Bridge Over Troubled Water

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Summary

Alfred F. Jones, Hollywood’s golden boy, is a jaded celebrity who meets a sick florist in a little English village who teaches him how to appreciate the little things in life again.

Arthur Kirkland is an anonymously famous author whose entire life has been on the edge of death. He meets a sickeningly healthy actor who teaches him how to keep fighting on.

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A chinese translation is available here, thanks to Asky030~~

Notes

Note that the sections in italics are excerpts from Arthur’s book.

See the end of the work for more notes
“You must know, little one, that everything has power. Words, actions, that little pebble by your foot, all of it has power.”

“And of my thoughts? Surely my thoughts are safe.”

“The mind wields unspeakable force. You best be wary of yourself above all. Remember that, Kiran, for you are the only one who can defeat your mind.”

Flower shop, Isle of Portland, early August:

“Hello, Mr. Jones, might I be of any assistance?”

A customer walked into the cozy little flower shop, looking somewhat bewildered at the bright bunches of flowers ambushing him left and right. Bright blossoms faced him, revealing to him their delicate hearts. Leaves and branches extended their arms, trying to pull him closer, capture his gaze, crying out for his attention.

Arthur set his book down, folding his hands. Long, slender fingers closed over dry, pale skin. “May I interest you in any flowers?”

The customer looked distraught, blue eyes darting between the exit and Arthur. Perhaps he would make a run for it.

“Is there anything you’re looking for? You can take a look at what I have on the shelves.” Arthur gestured around him, waving slender arms back and forth. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, exposing boney white arms threaded with eerily prominent blue veins.

“No, no.” The customer finally found his voice. “Just browsing.”

Arthur nodded, and turned away. He opened his book again, red pen in hand for improvements.
The customer walked up to his counter a few moments later, the heavy impact between leather boots and wooden floorboards announcing his steps.

The customer leaned in, pulling Arthur toward him before whispering conspiratorially, “How much do you want?”

“Excuse me?” Arthur pulled away, brows raised in confusion.

“How much?” Arthur’s blank expression prompted the customer to continue. “To stay quiet? So you don’t go running to the tabloids? Ten grand? Twenty? I’ll give as much as you want, just don’t say anything, please.”

Arthur coughed. “I see how it is. Rather faithless, are you not?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. He sneered. “Money talks. Not much else does. So, do we have ourselves a deal or not?”

“Mm, I would say not.” Arthur responded drily, eyes glancing at the old grandfather clock in the corner. The second hand was slowly creeping up to the next minute.

It was now the customer’s turn to look taken aback, though he didn’t release Arthur. “Don’t you know who I am? Obviously you know I’m Alfred F. Jones. The Alfred Jones. Yeah, the lead actor in Heart in a Box and Echoes. Hollywood’s golden boy, latest heartthrob. I’ve won the People’s Choice Award for top actor in four categories in four consecutive years!”

“My, aren’t we full of ourselves.”

Alfred pressed his hands on the counter, palms down and fingers out. He leaned forward, getting in Arthur’s face as much as he could.

Through gritted teeth, he spoke. “What will it take to keep you quiet?”

Arthur pointedly ignored him, once again looking at the clock. Another minute had passed.
A hand closed over the scruff of Arthur’s button down shirt, pulling Arthur to his feet and slightly cutting off airflow.

Despite the predicament, Arthur remained expressionless, green eyes the epitome of boredom. “Release me.”

A growl.

Fierce green and blue eyes bored into one another, a battle of psychological resolve.

*Tick, tock,* another minute.

Then Alfred loosened his hold on Arthur.

Arthur took a series of well needed gasps of air before speaking. “You will have to trust me when I say I give you my word that you will not be discovered. But, know that there is nothing you could offer me that could ever buy my silence.”

“In that case, I guess I don’t have much of a choice.” Alfred stuck his hand out. His blue eyes were chilly. “Alfred F. Jones.”

Alfred’s hand dwarfed Arthur’s pale, bony hand.

“Arthur Kirkland. Pleasure to meet you.”

*It has been said that time heals all wounds. ‘All’ is an infinitely large number of wounds. And time is only a bandage. The wound will only heal when a bandage is used well, and in conjunction with other salves. Time by itself is a monster, a silent assassin, and you will not be aware of its presence until it’s too late. Time is cruel.*

Alfred lounged on his bed, staring at the faceless wall. He was on vacation, a temporary
relocation, just a couple weeks of peace and quiet before returning to his hectic lifestyle. A short break from all the fanfare that surrounded him back home. A couple weeks should’ve been enough to curb his need for quiet; he should’ve been jumping off the walls, driven insane by the boredom after mere days. Instead, he found himself wanting to stay longer and longer, growing attached to the small island. He appreciated his fans, but they were overbearing. There was no freedom in Hollywood; everyone stuck to a strict schedule of plastic smiles and scripted actions. The boredom was worth his newfound freedom.

He went to the beach and threw rocks into the sea, bemoaning the low temperatures forbidding him from jumping in and swimming. He went to the pubs, realizing it was quite boring when he was alone and no one was rowdily making a huge scene and dancing on tables sans pants. He called his parents to let them know he was still alive and promptly realized he forgot about the time difference. He couldn’t even go online because he wanted to avoid everyone. There was nothing more stressful than reading the tabloids’ exaggerated lies and see millions of people believe it.

Alfred did a stellar job of avoiding people. The only people he had run into were old and male with fancy uniforms, people who did not fit into his fanbase and likely did not see their families often enough to recognise the movie star their daughters fawned over.

And he avoided that florist. Alfred convinced himself it was because of their less than stellar first meeting and how the little Englishman clearly was hiding things. Avoidance would keep Alfred safe from blackmailers and undercover reporters and sneaky little Englishmen who appeared harmless but would probably ruin his life when given the chance.

For some reason, after circling around the town for the fourth time, Alfred found himself heading towards the florist. Suspicious Englishmen be damned. The man did have a nice shop, and he was the youngest person Alfred had seen so far, and at least Alfred wouldn’t be as bored. Nothing killed boredom quite like hanging out with someone who despised you with a passion.

The outside of the shop was simple. A few hanging baskets of overflowing flowers dangled before the windows. Rows of blossoms brightened up the lands under the windows and the pathway leading up to the store. A PVC sign labelled the building as ‘Flowers’ in a scrawling, cursive font. Simple, but elegant.

The sweet aroma of flowers hit Alfred as he stepped through the doorway. Arthur was sitting behind the counter, concentrating on the arrangement of flowers before him. Not wanting to distract him, Alfred stood in the doorway, unnoticed, and watched Arthur work.

Arthur’s fingers slipped through the stalks, alabaster fingers a stark contrast to the deep green stems and the black watch sitting on his wrist. His brow furrowed as he moved the stalks back and forth, and back and forth. Occasionally he would pause, bite his lower lip, before trimming a stalk.
Green eyes remained clear and steady, wholly concentrated on the task before him. Slowly, Alfred watched as the mass of flowers became a stunning bouquet, bright with orange lilies and pink roses adorned with edelweiss. There was some sort of magic when Arthur worked. It was such a simple little creation, yet took so much effort and concentration to create.

Arthur tied the stalks together with a white ribbon and leaned back. With the back of his hand, he brushed hair out of his eyes.

At that moment, Alfred chose to make his presence known. “Nice bouquet. Someone getting married?”

Surprise flickered through Arthur’s expression as he looked up. “No wedding, my hands were feeling restless. I’ll be giving these to my neighbour. Fine old lady she is. Should I prepare myself for further accusations and threats? For another assault?”

Alfred rubbed the back of his neck. He at least had the decency to appear a little ashamed, Arthur noted. “Isn’t that a bit of an exaggeration? I mean, it’s not like I hurt you or anything. Besides, it’s what any person with a sense of self preservation would do. Who knows what you might leak to the press. People will do anything for their fifteen minutes of fame, you know.”

Arthur scoffed. “Boy, if I wanted fame, I would have gone about in a more dignified manner than that. You think too lowly of others.”

“Oh?” Alfred challenged, crossing his arms. He casually leaned against the wall. “Well I’m sure that if you had spent the last eight years in Hollywood you wouldn’t be nearly so high and mighty about your dignity.”

“And I’m quite convinced that you are blinding yourself to the good. You are trying too hard to convince yourself of how terrible your life is, woe is you, your life is so pathetic even though you’re rich, famous, young, and healthy. You are not going to convince me your life is all that bad.” Arthur was glaring at him, venom oozing out from bright green eyes.

Alfred glared back. “You wouldn’t understand, being a nobody and all. You don’t know how the world of showbiz squeezes the life out of you. It leaves an empty shell behind once it’s done with you.”

Arthur turned away and looked down at his neatly bound bouquet. He played with the stem of one of the stalks. “Emptiness is clarity for the soul. One must always retain a healthy dose of
empty. Full is what breaks you, fills you to the brim until you can no longer hold so much fullness and alas, you have nothing left for yourself. Too full of dependence on the attention of others, you have forgotten how to take care of yourself.” Alfred thought he saw Arthur’s eyes glaze over slightly, as if he wasn’t quite present anymore, but Arthur recovered quickly enough for Alfred to convince himself he was seeing things.

Arthur continued, “I can’t deny that you have a point; indeed, I don’t know what your world is like. Nor could I imagine living in a world as hectic as yours. But the four things you need for a good life are hope, optimism, longevity, and health. You are the only one at fault for your emptiness and you’re projecting your faults onto society.”

