember which of the drawers he'd seen Eames pull his running socks from. He's successful on the second try, and sits gingerly on the edge of the bed to pull on a pair of thick woolly hiking socks.

"Come back to bed." Eames sounds groggy underneath his mound of pillows. "We've hours yet before we have to be anywhere."

Arthur grimaces apologetically, and reaches for Eames' ankle, just visible as a lump under the duvet. He squeezes it softly. "I'm sorry, it's jet lag. I'm not going to be able to settle down. Go back to sleep. I'll be ok."

Eames makes a rude noise, then sighs. "There's coffee 'n' a pot for you in th' kitchen." He settles himself more deeply under the duvet. In the dim room, Arthur can just make out his nose and mouth outlined against the ivory sheet, the only part of him visible in a heap of tangled bedclothes. He smiles, squeezes Eames' ankle gently one more time, and goes to see what Eames might consider passable coffee.
In the spacious, sterile, and largely empty kitchen, he is touched to discover a brand-new French press still in its box sitting on the counter, next to a bag of freshly ground Allpress and a small box of oatmeal scones. Humming tunelessly to himself, Arthur washes the coffeepot and sets water to heating in an electric kettle.

The toaster oven, upon investigation, is as virginal as the coffee press, and not even actually plugged in. Arthur remedies this situation and then pours the hot water over the grounds, closing his tired eyes and relishing the smell of the brewing coffee and the toasting pastry. The only butter in the house is in the freezer, stored in two carefully portioned plastic bags, and a distinctive shade of green which is intriguing but not particularly enticing at this hour. Instead, he drizzles a bit of honey over the toasted scone, and unashamedly brings the entire pot of coffee with him into the living room along with the closest thing to a mug he can find (actually a dainty, shell-pink porcelain teacup bedizened with hand-painted roses and lilies and sprays of lavender, and Arthur adds it to the list of questions he wants to ask Eames about his decorating scheme).

Eames emerges two hours later, shirtless and barefoot beneath a pair of worn flannel pajama pants and scratching his fingers through the hair on his chest, his bare torso appealingly thick and covered with so much ink it nearly makes Arthur feel cross-eyed trying to decipher it. By this point, Arthur has finished the coffee and another of the scones, and is ensconced on the sturdy brown leather sofa in the living room with maps open on his laptop and wrapped in a faded quilt he'd found folded beneath the coffee table.

He immediately becomes conscious of how he must look, with the ridiculous thick socks pulled up to his knees, the too-large robe puffing about his frame, his hair sticking out in all directions and the old floral quilt draped over his shoulders. He starts to say something self-deprecating, but Eames is looking at him like he's the Crown Jewels, and Arthur shuts his mouth again.

Eames doesn't say anything, only crosses the room and settles himself close to Arthur, tugging the quilt so that it covers both of them, and nuzzling into Arthur's neck with a contented little growl. Arthur resettles his arm around Eames' shoulders and rests his cheek against the top of Eames' head, letting himself relax into the wordless intimacy of that gesture, of them being here together.

"Two halves of a whole."

They stay like that for a while, Eames' head on Arthur's shoulder, his warm lips pressed to Arthur's neck. Eames has a trace of not-wholly-removed mascara smudged on one cheekbone and sleep crumbles in his eyes, and the rest of his face is puffy from last night's champagne and flushed from the heat of the bed. His breath is stale with sleep, but Arthur welcomes it; it's proof that it's real, they're really here together. He's in Eames' house, wearing Eames' clothes, drinking Eames' unexpectedly excellent coffee and feeling Eames' solid living breathing body pressed against his.

He turns slightly and strokes a hand across Eames' chest, savoring warm flesh against his fingertips, before pressing his hand firmly against his heartbeat and leaving it there.

"Was the coffee up to par?"