Alfred blinked. It had been a long time since anyone had so blatantly disagreed with him, stomping over his words and practically feeding them into a shredder. It was refreshing. “Well are you living a good life?”

Arthur’s expression became unreadable. “No, I suppose I’m not.”

“Then aren’t you kinda being a hypocrite?”

Again, Arthur’s eyes glazed over. This time there was no doubt about it; his expression was spacey and unfocused. In a small voice, he responded with a single word. “Perhaps.”

And then it was dark. So, so dark. Darkness so unnatural, only the strongest would last. Darkness that ate away at one’s sanity.

But sane is the mask of insanity.

Ring, ring.

Arthur picked up the phone, annoyance clear in his voice. “Hello, Arthur Kirkland.”

The voice on the other end was blunt. “You told me you would send me a manuscript by last week. I see nothing in my mailbox.”
Arthur sighed and rubbed his temple. “Nothing was worth reading, all just piles of words meshed lumped together and left to dry. It’s garbage.”

“And I, my dear Englishman, will have to call you out on those little lies you’re so fond of telling. Mon cher, we both know that anything that little head of yours churns out is a bestseller in the making. And you know just as well as I that the problem is never that your writing is not good enough, only that it’s too brilliant and deep and raw to share. And you are too stubborn to change a single word.”

Arthur scoffed, “Frog, you know as well as I that I will never allow another word of mine to be printed. You think I don’t know how much money you made off of my last book?”

An exaggerated gasp was heard on the other end of the line. “My, you wound me. Thinking so little of me. You must think of what you are letting slip past your fingers! Millions would offer their souls to the devil for this opportunity you so carelessly toss aside!”

Francis could hear Arthur sniffling on the other end of the receiver. “I’m already dead, Francis. Another book will only make things worse.” Arthur said softly, shakily.

Hearing Arthur so small and restrained tugged at Francis’ heartstrings. “Cher, I don’t believe anything would change --”

He was interrupted by Arthur’s furious screaming. “You made me sign movie rights to Hollywood! Hollywood. An American will be trying to understand me. They have no appreciation for fine literature, he’ll ruin everything. Everything! Bloody yanks have no appreciation for the--” Arthur was cut off by a violent coughing fit.

Francis scrambled to calm Arthur down. “Arthur, dear, don’t strain yourself. It’s not good for your health. You wrote the screenplay, I’m sure it will turn out fine. You can even go on set to set the actor straight if you wanted.” He could still hear Arthur’s heaving breathing. “Go make yourself a cup of tea. Do be careful not to strain yourself--”

Francis heard two words -- “Bloody Frog”-- before Arthur slammed the receiver down.

Well, Francis thought, running a hand wearily through his hair, that could have gone worse.
Pain is a reminder that all we are is human and in the end, that is all we can aspire to be. Pain grounds us, reveals us, restrains us, but it empowers us.

Because only those who have suffered pain can truly say they have lived.

Today, Arthur sat in his garden. A book sat in his lap, closed, and untouched. It was still brand new, price tag still stuck on the cover. A receipt poked out from the top. Arthur wasn’t in the mood for expending the extra energy to discard a scrap of paper and hunt for a real bookmark. A receipt would serve its purpose just fine.

It was a beautiful day. High in the sky the sun shone, gifting the earth with warmth and joy. The light was greedily accepted by the pansies, the sunflowers, and the columbines as well. White, purple and yellow blossoms stretched to their their limits, revealing a vulnerable heart out for the world to see.

Absentmindedly, Arthur lightly fingered the cover of his book. Catch 22, because life is a game, and no one ever wins.

But some lose more than others. And Arthur wasn’t about to be one of them.

Under the book, a quilt covered his legs and lower torso. The tips of the quilt trailed on the ground. Arthur’s other hand was buried under the cloth, nestled amongst the folds. His palm rested lightly on his stomach, fingers gingerly rubbing against the pain. Cries of distress arose from underneath, shooting sharp pangs throughout his body. Arthur grimaced, but still keeping a neutral expression. He was, after all, an English gentleman, and English gentlemen had the stiff upper lip mastered down to an art form.

The only sound in the garden was the light rustle of wind blowing between leaves and the steady ticking of Arthur’s watch.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

It was like a timer slowly counting down until the day Arthur was free.

Arthur sat alone, intense concentration in his green eyes welled with tears. For all his
concentration, he saw nothing but black and red spots.

Gingerly, he massaged his abdomen, willing for the pain to go away. Once upon a time, he would’ve taken a painkiller, a little capsule that presented a solution to every problem. At some point along the line, he found that he just didn’t care anymore. Pain was natural, was it not? It wouldn’t do for him to take the easy way out.

Months earlier, he had disposed of anything remotely medical in his house, save for a small box of assorted bandaids. He had fought long enough; it was time for nature to take his course.

((But not in his shop, of course, because he needed to be able to wear the mask of good health for customers.))

He opened his book, reading empty words, processing none of the words on the page.

Arthur was tired, hurting, too much to continue living naturally.

But he was too stubborn to admit it.

What is the future? Infinite possibilities exist tomorrow, who knows where life will bring you?
Only the fates can tell, three old sisters with the knowledge of the world.

Why are we so obsessed with the future? What about the present? The present is a gift, one that should be cherished. For there is only one present, and never a chance to go back.

The past is a story, the future is infinite, but the present, your life, right now. It is a gift. Treasure it.

It was past two in the afternoon and Alfred was still in bed, reclining on a small mountain of pillows in his bed. He fiddled with his phone, scrolling through his unread messages.
He checked off every message from a certain Ivan Braginski and deleted them all with no regard to the contents of the messages. Alfred was on vacation. An unapproved, extended vacation in which he conveniently might have accidentally forgotten to tell anyone anything about his whereabouts. But it was a vacation, nonetheless. His mildly sociopathic but generally well meaning manager slash bodyguard would have to wait.

As for his friends and family, they received the same scripted message they had already read countless times before.

_Hey guys, don’t worry about me. I’m safe. Just taking some down time. Love you xx_

Just as he was about to turn his phone off the stupid device buzzed, announcing a new message in his inbox. Against his better judgement, Alfred opened its contents. Curiosity always caught the cat, after all.

_From: Ex-Commie Bastard Dude_

_Hello Jones. I hope you’ve been well. It has been dark here, without your sunny presence. Toris sends his regards. I do not know what has caused this latest childish outburst of yours, but I do believe this package I forwarded is of the utmost importance. This is the latest talk of Hollywood, of the world. If you get the role, it’ll put you on the international table. Your career will reach new heights. All you’ve been doing in complaining about how all your roles have been shallow and too easy for you. Prove to me that you’re as good as you say you are by playing the role of Kiran D. Lurkrath in A Graveyard of Buried Infinities. I dare you._

_I hope you enjoy your holiday._

_Ivan._

Perhaps if Alfred was still interested in fame, he would have found the message to be enticing. Kiran D. Lurkrath was foreign to him, but he had heard A Graveyard of Buried Infinities from time to time. It was some bestselling book by some guy no one knew. Elizaveta had spent a good chunk of the time on the set of their last movie crying over the book. Alfred never really saw the point of crying over a book; it was just words on page. How could words be such a big deal?

Ivan had perfected the art of passive aggression, however, and a chill ran down Alfred’s spine.
The thinly veiled threat was obvious, and Ivan was clearly appealing to Alfred’s competitive nature. *I dare you.* The traitor.

Alfred wanted nothing to do with the twisted world of lies, gossip, backstabbers, and egotism. So he did what he considered to be a good decision at the time.

Alfred threw his phone at the wall.

It landed in the trash bin with a satisfying clunk.

*A little push.*

*That is the difference between intent and action.*

*But don’t shove. That’s just rude.*

Arthur was going to bash his head into the nearest tree if Francis did not stop talking about writing.

Arthur had woken up this morning sore and grouchy, after a poor night’s rest. Figures that the frog would drop by when Arthur most wanted solitude.

The frog was the entire reason Arthur was out in the sun, slowly burning to death, instead of in the safety of his precious shop. Arthur hadn’t watered his flowers yet today; he hoped they wouldn’t suffer without his care for a few hours. The frog was why Arthur was wasting valuable energy on a walk rather than resting with a book as he ought to be doing.

For some reason, the frog had put it upon himself to coax Arthur out of his hole. Arthur vaguely suspected his family had put the frog up to it, but one could never really tell with the French. No matter the reason, Francis had hopped on a plane after their last call and decided to confront Arthur in person.

“Ah, *mon dieu,* the struggles of writing. Wilde, Plath, you, such self inflicted suffering for your
craft. Such dedication!” Francis Bonnefoy, the frog in question, was, as usual, twisting events for
dramatic effect. How very French of him.

Given Arthur’s natural disposition to despise the French, it was a surprise to all how Arthur and
Francis, the epitome of Frenchness, managed to coexist.

Arthur scoffed in response to Francis’ words. “I rather see my suffering as an unfortunate side
effect of a lifetime of poor luck.”

Francis waved a hand airily. “That is simply because you English must learn to let go of that stiff
upper lip.”

Arthur stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked at the ground. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but
was Wilde not arrested and humiliated for the very reason of his torment?”

“You English, draining the beauty out of everything. How such fine works of literature came from
such emotionless shells shall never fail to surprise me.” Francis declared.