"Perfect," Arthur says, "thank you for picking it up. And for the press. I know you don't use them." He drops a kiss against Eames' right ear, the only part of him his mouth can easily reach. Arthur's stomach chooses this moment to rumble noisily, as if it is also trying to say thank you, or perhaps reminding Arthur that the two scones he'd eaten hadn't been very large.

Eames snickers and pokes Arthur gently in the gut. "Well, there's a whole floor at Harrod's, you know," he lies cheerfully. "Necessaries For The Care & Feeding Of Pet Americans."

Arthur snorts at the notion. "Did you buy me a collar and a flea treatment too?"
Eames pulls away from Arthur's chest and gives him a quizzical look. "Would you like a collar?"

Arthur abruptly recalls that Eames has been spending the past month studying BDSM culture. "Not really."

"Because I would be delighted to pick one out for you, darling." Eames' eyes are mirthful and he's obviously trying to but can't quite keep the corners of his mouth from twitching up in a teasing grin.

"Definitely not."

"Greer likely has one in reserve in the costume department."

"Shut up." Arthur seasons this with a piquant dash of bitchface, and Eames subsides, but his body quakes for a moment more as he tries to suppress his laughter. He relaxes back down against the back of the couch, but with his arm around Arthur this time, and cards one hand gently through Arthur's impossible hair.

Arthur closes his eyes, relishing the touch. "You're out of eggs," he tells Eames, as if the refrigerator had been fully stocked with everything he might possibly want except eggs. In fact, he'd found it mostly empty, populated only with half-finished takeout containers and an assortment of dubious condiments.

"My apologies." Eames is still looking at Arthur as if his fondest desire has just been granted. "Anything else?"

"Unadulterated butter, to start. I made a list."

"I think we can manage that. There's a Tesco--"

"Around the corner, next to the Starbucks," Arthur interrupts. "I looked it up. I didn't want to barge in and wake you up looking for my clothes, though."

"Thank you, my heart," Eames says softly, and then he reaches out one strong hand and grasps Arthur by the chin, drawing Arthur's face to him and brushing his lips gently over Arthur's.

All thoughts of breakfast disappear instantly. When Eames pulls back a fraction, Arthur follows, finding his mouth again and opening it up, feeling his nerve endings sizzle as Eames nips Arthur's lower lip. Eames' own lips are soft and plush but his tongue is devilish, teasing and stroking against Arthur's. He grips Arthur's jaw with one hand and reaches down to untie the robe with the other, running a covetous hand around Arthur's waist and up his back. Arthur arches against his hand like a cat, and Eames' mouth moves down Arthur's neck and across his chest.

His arousal building, Arthur twists and straddles Eames' lap, kissing him harder and pressing his increasingly interested cock against Eames' bare belly. He stops cold, though, the instant he feels Eames' hesitation.

"...Just, not on my gran's quilt, love," Eames apologizes. "Come to bed?", and he holds out a hand to pull Arthur off the couch.

Arthur goes gladly, heedless of his sticking-up hair and dorky socks.

By the time they reach the bedroom door they're both hard, groping and stumbling against each other and panting, blind to their surroundings. Eames backs Arthur up to the bed, half-carrying and half-pushing him. He kisses him again, his hands on Arthur's hips, and then flexes, literally
tossing Arthur’s whole body onto his back in the bed. He strips off his pants and pounces, pinning
Arthur's hands above his head and nipping and growling and suckling on Arthur’s skin like he’s
starving. The leonine grace and sheer strength of him are powerfully erotic, and Arthur allows
himself to swoon into it for a moment before his impatience gets the best of him.

He bucks up and sideways, trying to roll so he’s on top of Eames instead, and Eames relents and
lets him. Arthur swarms hungrily up his naked body and lets his knees fall to the side of Eames’
hips as he gets a hand between them where Eames' heavy cock is fully erect and beading with pre-
come; Arthur strokes it roughly and kisses him again and again, conscious of nothing but how
much he wants this man and how amazing it is that he's here, now, and can have him.

Or be had by him, rather, because that’s really what Arthur wants after watching that display of
confident dominance on stage last night.