Arthur did not dignify that with a response. He simply continued walking, and Francis did not
disturb him until the trail led to a long stretch of rocky beach.

Francis tsked disapprovingly. “English waters, as gloomy as the people it surrounds. Could it be
that the drabness of you English folk are seeping into your land? Such a shame, an empty grey
beach on such a beautiful day. Your Prime Minister really could take some pointers from
Marseille.”

Arthur snorted, kicking a rock along as he walked, but said nothing.

A couple more moments of silence passed until the frog began croaking again. A familiar croak
that Arthur had long tired of hearing.

“It has been years since I last read something new from you. Remember when we were children?
You used to be so excited when you finished writing anything and wouldn’t give anyone peace
until they had read whatever you wrote.” Francis draped one arm across Arthur’s shoulders, the
other resting in a pocket with the thumb peeking out. Francis was, after all, the very epitome of the
casual, laid back and fashion forward Frenchman.
Arthur shrugged the arm off and gave Francis a cold look. “Remember how I spent my entire childhood in a hospital?”

Francis hummed. “Touché. But Arthur,” Francis stopped walking and turned to face Arthur. He grasped Arthur’s bony shoulders to keep him from walking away. A rare seriousness had taken over his expression, “you work magic with words in a manner no one has before, and no one will after. It is a gift, and such a shame it would be to leave it veiled behind obscurity! Your words could define a generation, a new age!”

Arthur pulled his hands out of his pockets and crossed them over his chest. Through thick lashes, Arthur glared up at Francis. In the distance, far over the water, Arthur vaguely registered the cry of seagulls, squawking as they fought the waves.

“And what use have I for fame and talent if my life has been one death sentence after another? My entire life, I have been on death row.”

Francis did not have a response, not an adequate one Arthur could not counter.

On the other end of the beach was a certain American, blond haired and blue eyed, munching on a McDonald’s burger. The stretch of beach had already been explored extensively in the week Alfred had been here; to his pleasure, he found that no one really cared about his presence. Occasionally he would run into someone who recognized him, but they were always polite and never asked for pictures or autographs while squealing like his traditional fan base he had left behind.

Alfred had taken the last bite of his burger when he caught sight of Arthur in the distance. Somewhat ashamed of his treatment of the Englishman so far, he scrunched up his burger wrapper, stuffed it in his pocket, and began walking towards Arthur. It was barely noticeable, and Alfred certainly was unaware, but there was a slight bounce in his step that was not there before.

Arthur was with another man, but that didn’t deter Alfred. After all, Alfred lived strictly by the philosophy of the more, the merrier.

From where he was standing, Alfred couldn’t see the expressions of Arthur or his companion’s face. It was not long until he regretted joining their conversation.
“Hey, how’s it been going?” The other man turned to face Alfred, wearing a blank expression but matched with stormy eyes. Arthur ignored the interruption, instead turning his back to his two companions to look out at the sea.

The other man recovered first, his face instantly lighting up. “’ello, Arthur did not tell me he had made friends. I am Francis Bonnefoy, charmed.” His English was perfect, though lined with a French accent. With a flourish of his arms, Francis gave an exaggerated bow as soon as he had finished talking. Before he straightened up, Francis grabbed Alfred’s arm and laid a chaste kiss on the back of his hand.

Ever so slightly, Alfred’s shoulders tensed but he laughed goodnaturedly. “I suppose you’re a fan?”

For a split second Francis looked confused, before breaking out into a wide smile. “Per chance, would you happen to be Hollywood’s golden boy?”

Arthur looked at his watch; he had been away far too long and interjected flatly, “He is. Are we quite done here? My flowers are drying up by the minute and I really must water them.”

Francis’ pleasant demeanor was unfazed as he brushed off Arthur’s grumbling with a laugh. A hand rested on his hip, exuding confidence. Unlike the overconfident, arrogant stars Alfred often associated with, Francis’ confidence was comfortable, natural, and certainly not over the top. Francis was not trying to flaunt his dominance, confident was simply how he was. And certainly, it was a good look for him.

“Well, you certainly are ungrateful today.” remarked Francis.

“Shut it, frog.”

Hints of a grin still glinting in his eyes, Francis teasingly put his hands up. “Very well. As his grumpmeister wishes. Alas, I must make my farewell as Alastair awaits for my arrival in London.”

“You came down to ruin my day before plotting with my brother. Truly, I am honoured to be held in such high regard.” Arthur’s words dripped with biting sarcasm.

Francis was as unfazed as ever. “You spend some quality time with your American friend here. I will be checking up on you shortly. Expect a call from Alastair within the month, and do keep my
words in consideration.” Alfred noted how Francis acted in an almost maternal fashion to Arthur; then Francis turned to him. “And monsieur Jones, I trust you will not be turned off by Arthur’s sour demeanor. He could use a fine friend like yourself, not too harsh on the eyes at all.” Francis winked. “I bid you two adieu, and I expect we will meet again, Alfred F. Jones.”

And just like that, he was off, disappearing around a bend.

Once he lost sight of Francis, Alfred turned to Arthur. “Well, uh, I just wanted to apologize for what I did when we first met.”

Alfred was going to say more, but was cut off by a curt, “apology accepted.”

Alfred blinked. “Oh. So, um, I was thinking we could get to know each other, make an acquaintance? You seem like an interesting guy. I could leave, though, if you want.” He stumbled over his words, unsure of how to act towards Arthur.

For the first time that day, Arthur finally looked at Alfred. “No. Stay. I could use a slave.”

And as abruptly as Francis, Arthur began to walk away in another direction, leaving Alfred both confused in the dust, and scrambling to keep up.

The value of a relationship can not, and should never, be measured by what you receive from the other. One who would give up everything for you is one to be avoided. Possessions should not be so easily discarded; if one would give anything for you, they would do anything against you.

There is no shame in admitting you associate with certain individuals for what you receive in return. It is, after all, human nature to be evil and selfish.

Be wary of those who claim and act without selfishness.

“You know, for a stuffy old Brit you’re a pretty interesting guy.” Alfred leaned on the counter, casually twirling a cut flower stem in his hand.
Arthur’s back was turned towards him as he watered the flowers in his shop. “For an egotistic American with rather violent paranoid urges you’re quite companionable.”

Alfred laughed drily. “Don’t get too full of yourself, Artie. I’m only keeping you company because I don’t really have any other choices. Besides, I figure if you’re going to sell me out I’ll just have to put you out of business.”

Arthur moved along the shelves with his watering can. “Then I suppose my only choice would be to reveal your hidden true self. Now wouldn’t that be a shame? You’d let down all your fans. What a pity.”

The stem twisted out of Alfred’s grasp and he laughed. “Keep dreaming. My fans are more dedicated than that. You’re just some jealous nobody who wants to extend their fifteen minutes of fame. No one would believe you. After all, who’d question a face like this?” Alfred gave his brightest grin and winked, his signature expression. His voice was somewhat strained, though, and his eyes were dull despite the brightness of his smile.

But Arthur didn’t call him out on his poor acting. He was preoccupied with his strawberries which had just begun to bear fruit. “I may be a nobody, but I am a nobody with connections. Perhaps my word holds little weight, but I am sure a few well placed calls would tip the balance in my favour.”

“Oh really?” Alfred straightened and slowly headed towards where Arthur was standing, watering his strawberries. “And who these connections of yours that are important enough to possibly hurt my image?”

Arthur looked up at Alfred, who was now standing behind him. He could feel the pride emanating off of the American, who was standing tall and proud, not unlike his tiger lilies. Bloody prideful flowers always absorbing more than their fair share of the fertilizer. “As it happens to turn out, I am rather well acquainted with a certain Kiku Honda.”

Alfred started, shocked gaze meeting smug green eyes. “Kiku? You mean, THE Kiku Honda!? Like, the greatest up and coming film director of this age?”

“And the youngest winner of the Academy, Golden Globe, and BAFTA for best director amongst numerous other awards? Yes indeed, that Kiku Honda.” Arthur smirked, turning away to water his tomatoes. Despite his obvious smugness, Arthur had sounded completely casual about it, as if he was talking about a neighbour or distant friend rather than the most celebrated director of the modern age.
Right then, Alfred did a fine impression of a fish, mouth opening and closing wordlessly, blue eyes bulging out of his skull. Perhaps it was unintentional, but Alfred’s posture became rigid, giving him several additional centimetres to his height, and he leaned in slightly, as if to intimidate the smaller man before him.

Alfred’s hand gripped Arthur’s bony shoulder, forcing the smaller man to look at him. Alfred’s movement was rough, causing Arthur to drop his watering can. The metal sang as it bounced along the wooden floorboards, a clang resounding with each impact. A trail of water dripped out of the spout, splattering across the floor before slowing to a steady drip.

“But Kiku never sees anyone. It’s practically impossible to get a hold of him. He only meets people through personal invitation! People would kill to meet him. Why would he... how would he know a nobody like you!?” Alfred’s eyes flashed maniacally. No doubt, Alfred was one of countless stars who would kill for the chance to work with Kiku Honda.

There was a pause after Alfred stopped talking. Arthur’s eyes fixed on a point to the left of Alfred’s head. A long scratch marred the wall, a remnant from the last time Arthur’s brother visited.

Arthur blinked a couple of times, refocusing himself in the present. His eyes still seemed hazy, heavy lids covering much of the colour, and his voice was distant. “I suppose one could deem it to be a meeting of chance. Kiku was quite taken by my work, and I with his. We artists stick together, you know, in this world moving too fast for the people to keep up.”