"I washed," he murmurs, rocking his hips down into Eames' solid thighs. Eames seems to take his
meaning, because his cock flexes in Arthur's hand and the tip is wet when Arthur's fist slides up to
it again.

"Christ, Arthur," Eames groans into his mouth. "Let's have a taste, then." He doesn't wait for
Arthur to move, though, tumbling him over and lifting Arthur's hips off the mattress, shoving a
pillow underneath him as Arthur draws his own knees up and holds them taut and open, giving
Eames the access he wants.

Eames gazes at Arthur's splayed body in amazed half-disbelief, like a gold miner who's just tapped
into the motherlode, the expression somehow both predatory and endearing. He goes right in, his
tongue in Arthur's ass gentle at first and then probing, twisting, his low growls and groans of
satisfaction almost as erotic as the wet glide of his mouth on Arthur's flesh. It's exquisite, it's bone-
melting, it's raunchy and tender and loving and lewd.

Arthur shudders and writhes, panting, torn between wanting Eames to do exactly what he's
doing forever and wanting to get Eames' cock inside him, to truly consummate their reunion, as
quickly as possible. His brain and, indeed, his entire spinal column are liquefying at the velvet
heat of Eames' mouth on him, and he can't quite focus his mind enough to ask for it.

He's faintly conscious of Eames fumbling an arm out for something on the nightstand, but doesn't
fully register what it is until Eames' tongue is joined by his fingers, and Arthur smells the coconut
oil. Flashes of memory hit him: the enormous bathtub in their Mossel Bay room, the way the
melting oil had dripped down Eames' forearm, how it had left handprints on the mirror where
Arthur had braced himself, and the rich, intoxicating fragrance of it all around them.

"You remember?," he asks unsteadily, pushing down against Eames' hand.

"Always," Eames whispers. His thumb is rubbing tiny, insistent circles around Arthur's hole. "As
if I could forget being inside you for the first time." He does press inside, then, and Arthur arches
and whines with the not-enough/too-much-ness of it, silently commanding his own muscles to
relax and let Eames in. He's missed this more than he realized. Eames expertly probes for that
little bundle of nerves that turns Arthur inside out and brainless with bliss; he knows this, knows
Arthur's body well, and Arthur nearly goes out of his mind as Eames finds and strokes it twice,
three times.

When he can open his eyes again, Eames is kneeling in front of him, two fingers of one hand still
deftly twisting inside Arthur's body, the other slowly stroking his own erect length. His eyes,
intent and ravenous, travel hungrily from Arthur's face, to his cock, and inexorably back down to
what he's doing to Arthur's ass.
The powerful masculine display of Eames' naked form before him and the maddening, delicious friction and pressure he's creating might have been enough for Arthur, at another time. But it's been a month since they've had a good, deep, filthy fuck, and he isn't going to settle for anything less.

"Enough," he finally grits out. "I want it now."

Eames' eyes are fierce and dark with longing. "Then you shall have it. On your knees, or...?"

"Can you sit up against the headboard? I want to look at you."

"Oh. Yeah," Eames agrees breathlessly. "Yes. Come here." He shoves at the pillows and scoops another generous dab of oil out of the little tub, melting it down the length of his whole hard shaft as he leans back against the headboard.

Arthur is on him in a flash, settling astride his hips and reaching back to line up Eames' freshly slicked cock with his own equally slick entrance. Eames is big, and Arthur has to pause for a moment, biting his lip and allowing his body's response to the initial stretch to ease, his hands planted firmly on Eames' shoulders to steady him, but then he's free to slowly writhe and press and corkscrew down until he's fully seated.

And oh, god, there's nothing like it, no words for how primally satisfying it is to be joined and completely filled like this, flesh within flesh. Even more so when the person filling you up is a beautiful, brilliant, tattoed brute who you're unexpectedly (amazingly, terrifyingly) in love with, and who's watching you with his own heart in his fine grey eyes and your name on his lushly kissable lips like a prayer.

Eames wraps his big hands firmly around Arthur's waist, but they're following rather than directing Arthur's steadily intensifying rocking motion, and for all of his verbosity elsewhere, he's quiet now, breathing hard, simply meeting Arthur's eyes even as he rolls his hips, thrusting up into Arthur's body. Arthur had wanted Eames sitting up so that he could look at his body and in his eyes, to double and redouble the connection between them beyond the immediate genital conjoining, but he hadn't counted on how powerful that connection might be. The knowledge that Eames is seeing him, really seeing him -- all his naked skin, and the naked emotion on his face -- is almost unbearably intimate, but Arthur can't, doesn't want to, look away.

"Kiss me," Eames finally whispers, his voice raw and rasping, and Arthur realizes Eames must be feeling the same kind of awe-struck vulnerability that's knocking Arthur for a loop (and is going to make him come like a dam breaking).

"Kiss me back." Arthur leans forward and braces one arm on the headboard, sacrificing some depth of penetration for the delicious softness of Eames' lips and the pleasing rasp of stubble on Eames' chin. They move together, breathe together, Eames' powerfully muscled legs flexing as he drives his hips up, seemingly indefatigable.

Arthur kisses his forehead, his eyelids, his jaw, his neck, one hard nipple, taking advantage of the position to make Eames gasp and keen under him before returning to the sweetness of his mouth. He can't help his own noises, either, the stutter of his breath or the low whine that escapes him when Eames angles his cock just right, the crazy jumble of "yeah" and "fuck" and "oh" that are all he can manage to tell Eames how much he loves it, how good he's making Arthur feel.

Eames' chest and neck are gorgeously flushed when he pulls Arthur off his cock and drags his hips forward, encouraging Arthur to fuck his mouth for a few blissful minutes. The wet heat, the slide and drag of his tongue, combine to make Arthur's noises grow louder and more uninhibited. By
the time Eames pushes him off and then over onto his back, bending him nearly in half, Arthur is more than ready for it, and willingly gives over every iota of control to him.

"You're mine," Eames pants, his mouth close to Arthur's ear. "And I'm going to take you apart now, my love." His eyes glitter with an odd mixture of possession and awe, his lips swollen and pink and pleased.

"All yours." Arthur wraps a hand around Eames' cock, tugging it gently until Eames presses forward. "Want to feel you come."

Eames' eyes search Arthur's face. "You're ready?"

"I've been ready for a month." He wraps his legs around Eames' lower back, unsubtly encouraging. "Make me forget my name." This is exactly what he's been aching for all these past weeks, and he means to have it now.

Eames pauses briefly to take another handful of oil and rub it over his cock and Arthur's hole before pushing inside again, and to lean down and kiss Arthur once more before setting a fast, brutal pace, their hips slamming together, the headboard jouncing against the wall behind them. It's agonizingly, almost intolerably good, Eames' weight bearing him down, his breath hot in Arthur's ear telling Arthur how beautiful he is, how good he feels, how he wants to fuck Arthur until the sun explodes and the world burns. The oil slicking the hot friction of their bodies together and the sound of Eames' voice kindle and rekindle an even deeper burn of arousal inside Arthur and he says so, or tries to, every coherent thought tumbling out of his mouth in a subverbal language of ohs and mmms instead.

He can tell when Eames is just on the verge, and redoubles his encouragement, panting out breathy endearments and obscenities so that Eames can have it all, the feel and taste and scent of Arthur's body as well the lewd, filthy phrases he likes to hear; he bucks up under Eames without shame, wanting to give him as much of himself as he can, to make this every bit as good for Eames as he's making it for Arthur. Eames tries to hold back, to fumble a hand between them to get Arthur off beforehand, but Arthur bats it away and orders him to let go, to finish. Eames does, with his teeth buried in Arthur's bicep and with a raw, guttural cry that Arthur finds indescribably satisfying.