Alfred scoffed indignantly at Arthur’s remark about artists. “And I’m not an artist? I’ll have you know, I make my living by bringing out the emotions in my viewers!”

Arthur looked at Alfred, critically looking him up and down. This was akin to his first meeting with his agency representative, when a barely fourteen year old Alfred stood naked except for his boxers, arms out and feet spread. Awkward not-quite developed gangly limbs, and the remnants of baby fat on his hips and cheeks were on display, under the scrutiny of the stern woman who had some strong words regarding Alfred’s pimply forehead. Regardless of her harsh words, he was accepted and in less than two years he would see himself labelled Hollywood’s newest rising teen star.

Despite being fully dressed (with two layers, too), Alfred felt equality naked under Arthur’s piercing stare as he had in his underwear all those years ago. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, fingers tugging at the threadbare sleeve of his hoodie.
Then Arthur looked up, looking him in the eye. “No, I don’t reckon you are. Humour me: would you be making your living if you did not have physical beauty on your side?”

His tone was bored, dismissive, as if Alfred was some child Arthur had been coerced into entertaining. Alfred clenched his fists, but said nothing. He had no leverage, nothing to refute Arthur’s words with.

Arthur face had been a blank mask, but Alfred’s silence softened the edges. When he spoke, his voice was softer; any traces of his previous animosity had dissipated. “What was it that drew you to the limelight?” His head tilted slightly to the side, eyes wide and questioning peeking out from underneath a shaggy fringe.

Alfred’s gaze bounced around the room, avoiding the figure standing before him. This was a common question, and Alfred typically said he wanted to inspire people when asked by interviewers. No one ever brought up his lack of inspirational actions other than a few photo ops with charities and unending patience with his fans.

But Arthur’s gaze held strong and steady, boring into Alfred’s soul, as if seeing the deep secrets buried under layer after layer. Alfred gulped, hit by a sudden realization. When he was younger, Alfred thought being an actor meant being a hero. After all, Clark Kent was Spiderman acting as a regular person. But no longer was Alfred the bright eyed, naive little boy he had been, and no longer did he know what he wanted in life.

Arthur’s gaze remained focused on Alfred. His eyes were narrowed, but his eyebrows were raised, mastering the look of disinterested curiosity. His eyebrows framed his face perfectly, a perfect declaration of his curiosity but not over the top. Alfred couldn’t resist this face and answered as honestly as he could.

“I don’t know.” Alfred dragged a hand through his hair. “I always liked attention when I was a kid. I was the class clown, you know? Then when I was nine I ended up in a theatre performance and all I did was dance around covered in cotton fluff while waving around a cardboard cloud in the background. And I loved it, being the centre of attention. I got this adrenaline rush afterwards, with all of my family congratulating me and everything even though I got the part out of random luck. They would’ve taken any random kid and I happened to be the first they saw. It wasn’t even an important role or anything. I don’t think anyone other than my family even knew I was there.

“But I loved the feeling of coming down from the stage and having people rush at you, talking about how great you were. Even though it was only my family, I loved it. It’s the best feeling in the world. After that I kept signing up for school plays and I was probably awful but I always got the part.
“And actors are like heroes, right? All the superheroes act like regular people, and I kinda associated being a hero with being an actor. I guess I still do. And I like being someone else. Because then you can literally be anything you want. Acting is so freeing ’cause how you appear is up to you.”

Alfred inhaled deeply, slouching against the frame of the shelf. His arms folded across his chest.

“Indeed, I really do envy your freedom. I really am seething in jealousy at how you are avoiding your fans, managers, and your responsibilities on an obscure island no one lives. I dearly regret not choosing the acting route.” Arthur retorted, voice dripping with cynicism.

Alfred’s shoulders slumped even more. His entire body sagged, as if he couldn’t draw up the energy to stand to his full height. His gaze flickered down, traces of hurt seeping into his features. “Well acting is freeing. But I guess I got caught up in the high from all the attention and then I ended up typecast. Have you seen any of my movies?”

Arthur shook his head, then gestured for Alfred to continue. The water from the watering can he had dropped earlier finally stopped its dripping, having finally run out of water. The pool of water was no longer there, having seeped into the wooden floorboards. Only a damp patch remained, filling the shop with a light, musky forest scent.

Prompted by Arthur, Alfred continued. “Well about two years ago all the hype kinda died down and I realized that all my roles are pretty much the same person with a different name. And then I realized all these awards I got and all this attention isn’t because I’m a hero or talented or anything and I just snapped. So here I am.”

Alfred finished his speech with a flourish, arms outstretched and palms facing out.

Arthur turned away to retrieve the discarded watering can, then headed for the sink in the corner.

Then the room was quiet, only the sound of water sloshing in the can in the room.

When the can was a quarter full, Arthur turned back to face Alfred. Alfred had moved away from the shelf and was now resting his weight on the counter, shoulders slumped forward. The two shared an understanding look, conveying with their eyes what words had failed.
Ever so slightly, Arthur’s lips curved upwards. “Here you are.”

Behind him, water continued sloshing around.

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_**I once dreamed of a clock.**_

_Time is infinite, but miniscule. Time is a minute, but also minute. A second can crawl at a snail’s pace, simultaneously zipping by at the speed of light._

_**I can die in a second.**_

_As I watched my dream clock tick, I wondered: will this next second be my last?_

_After all, it only takes a second for a man to die. Even if it’s the second time._

_---

Alfred was unimpressed.

He was sitting on the steps leading up to Arthur’s flower shop, leg bouncing up and down impatiently as he waited for Arthur to finish up some last minute chores inside. Alfred had offered to help, then they could be on their way out sooner, but Arthur had all but shoved him out the door. Minutes earlier, after much heckling, Alfred had convinced Arthur to go on a walk with him. Or, as Alfred worded it, “exploring”.

His phone was in his hand, displaying his numerous unread emails, all of which were from Braginski involving this new movie that would supposedly propel into the critics’ circles.

Of course, Braginski also claimed his last three films would also be critical successes. Then they were nominated for the Razzies. All of them.

But as always, there was a silver lining. A critical failure was not synonymous with a box office failure, and Alfred had earned himself a hefty paycheck for the movies, not to mention the publicity and endorsement deals that had come out of it. But after eight years in the business,
money and publicity meant little to him.

To add salt to the wound, his movies were box office hits due to the influx of hormonal, preteen girls. The last three movies, the so-called critical masterpieces, ended up marketed as teen chick flicks.

Needless to say, Alfred was not impressed.

Alfred did give Braginski credit for one thing, though. At least the title wasn’t cheesy and over the top like Heart in a Box this time. And there was no costar. Only him. At the very least, this one wouldn’t be some terrible romantic flick.

But Alfred was still unimpressed.

Having run out of things to check on his phone, Alfred stuffed his phone in the pocket of his hoodie. He rested his elbow on the step above where he sat, leaning back to study the community. Alfred had only run into people a handful of times on the streets, almost none of whom had recognized him. They waved in greeting, and Alfred waved back with a bright grin. Just as he had done on his little farm village all those years ago. A restlessness suddenly awoke inside him, and he felt this need to be on his feet and moving.

Alfred pushed himself off the stairs, dusting off his pants. The sky was clear with only a couple solitary clouds drifting in the sky. One was full and fluffy, colouring book-esque in every way possible. The other was thin, wispy, like the cotton candy swirling around in a machine. He paced back and forth at the foot of the stairs for a minute, then two, before finally giving into his impatience. Alfred barged up the stairs, prepared to haul the florist out. On the third step, Alfred heard soft footsteps steadily approaching. The door flung open, revealing a slightly breathless Arthur.

Arthur leaned heavily against the doorway. “My apologies, it appears that time just flew away from me.”

His earlier irritation gone. Alfred grinned. He held his arm out, as if he were a noble knight and Arthur his fair lady. “Time does that, doesn’t it? Shall we?”

Arthur said nothing, simply sliding his arm through Alfred’s. And off they were.
There is never enough time. Life is a ticking bomb, every moment one step closer to the end.

For many times over the course of my life, I have resigned myself to the end. My life is short, shorter than most, and I am ready for the end.

Or so I tell myself.

But will I ever truly be ready for the end?

Alfred was waiting for him outside, so Arthur had to move fast. Arthur rushed to the back room of his little shop. Shelves upon shelves of budding flowers and packaged seeds and fertilizers greeted him but Arthur made a beeline for the a small drawer at the end of the room, shoving past the greenery in his path. Roughly, he yanked open the drawer, pulling out a small pill container. He fumbled with the lid, unable to pry it off with his shaking hands. Arthur swore under his breath, willing his hands to steady. Finally, just as Arthur was on the verge of slamming the cylinder against the wall, the lid came off with a pop. Hurriedly, Arthur shook two little caplets out and lifted them to his mouth. In a single, fluid motion, he had thrown his head back and swallowed the pills dry.

As expected, the pills did not go down easy without the lubrication of water. Arthur could feel the capsules lodging in his throat, straining against the walls of his esophagus. It was an unpleasant, almost painful, feeling that always made him regret his hurry. Arthur coughed and pounded lightly on his chest to help the pills go down. It worked, but he found drops of blood splattered on his hand.

Arthur moved a couple steps to the side to a large square sink. He rinsed the redness of his hands, but made no motion to step back or dry off his hands. Instead, he placed his hands on the sides of the sink, bracing his weight as he leaned forward over the drain. It was silent. Still. The plants were as still as Arthur, unmoving, burdened by the weight of their brightness.

Tousled blond locks fell before Arthur’s eyes, curtaining much on his vision. Tears filled his eyes, but did not flow out. His eyes were lined with dark bags, bruises against his yellow tinted skin.

The silence was broken by Arthur’s heavy breathing. In, and out, and in, and out. This was a regular routine, one Arthur absolutely despised, but nevertheless regular. Shakily, he lifted a hand to his mouth, suppressing the churning in his stomach as best he could. It was like Kronos, attempting to defy fate. The end cannot be defied, but it can be delayed.
A drop of water leaked from the sprout, echoing in the little room.

It brought Arthur out of his reverie.

He blinked, the hand at his mouth lowered to rub at his abdomen. A hardened lump lay under his shirt, under his skin, unseen, but all too prominent.

_In, out, in, out._

Arthur heard faint movement from outside. He collected himself best he could before scrambling out to meet Alfred.

_I believe I have spent much of my life following the desires of others._

_Did I ever fight for me?_  

_What do I want?_  

..._I think I want to die._

Alfred whistled a cheerful tune, the opening to his TV show from his early days in Hollywood. He was heading for a clearing, (American) football tucked under his arm and ratty old baseball cap on his head. His blue eyes were clear and bright, shimmering with excitement.

Arthur walked beside him, just barely keeping up with the American’s wide gait. The air was still and the sun was out, dusting everything in a warm sheen of gold.

“What took you so long? Harbouring a secret drug addiction?” Alfred’s tone was light and teasing, but his words hit a little too close to home.
Arthur kept his voice flat. “You would know, wouldn’t you? How many of your colleagues have you suspected of being not quite sober?”

Alfred’s eyes lost a bit of their shine. “Hollywood is a long story. Celebrities are probably the most two faced people there are,” he said, his voice just barely masking weariness. He didn’t elaborate any more than that, and Arthur didn’t push him.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

When they did reach what Alfred deemed to be the “most perfectest footballing spot that even the pros would kill for,” Alfred wasted no time in teaching Arthur about the sport he loved so dearly.

“I’ll have you know that I used to play rugby. It can’t be all that different.” Arthur failed to mention that his rugby playing days barely lasted three weeks before his cancer relapsed and he spent the next six months in and out of the hospital.

“No, you have to hold the ball this way!” insisted Alfred. “It should make a nice spiral. Like this!” He threw the ball at Arthur who caught it.

Arthur tossed it back, though Alfred had to run forward a couple steps to receive the ball.

“Come on! More muscle power! That’s it! No you have to twist your arm more! Take a step forward when you throw! Yeah like that!”

Alfred ran a rigorous teaching session and it wasn’t long before Arthur was panting, hands on his knees and drenched in a layer of sweat.

“I think it’s time...for a break,” gasped Arthur.

Alfred was glowing, adrenaline surging through his veins bringing him to a pleasant high. “Tired already, old man?” He stepped forward, closing the gap between the two.

“Not all of us have personal trainers or the time to move around so much. Some of us have real jobs that keep us from staying fit.” countered Arthur, glaring.
“If you say so, gramps.”

An elbow jabbed into his side. “Remind me to give you buttercups. They represent immaturity.”

“Well at least I don’t have to worry about throwing out my back every time I get out of bed!”

While Arthur and Alfred exchanged insults, two girls, who had been watching the two men, walked up to Alfred.

“Excuse me,” one interrupted, “are you Alfred Jones? Like, the Alfred Jones?

Alfred froze and smiled brightly. If one looked closely enough, they would notice the hardness in his eyes; how they narrowed slightly. How his smile was just a little too bright, a little too plastered on. When he replied, his tone was reserved, guarded, so unlike the freedom when he teased Arthur. Most people wouldn’t notice, but Arthur was more perceptive than most. “That would be me. You guys fans?”

“Yeah! I love Heart in a Box. You and Natalya Arlovskaya are totally my OTP!”

“No, Echoes was the best. Especially when you and Elizaveta Hedervary had that balcony scene.”

Alfred laughed, “I hate to crush your dreams, but Natalya and Elizaveta are just friends. Want autographs?”

Arthur stood off to the side, gripping the football.

After photos and hugs, the two girls turned to leave. One called out, “Hi Arthur. Mum loved the flowers you brought.” Arthur nodded his acknowledgement, and they waved and were off.

Arthur fidgeted with the ball in his hands, fingers tapping an irregular beat against the pigskin. Alfred wore an unreadable expression. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and his shoulders sagged.
Sensing the mood, Arthur answered Alfred’s unvoiced thoughts. “They won’t tell anyone, you know. It’s an unspoken rule. Pry not, let untold secrets remain as such. It’s hard to keep a secret in a community as small and closely knit as this one. There are clear boundaries, and those lines are never overstepped.”

“There are no rules when it comes to fame.”

This was the end.

And the beginning.

It was at this moment when I understood my purpose. How life was simply a series of struggles. This peace of mind I was so desperately searching for, it did not exist. The closest one will ever get to achieving peace of mind is through the acceptance that one can never achieve peace.

“You should go back to acting.”

Alfred looked at Arthur in shock over their food.

Alfred’s mouth opened and closed silently before he was able to use his voice. “Why would I do that? I hate everything about it. Aren’t you like the number one proponent of ‘I don’t give a crap what other people think so I just do me’?”

Arthur was picking at the barely touched plate of pasta before him. His gaze flickered up, and he looked at Alfred through thin lashes and an untamed fringe. “And how well is not caring going for me?”

“Actually, pretty damn well,” Alfred said through a mouthful of food. “You’re happy and have everything you want.”

Arthur let out a short, bitter laugh. “You have no idea,” he muttered under his breath.
Before Alfred could question what he had no idea about, Arthur interrupted him. “Why did you stop acting?”

“The people are horrible. I hate everyone I work with. They’re all snobby little dolls who expect everyone to bend over backwards for them. This one guy who was my stunt double tried to throw me off a four story building to prove I was a wimp to the entire crew. And this one actress I worked with refused to kiss me! We were the main couple but she didn’t like how I looked and another stunt double had to do all my kissing scenes. My stunt double was practically a doppelganger! And there's nothing wrong with my face!”

Arthur held up his hand to stop Alfred before he launched into a full blown tirade against his job.

“Surely you met some decent folk? I’m rather unconvinced that you have gone all these years without having met at least one decent person.”

Alfred paused for a moment. “Well...I do really like Elizaveta. I starred with her a few years ago. She’s pretty much my best friend. But she’s literally the only one.”

Arthur set his fork down, giving up on his meal, and setting all his attention on Alfred. “But she is someone. Are you in Hollywood to meet nice people, or to do something you love? Because from what you’ve told me, acting is a part of you and you can’t just give up a part of you like that.”

It was now Alfred’s turn to look down, thinking over Arthur’s words.

Arthur continued, “I’ve never mentioned this to anyone before, and I may have lied a bit when you asked me earlier, but I have watched your movies before. All of them. All the roles you’ve taken are wrong. You can do better. I know you are better than the stereotypical boy next door and I watch you act because I see so much potential in you. Know that you are one of a kind, and all the critics, directors, anyone who says you’ll burn out of your fame has no idea what they’re talking about because you are going to make history and giving up now would be such a waste.

“There’s a lot more to acting than just Hollywood. You don’t need a break from acting. You need a break from Hollywood. Maybe a break forever. But please don’t give up acting. You have a passion for it, I know you do, and the way you move on screen, you immerse yourself so completely into a character and you really bring them to life. You are not just acting as the character, you become the character and it’s just so brilliant and perfect and I swear to God if you retire from acting for good it will be the end of me.”
Arthur said his words with such conviction that Alfred was surprised those words had come from Arthur himself. Never before had Alfred seen Arthur show so much emotion, see him feel so strongly about anything. In fact, Alfred wasn't entirely sure if he had ever seen Arthur show emotion other than anger and repressed anger.

Their table was overcome with silence. Alfred sat quietly looking at Arthur, and Arthur looked down at his cold plate still full of food. Arthur was breathing heavily.

In a small voice, Arthur broke the silence. “Please don’t stop acting. It would be such a waste. Do you understand how lucky you are? To be healthy, talented, given the opportunities you have at your feet, and such perfect health. Please don’t waste your life.” Arthur’s voice broke on the last sentence and his hands, which had previously been sitting limply in his lap, were now covering his face.

Taken aback, Alfred sat still, stunned and silent.

As the watch on Arthur’s wrist ticked on, his face remained buried in his hands. His shoulders shook, slightly at first but steadily grew more violent until broken sobs started leaving his throat.

The sobs pulled Alfred out of his reverie. For a second he sat there, unsure of what to do. But, his inner hero took over and he stood up, walking to Arthur’s side of the table. He pulled his chair along with him. Setting his chair beside Arthur’s, he gathered Arthur into his arms. He half expected Arthur to put up a fight, but Arthur was stiff. Stiff and bony. Alfred rubbed Arthur’s back, feeling the bumps where Arthur’s spine protruded out from his skin.

It was the best he could do to comfort the man who had given him so much.

Later, Alfred would forget that Arthur had eaten almost nothing during lunch, forget how small and frail Arthur felt underneath his many layers of clothing. Arthur would say he simply got caught up in the moment, and Alfred bought it.