Eames collapses on him, gulping air, trying to bear some of his weight off of Arthur with one quivering forearm, but not really succeeding.

"Can you stay?" Arthur asks, worming his right hand between their bodies to get hold of his own cock. Eames looks surprised, but assents, making a little room between them for Arthur's hand to work while carefully holding his body rigid so that his softening cock doesn't fall out. Arthur's close already, so close, and it takes only a few strokes before the combination of the pressure of Eames' cock inside him and the tight grip of his own fist leave him gasping and shuddering out his own orgasm. The powerful muscle contractions push Eames the rest of the way out, but it had been enough.

When he's sure Arthur is finished, Eames rolls onto his back and drags Arthur along with him, pulling him into not-quite-a-headlock under one arm and tugging one of Arthur's legs over his, Arthur's arm around his chest. When he has Arthur arranged the way he wants him, all of the tension seems to drain out of him at once, and they lie together, their breathing slowing, the shimmers of heat coming off of their naked skin gradually melting away.

Eames says something, or tries to, but Arthur can't quite hear him. He lifts his head slightly, nudging the crown of his head up into Eames' chin, and Eames repeats, more clearly this time: "You're the other part of my soul." One brawny arm pulls Arthur more tightly against him. "I've
"Your better half?" Arthur asks blurrily, half-teasing, half-troubled; what Eames just said has reminded him of something, but it's elusive, dreamlike. He frowns, trying to chase the memory.

"I bare my heart to you and that's all I get in return?" He sounds honestly aggrieved, and Arthur abandons his attempt to figure out what his previous statement is triggering, so that he can reassure Eames properly.

"It hasn't been like this for me, either," he admits. "That was... I can't even describe it. I love you. I hated being apart."

"I love you too, you ingrate." Eames is quiet for a moment, then: "D'you remember what you said to me, last night. Just before you fell asleep?"

The half-memory pings for Arthur again. He tries to think back. "That it was good. Always good with you."

Eames sounds more intent. "Nothing after that?"

"Not until I woke up, no. Why? What did I say?" He has a sinking feeling. Although it can't have been too bad, since Eames is still nuzzling into Arthur's hair and tightening his arms around him, comfortably possessive.

Eames seems ill at ease too. He fidgets, scratches his chin, and his voice is low and vulnerable when he speaks. "You said 'my other half.'"

Arthur frowns, trying harder to catch his meaning. "I mean, yeah. I guess, you are. Aren't you?"

"It's just..." Eames takes a deep breath. "I'd just thought it at you a millisecond prior. Exactly those words. But I didn't say them. And then, you did."

"Oh."

Pause.

"Probably just a coincidence."

"Probably."

"Although..."

Arthur shivers a little. "Don't." Eames squeezes him just a fraction harder, then releases him, and fishes the duvet off the floor next to the bed. When he turns to collect Arthur again, it's with a warm cloak of goose down and fine linen weighing on them both. He kisses Arthur's forehead, his nose, his lips, light and undemanding, and Arthur shamelessly snuggles into him.

A thought occurs to him. "I dreamed about Mal, on the plane. A real dream."

Eames hums a little. "About what?"

Arthur pushes away the looming, terrible, Mal-grief that threatens to envelop him. "It was the job, but not the job, you know? I was trying to find the mark to sedate him, and she was just there, taking my arm while we walked, the way she always did. She said... I was one half of a whole, now. A lover. It must have been on my mind." It doesn't explain the probably-just-coincidental timing of what he'd said, if he'd in fact said it at all and Eames isn't just messing with him for some
unfathomable post-coital reason of his own.

"You know that's you telling yourself."

He nods into Eames' chest. "I know. But it was such a Mal thing to say. I know I'd heard her say it, more than once. She liked to sound wise like that, sometimes." He laughs a little, fond memory tinged with sadness. "You weren't really that close to her, were you? I know you never liked Dom, and I think she knew that too."