For as talented an actor he was, he knew nothing of how to read people.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that there is no successful method of avoidance for the past stalks you, shadows you, waiting for the perfect moment for karma to hit you.
You can not win.

There was a knock on Alfred’s door. It was heavy, shaking the entire wall. It was an eerily familiar knock. Through the peephole, Alfred saw an unfortunately familiar face. It was large and round, with a pleasant expression that did not quite match the menacing violet eyes. Though he did not expect this particular guest, Alfred was not surprised by his appearance. Alfred swallowed down a growing lump in his throat as he unlocked the door.

“Braginski,” he greeted, opening the door just wide enough so that he could see his manager standing in the hallway. “Can I help you?”

“Jones,” his manager responded pleasantly in acknowledgement. “We’ll see how much trouble you are worth today.” The threat was thinly veiled, but was clear to Alfred. He was going to agree to Braginski’s demands, or he was going to be joining the ranks of other unemployed former teen stars. Which really, Alfred wouldn't have minded all that much were it not for Arthur's speech the other day.

Braginski didn’t wait for Alfred to invite him in. Instead he pushed the door open, causing Alfred to stumble to keep his balance, and walked directly into the small sitting area. He made himself at home on the couch, casually crossing an ankle on his knee and slouching his arm along the back of the couch.

Alfred regained his balance and scurried after his manager, setting himself down on the corner of the TV stand, as far as he could sit from Braginski while staying in the same room.

Braginski sniffed disdainfully, turning his nose up. “A rather scant little place, no? You can’t imagine how difficult it was to track it down.”

“How did you find me?” Alfred’s voice was tight. Firm, but tight.

“Why, I know some people. They tracked your messages to your family and Elizaveta. You are quite the amateur at running away. Now,” Braginski waved his hand, “for real business. You are going to read A Graveyard of Buried Infinities.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slightly wrinkled paperback of the book and set it on Alfred’s coffee table.

“No.” Alfred crossed his arms, eyes narrowing. “I do not answer to you. I will be choosing my own roles now, a job that should never have fallen into your hands.”
Braginski remained eerily pleasant, though a coldness had settled over the room. “Is that so?” He said, smiling a smile that showed all his teeth. “I do hope you remember the ones who supported you from the beginning.”

Alfred smiled back an equally disturbing grin. “I remember you never supported me, unless you could something to gain. But Ivan, I hope you remember how long, how many times you’ve walked over me, and how I let you flatten me every. Single. Time.” The two sat on opposite sides on the room, sharing equally maniacal grins in silence, waiting for the other to back down.

Not being one for patience, Alfred backed down first. But not without a fight. “I will not be reading the book. You will only arrange the roles I have approved of. And I will never star in another teen drama.”

Braginski laughed, throwing his head back and clutching his chest as if Alfred was the greatest comedian on earth. “Surely you are joking. You don’t have the slightest idea what you’re about to give up. This is the role that will define your career. Are you really so naive as to give that up?”

Alfred looked straight at Braginski, dead serious and a no joking demeanor. “Do I look like I’m joking, Braginski? Do I?” He took a deep breath and paused for a second before giving his manager the hardest look he could make. “I would give up everything if it meant I was free from you.”

Ivan had no response to that. He simply stared at Alfred, still wearing that pleasant smile.

After several moments of silence, Ivan spoke softly, “End your career, if you are so idealistic as to dream the world spins for you.”

Despite his victory, Alfred did not smile. He kept his face straight and serious, his expression leaving no room for disagreement. “Excellent. Speak to the producers for A Graveyard of Buried Infinites. I will be playing Kiran D. Lurkrath.”

Without a doubt, the most terrifying moment one can experience in life is the realization that you don’t care.

Without a care, without humanity.
“They’ve cast him.”

“What?” Arthur grumbled, having been interrupted in the middle of his late afternoon nap. “What are you talking about, Frog? Cast who?”

“Kiran. For the movie. He’s been cast.”

“Is that all?” Arthur yawned.

He could hear Francis frowning through the phone. “You know, I was under the impression you would care more about the casting. You had some rather strong words to say on the matter.”

“Yes, well, it’s not as if the producers would have listened to my suggestions.” And Arthur hung up.

Do I want to be known?

Will I be remembered for the great things I have done, or my faults?

History is cruel when it comes to the memory of the deceased.

Breaking news: Teen heartthrob Alfred Jones confirmed to star in A Graveyard of Buried Infinities. The much anticipated film adaptation of the international bestseller by an elusive anonymous author will be starring the three time Razzie nominee in the main role. Will this be another butchered acting attempt by Jones?

For all of the Russian’s faults, efficiency was not one of them. Alfred never failed to be awed by how quickly his manager could work. It had been less than three weeks since their unfortunate
meeting and the movie deal had already been finalized.

Alfred burst into Arthur’s shop with a brand new copy of A Graveyard of Buried Infinities Alfred had pulled an all nighter so he could finish reading it.

“Artie! I just read this book and my life will never be the same again oh my god I can’t believe what just happened this dude is amazing why would the author of something so amazing want to stay anonymous?”

Arthur merely looked up from his own book, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, with disinterest written all over his face. “Fame is not for everyone.”

“But this character! This Kiran guy is so amazing how could they have created such a character!”

Drily, Arthur responded, “You seem awfully inspired by this character.”

“Well, yeah. Obviously.” Alfred was bouncing with excitement, a beaming little ray of sunshine. “You’ve got to read it! I bet even you with all of your fancy classics will be amazed by Kiran. The author is actually the most amazing person. I don’t know how I’m supposed to play Kiran. He’s just so, so...so human and flawed and how can I possibly give his character justice?”


“Yup! I can’t wait until filming starts. Oh! Filming!” Suddenly Alfred’s expression sobered ever so slightly. “I’ll have to leave for filming in a month.”

Arthur’s gaze dropped. Silence ensued, broken only by the systematic ticking of Arthur’s watch.

“Well,” Arthur finally said, “I guess you wouldn’t have been able to stay for much longer anyway. You have a life out there. Go out and conquer the world.” Arthur smiled a broken smile.

“Artie...” Alfred’s previous joy had dissipated. “You know, you could come too. I mean, you can’t be on set of anything but you could come to where filming’s going to happen.”
Arthur shook his head. “No, I can’t. I won’t. You shouldn’t be going around getting attached to strange men you don’t know, anyway.” He tried to pass it off as a joke, but it failed to lighten the atmosphere.

He took a deep breath before starting again. “What I mean to say is, relationships are much like people. They come and go. The month spent with you has been quite a pleasant experience, but there is a time stamp for everything and our correspondence will be nearing its end.”

“No.”

Arthur was taken aback. “...no?”

“No.” Alfred reiterated. “I am going to come back after filming and we are going to watch the movie together and we are going to break this time stamp because you are one of the most inspiring people I’ve met. Seriously, you’re up there with my parents and I am keeping you in my life for as long as I can get away with it.”

“Alfred...” Arthur was momentarily speechless. “You can’t do that. You have a career, and you are going to shine. You should never let other people hold you back.”

Alfred smiled sweetly, a genuine smile that lit up the room, that shone in his eyes. “Ah, but Arthur, don’t you understand? You could never hold me back. After all, you are my muse.”

And isn’t it ironic that it was by pursuing his muse that resulted in Yeats driving himself insane?

Muses are fickle creatures; treat with care.

With the rain pounding against the walls, Arthur and Alfred sat across from one another in Arthur’s small dining room. Arthur had been filling out a crossword puzzle when Alfred insisted he needed Arthur’s help in practising for his new role.

From the start, the practise had been a disaster.
“You know, I honestly think Kiran should just man up. I mean he has everything he needs so why is he going on a useless adventure? He has a family, friends for emotional support, everyone has enough food and they have a medic and his life is just fine. There’s nothing he could get from going exploring. And everyone already recognizes him!” Alfred cried out, just on the verge of tears.

“If you believe there is nothing Kiran could need, you have misunderstood his entire character.” Arthur was merciless, despite the state the American was in.

“I can’t do this anymore! I must have broken my acting gene.” Alfred planted his face against the cool wood of the table. His hands tore at his hair, leaving behind ruffled bunches of tangled locks.

“You are being ridiculous,” Arthur snapped. “You have broken nothing. Perhaps you simply are not cut out for this role. Kiran is a much deeper, more human character than all the one dimensional pretty boys that seem to be the only type you can portray properly!”

The table shook harder each time Alfred banged his head against the wood.

"Artie, you’ve got to help me!” Alfred was on the verge of tears. "I need this role! You said I had so much potential, you can’t just shut me out when you feel like it! I'm human too! I have feelings and flaws and look at me, I am on my knees, on the ground, and I am literally begging you to save my career and this character so I don't mutilate and ruin such an amazing creation and all the hard work of the author and everyone behind the scenes. Please?"

On the last word, Alfred’s voice broke which finally prompted Arthur to put his crossword aside.

"Alright," Arthur said, pulling Alfred off the floor. "I think you've suffered enough. You really have your heart set on this Kiran, don't you?"

Alfred nodded, taking a seat at the table across from Arthur.

"Then tell me," said Arthur, "what about Kiran appeals to you so much? Does he remind you of yourself?"

Alfred propped his head up on his forearms. "Well, yes? No? I don't know? I mean I really like
"Well I think Kiran is a little bit like everyone in the world. He is selfish, self centred, ignores good advice because he thinks it doesn't apply to him. He thinks the rules and laws of nature, and of society, are beneath him. Really, Kiran is the absolute worst humanity has to offer."

Alfred raised his head, blinking repeatedly. "But Kiran is such a good person! He stopped his village from stoning that innocent girl to death and ended up being kicked out and he gave the stray cat some food and he did save his village! I mean, sure, maybe Kiran isn't the perfect hero, but he has to be one of the better guys since he basically got nothing out of all the good things he did but he still chose to do them anyway instead of being selfish. Like he could have been so much more selfish but he didn't! And doesn't everyone break rules? And he never did evil things without an ulterior motive, so really he's just human, isn't he?"

Arthur smiled and said, "And now you understand your character. Up until now, you've been treating Kiran as an omnipotent super being who could do no wrong. And that is simply not what he is. To portray Kiran properly, you must be able to dig into his humanity, and present not a hero, but a human with flaws like us all."

Across the table, Alfred tilted his head and gave Arthur a curious look. "You know, for someone who cares so little for that book, you're really good at figuring out the characters."

Refusing to meet his eyes, Arthur looked out the window and watched the droplets stream down the glass. "Indeed, it is quite the mystery."

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_Secrets should never be discovered, but always have a way of being uncovered._

_It is a most unfortunate string of events._

---

“Hey, what’s this?”

Arthur was pruning his apple tree while Alfred dug through the many drawers and cabinets of Arthur’s checkout counter. Alfred had come across a book Arthur had stuffed in the back of a bottom drawer, underneath piles of paper that were important enough to be kept, but only in an out of the way location.
The book was new, the cover unblemished, and the pages unopened.

Arthur turned, affectionate exasperation written over his face, expecting Alfred to be holding a gel highlighter or an uniquely shaped USB, something of that sort. He immediately recognized what Alfred was holding up, even before he made out the cover, and his expression fell automatically, a reflexive action to seeing his own book anywhere.

The cover was simple, dark, and elegant. Alfred eyed the cover design appreciatively. Even Arthur himself had much respect for the artist who designed the cover. It was a shame that such a perfect, befitting design was for his own work. The design was solid, but abstract. A wispy figure in white -- perhaps a ghost, perhaps a human, perhaps a man, perhaps a woman, perhaps not even humanoid -- centred the cover. The background was a gradient of blue, lightening from the black corners to the royal aquamarine blue outlining the figure. A wispy, intricately woven design, perhaps a wind or broken spirits, danced around the figure.

Underneath the figure was the name of the author printed in a calligraphic font, with thin tendrils sprouting from each letter and delicately wrapping around the name.

Arthur was silent, still. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly before he gave up and settled for simply staring at the book in broken horror.

Alfred glanced back at the book; was it something incriminating Arthur wanted no one to find out? Was this a Fifty Shades of Grey esque book? A guilty pleasure no one was to know about?

The title was in the same font as the author’s name, too lengthy and intricate for Alfred’s lack of patience. He froze, much like Arthur, when he realized he recognized the author’s name.

Arthur Kirkland.

Well then.

Arthur was frozen, pruning shears still raised against the leaves.

His companion recovered rather quickly, doing a double take before bursting in excitement.
“Yo, Artie! I didn’t know you wrote a book? Why didn’t you ever mention it?”

Arthur only blinked. His skin was white, all colour having drained out of his face.

It is a sad moment when one realizes they look healthier on the verge of fainting from shock than in their regular lifestyle.

Alfred was now studying the cover, admiring the artwork, the finer details the artist had slipped onto the paper. “This is a real nice book,” Alfred started. “How come you never men...mentioned it?” His voice faltered when he read the title.

A Graveyard of Buried Infinities.

Oh. Oh.

Alfred’s mind was racing. What were the chances? Of all the people in the world, he met the elusive author of the book that had taken the world by storm, that had redefined the limits of writing, and had changed Alfred’s life so profoundly?

“You-you’re the one who created Kiran?” Alfred asked, awe and disbelief and shock and confusion meshed together in an intangible mess.

There was no where Arthur could hide, no way to avoid this conversation. “I am.”

“Why is this cover different from the printed editions?”

Arthur sighed. “A first printing. For my eyes only.”

“Is that why your name is still on it?” The first consumer printing did not have Arthur’s name anywhere. He was anonymous.
Arthur nodded. “Yes.” He had a closed tone, shutting down all the questions Alfred was still bursting to ask. This was going to be the end of this discussion.

The two men looked at each other in silence, Arthur wanting to disown his book, and Alfred wanting to know everything about the book. But it was too late for Arthur to unprint his book, and Alfred could never learn anything without antagonizing Arthur. And so, they sat in silence, punctuated only by the steady ticking of time gone by.

Alfred finally broke the silence, cutting through the tension. “Well, it looks like we’ll be heading across the pond together.” Arthur was cold and stiff, and Alfred had many unanswered questions, but for now, a brilliant grin had overtaken the actor’s features. So bright, that even Arthur couldn’t resist offering a smile of his own back (though his was thin and ever so slightly strained).

“Indeed, it appears we shall.”
Act II: When Fate Casts Its Shadow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It's never too late for a new beginning. But never put off for later, what can be done now.

Time is infinite, and time is finite.

Movie Set, Yellowstone, Mid October

Alfred F. Jones, Hollywood poster boy extraordinaire, was bouncing up and down, not even bothering to give a halfhearted attempt to appear professional. His inner fanboy had revealed itself, and nothing would hold him back.

“Holy mother of God!” Alfred indiscreetly whisper-yelled at Arthur. “That’s Kiku Honda! The Kiku Honda! I can’t believe I’m actually standing on the same set as Kiku Honda! He’s right there!” Alfred’s arm was wildly waving around, following the director’s every moment. The director in question was currently engaged in a discussion with a cameraman and pretending he was unaware of his lead actor’s blatant admiration for him.

Arthur, who was sitting in a fancy monogrammed chair, simply pressed his temples and groaned. “Do realize that you are giving me quite the headache.” Alfred’s hands had settled on the armrest of Arthur’s personalized chair; thus, every motion was felt quite strongly by Arthur. Not to mention how queasy Arthur had been feeling ever since landing in America. Certainly the endless meetings and steady stream of paperwork didn’t help. For all his indifference towards Hollywood and his own book, Arthur was very much involved every step of the way.

Alfred looked down at his companion, who was moments away from cradling his throbbing skull, and frowned. “Artie, you sure this is normal? I really don’t think jet lag should be this bad.”

Arthur tsked. “Nonsense, I am simply prone to motion sickness. The long drive here was not kind to my head. It’s nothing more than a mere cold.” He nudged Alfred’s arms off his chair, then proceeded to set a hand on each armrest. With some effort, Arthur pushed himself up into a standing position. “I will be resting in your trailer. Stop making a fool of yourself and go become acquainted with Mr. Lurkrath. I am expecting great things from you.”
Of course, as the author and screenplay writer Arthur had his own trailer. But Alfred’s had a radiator, something Arthur cherished during the chilly fall months.

Standing by the now vacated chair, Alfred watched as Arthur slowly made his way to the trailer. His hand was vigorously rubbing his head.

Now alone, Alfred wandered aimlessly around set. Kiku Honda was busy, surrounded by a myriad of cameramen and costume designers and makeup artists. Alfred would follow Arthur’s advice and introduce himself later.

Alfred pulled his hood over his head and shoved his hands into the pocket of his hoodie. Brittle leaves and dried grass announced his every step. Around him, in every corner of the set a producer, a composer, cameramen, sound technicians, people were working to construct the set, putting up the green screens, working to make their contribution to Arthur’s story. An empty feeling rose inside his chest when he realized how useless he was. As the original author and the writer of the screenplay, Arthur was expected to arrive to supervise the building of the set, as well as smooth over any rough scenes.

Alfred’s arrival had not been expected for another month.

He looked down as his feet, clad in dirty, worn converse sneakers, as they trampled upon the landscape.

In the nearby distance, Alfred could hear the buzz of countless conversations between all the people working on the set, working to propel Alfred into yet more stardom. Alfred was overcome by shame as he realized how little credit others were given for their equally important roles in making his movies a success.

Braginski was certainly not impressed when Alfred announced his intention to head to Yellowstone and arrive on set ahead of schedule instead of practicing and memorizing his lines with his costars in Los Angeles. “You will only be a disturbance to the others,” he had said.

Certainly he needed the practice, though Arthur now refused to give any feedback until Alfred could give a “halfway decent portrayal”. Alfred had made little progress since his fight with Arthur, thought not for lack of trying. Kiran D. Lurkrath was simply too complex of a character for Alfred to unravel, and Arthur gave no additional hints as to how Kiran should be seen.
The buzz of people, of progress, had lowered until Alfred could no longer hear anything other than the sound of his own two feet. He had reached an alcove, an open field, and he was standing in the centre.

Looking around at the flat plain, Alfred was suddenly hit by a wave of inspiration. Here he was, alone in an alcove, surrounded by nothing but emptiness. Feeling nothing but emptiness, a hole inside his chest. Exactly how Kiran D. Lurkrath felt for his entire life. Alfred’s eyes brightened, realizing how he should portray Kiran, how Arthur intended Kiran to be perceived.

No one was there and Alfred didn’t have his script with him, but that didn’t stop him from leaping headfirst into character. He was no longer Alfred F. Jones; Alfred Jones had been replaced by Kiran D. Lurkrath.