"I knew her well enough. Insofar as any self-respecting French woman would ever let herself be known by an English man, anyway." Eames’ laugh is just a trifle bitter. "Enough to have heard her use that phrase, yes." He pets Arthur's back and pushes the hair out of his face. "Why do you think you dreamt her just then?"

Arthur stirs and resettles himself more firmly against Eames. He doesn't really want to bare himself this way, but it's Eames, who is, when Arthur allows himself to admit it, his other half, his complement, filling in all of Arthur's gaps and imperfections and uncertainties, and allowing Arthur to fill in his own. "I was so frustrated with the job, with the concussion, and I couldn't think of anything but getting here. I'd been wanting you, the whole time I was gone." He sighs. "She told me to be careful and not to worship you. Like her and Dom. I guess I've been worrying about that, about where we're going with this. She also said that you loved me, despite yourself - or something like that. I don't remember exactly."

"More so than I've even told you, darling," Eames confirms, his voice soft and fond. "I'm honored, really, that you know it deeply enough for your subconscious to have chosen Mal to confirm it to you. I know how much you loved her."

There's a little more than a quaver in Arthur's voice as he acknowledges this. God, he misses her. "She was more alive than anyone I've ever known. Until she wasn't."

Eames tips Arthur's chin up so that their eyes meet. This close, there are flecks of blue and green in the grey, faint crinkles of affection in the fine lines around their edges. "And that, Arthur, is why I cannot forgive Dominic Cobb. For what he did to her, and what that did to you. And when you put yourself in so much danger to follow him those wretched few years, I'd half a mind to just make him disappear."

"I would have hated you for it. For her sake, and the kids, if not for his own."

"I know."

"Well, thank you for stifling your homicidal impulses."

"My agreeing to work with you both on the Fischer matter may not have been entirely selfish," Eames admits. "It was unbelievably tempting to see you freed. Although, if I'd known the risks we were all taking with that sedative, you and Ari and the rest might be stuck in Limbo to this day. Bloody Cobb," he growls.


"Guilty."

"I'm glad you waited, actually." Arthur tries to formulate his thoughts. "I wouldn't have been..."

"Receptive?"
"Ready. Mature enough, maybe. My self again."

Eames hums thoughtfully. "I can see that." He grins suddenly. "In retrospect, I'm glad you were so difficult to read then, darling. I'd have hated to spoil this by coming on to you too quickly."

Arthur agrees. "It really was perfect timing. Though if I'd known what I was missing..." He slyly tweaks a nipple, slips his hand down and gooses Eames' sticky, spent cock.

Eames gives a single, high-pitched squeak and tackles Arthur, laughing, pinning him and tickling him mercilessly as Arthur, delighted, flails under him and calls him terrible names and tries to push him off the bed. They wrestle and kiss and wrestle some more, and Arthur loves it, loves all of it, loves Eames.

Chapter End Notes

Dearest readers: I've been promising updates for a very long time now, and I've written quite a bit -- but nothing I've written, or imagined, or brainstormed, feels like quite as fitting an end to the story as this chapter. Of course there are avenues unexplored, conflicts unresolved, and scenes unwritten, and I regret that. In truth, I could write this canon forever and not explore every facet of the characters or universe.

As I've noted several times in this multi-year process, real life has had a way of demanding all of my attention. Rather than adding yet another work to the list of abandoned WIPs, or forcing situations and plot twists that don't feel organic or authentic to the story, I'm choosing to honor my characters by ending the story here, with the two of them reunited, and reassured, and (at least temporarily) sated, even at the expense of sating the reader.

I appreciate each and every single one of you who finished this opus and who supported me with comments and kudos along the way. Your feedback improved the characters, influenced the direction of the story, and had a most definite impact on my writing. I probably won't be contributing more fanworks, as I've begun to go commercial, but Arthur and Eames will be my OTP forever.

With love and gratitude--
ao3.Brangwen

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