Alfred couldn’t remember every scene, and certainly not the majority of his lines, but he was in acting subspace and each word, expression, movement came naturally. He was no longer simply portraying Kiran, he had become Kiran.

Most of the scenes were improvised, once Alfred had run through nearly half the story. He didn’t notice; he was still riding the high of acting, the rush of adrenaline he had been craving for years. A release that every one of his previous movies failed to achieve.

Alfred only came back down to earth at the sound of applause.

A short few metres away, Kiku Honda had joined Alfred in the field. He had not seen all of Alfred’s impromptu performance, but he had witnessed enough to be sure his casting of Alfred was the correct choice.

Alfred was speechless, cheeks flushed with the adrenaline coursing through his veins and the recognition that it was his idol who was standing before him, applauding his acting.

“Forgive me for interrupting,” Kiku Honda said, approaching Alfred. “You are very talented, Mr. Jones. I admit I had my doubts when you were cast, but you have proven me wrong. I hope you will give an equally invested performance when the cameras are on.”

For a moment, Alfred was speechless. His hands moved on their own, fiddling with the hem of his hoodie.
A minute passed before Alfred regained his ability to speak. “Er, wow! Thanks! You’re like, my God. I’ve always wanted to work with you and I’m super honoured to have this opportunity.” He stuck his hand out.

Kiku Honda reciprocated the handshake with a strong grip. With a wry smile, he said, “I am certainly glad I have made the right choice in casting you.”

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*How long has it been since I felt something other than pain? My life is a curse, living is but a dream. How difficult it is, to have everything in the appearance and nothing in the reality.*

*I am but an actor in my life, living how I wish to be seen.*

*I am empty.*

---

Soft, muffled snores came from inside Alfred’s trailer. Arthur was still sleeping when Alfred returned, still riding the waves of elation brought on by Kiku Honda’s praise. The heat was blasted to its highest setting, so high Alfred worried Arthur would overheat in his sleep. Beads of sweat dotted Arthur’s forehead, confirming Alfred’s suspicions.

As quietly as he could, Alfred turned the dial so the space was no longer a sauna and gathered fresh clothes. For the third night in a row, Arthur had taken over Alfred’s bed which left Alfred to retaliate the only way he could: by welcoming himself into Arthur’s bed.

Alfred had just turned the latch of the trailer door, prepared to step out, he heard the blankets shift and turned towards the source of the sound.

“Alfred?” Arthur slurred, eyes blinking blearily, still heavy with sleep.

Releasing the door latch, Alfred moved back to kneel beside Arthur. “Hey, you okay? You’ve been pretty out of it lately. Anything bothering you?”

Eyes still clouded over with sleep, Arthur shook his head. His voice was shaky, but in spite of his obvious illness, Arthur’s grouchiness did not fail to make an appearance. “Fine. I’m fine. You Americans worry too much.” Arthur shifted his blankets and sniffed. “Is it morning?”
Shaking his head, Alfred answered. “Nope. It’s just after twelve. After midnight.”

Arthur moved to get up but was stopped by Alfred. “What are you doing? You should go back to sleep.”

Weakly, Arthur put up a small fight. “Nonsense, I will sleep just fine in my own trailer.”

“Artie, you’re obviously sick. You’re not going anywhere.” Alfred refused to budge.

As Arthur struggled, the moonlight shone a stripe across Arthur’s face. The patch of light hit a patch under his ear, directly beneath his jawbone. A raised patch of skin was clearly visible, and it did not fail to escape Alfred’s notice.

“Stop.” Alfred’s tone was hard and Arthur ceased his struggles. Gently, Alfred raised a hand and brushed Arthur’s jaw line, over the protruding lump. Softly, he said, “What’s this?”

“Hmm?”

“This lump on your neck. It’s hard. What is it? Does it hurt?”

In the dim lighting Alfred couldn’t see Arthur’s skin, initially flushed with fever, lose all colour.

Arthur’s gaze dropped and his muscles relaxed. “Must be an allergy. My skin is rather sensitive. It’s quite bothersome, but no, it does not hurt.”

Alfred bought Arthur’s lie and left soon after. Unfortunately, Arthur knew all too well what the lump meant. After all, he spent his childhood covered in them.

Tick, tock, his time was running out.

In England, his doctors had attacked his cancerous cells with radiation and chemo and surgeries;
they threw their entire arsenal at him year after year but he had finally given up a year ago.

That he had gone a year without a relapse, especially as he had stopped his drugs and treatments cold turkey, was a small miracle. But Arthur had been the miracle boy for long enough.

He was tired.

Turning to face the trailer wall, Arthur closed his eyes and tried to banish all thoughts of death. His headache was beginning to return, full force. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes before sliding across his face.

Months ago, lumps in his abdomen had appeared just before Alfred stumbled upon his shop. Back then, Arthur didn’t care. He had prepared for that moment. He had made peace with his fate.

Except he didn’t.

The signs were all there, popping up whenever and wherever and Arthur had ignored it because it didn’t matter. No one was close to him anymore. He made his peace with his family, with Francis, with the few friends he had, and prepared to live a peaceful rest of his life.

Alfred had changed his plans, but at the worst possible time.

Tick, tock, time was out.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

*Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

What is time but a ticking bomb?

*Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

It was evident to Alfred and everyone in the nearby vicinity that Arthur had not had a good night’s
Arthur’s usual grouchy demeanour had stepped aside, leaving a sniffling, red nosed and miserable author who was almost agreeable in his place.

A strong gust of wind blew a handful of shrivelled leaves into Arthur’s lap. They settled on a thick stack of papers.

“I really think you should take a break,” Alfred said, leaning over the back of Arthur’s monogrammed chair as the writer was going over the filming schedule.

Brushing the stray leaves off his lap, Arthur wrapped his woolen jacket tighter around his body. “You should be rehearsing. Kiku has said good things about you, but you have yet to impress me.” Arthur brushed off Alfred’s suggestion, stubbornly forcing his body even further past its limits.

“Ha ha!” Alfred laughed. “I hate you tell you this, but you’ll have to wait until filming starts. You’ll be blown away for sure, but I can’t have anyone else seeing my amazing abilities yet.”

Dried leaves and brittle twigs crunched as Alfred loudly stepped to stand in front of Arthur. Gently, Alfred tugged the stack of papers out of Arthur’s grasp,

“Come on,” Alfred prompted, “Your job was done months ago. The script and everything is perfect, and you know it. Francis even threatened to beat me if you didn’t stop micromanaging. Let’s go exploring! Remember when we used to do that in Portland? There are some nice towns nearby and they have tons of moose things and I want to get something for my brother!”

Before Arthur could voice his dissent, Alfred had whisked Arthur to his feet and was half carrying Arthur to his rented car.

On the highway, it didn’t take long for Arthur’s head to loll to the side, his eyes to slip shut, and his thoughts to drift off to dreamland.

Glancing to the right, Alfred smirked victoriously.

Arthur was far too stubborn to listen to anyone, or care about his own well being. Alfred, however, had a heart big enough to care for the both of them.
For a few more minutes, Alfred drove along the deserted rural road before pulling up on the shoulder. After yanking the key out of the ignition, Alfred reached across the console, carefully across Arthur’s body as to not disturb the sleeping man, and opened the glove compartment to pull out his script for the movie.

Sometimes, Alfred impressed himself with his genius.

_Fate plays games with us, taunts us, makes us think the impossible is possible._

_Fate is cruel, and no one wins the game of fate._

_Everyone who tries ends up dead._

There were two weeks until filming officially began and Arthur had finally realized the crew was actually decently competent without his directions. Even by his ridiculously high standards.

The air was chilling, winds growing in intensity, sunlight waning; Arthur could feel his strength dwindling. His appetite was gone, and what little he ate always resulted in indigestion. Constant heartburn plagued him day and night and Arthur found himself longing for the familiar white, sterile walls of the hospital, for the constant beeping of machines and countless tubes poking in and out of his body. He detested the hospital, for all the overbearing nurses and reminder of what he would never have, but having spent three quarters of his life a permanent resident made it a home.

And that very thought troubled Arthur deeply.

Arthur hated how the hospital brought him such comfort. He couldn’t deny he often found himself longing to be drugged and mindless, if only so he would be out of this pain.

But the determination to make the most of his days was stronger than his pain.

His time was running out.
Yet, here he was trapped inside a little box, not unlike a hospital, in great pain, unable to go out as he pleased. He was a prisoner in his own life.

With a pen in his hand, Arthur wrote all of his thoughts. Shaky letters were left in the trail of Arthur’s hand. What he wrote from here on would never be seen again by his eyes; it would only invoke resentment, seeing how his once beautiful penmanship had deteriorated to the level of a child.

As a child, no matter how sick he was, Arthur had always been able to maintain a steady hand. Hours upon hours of recording every last excruciating detail of the treatment, of the pain of being unable to play with other children, the loneliness of having only the four hospital walls as company. His writing was beautiful, and he knew it. Once Francis had made an off handed remark about how Arthur could have been a typographer if the situation was different. Writing was what gave Arthur a sense of normality, but now that, too, was gone.

And Arthur didn’t really know what he would do if he couldn’t write.

As dense as Alfred was, Arthur knew it wouldn’t be long before he would no longer be able to hide his weakness.

For several days now -- Arthur didn’t know how many, only that it was too many -- a vicious throbbing persisted in his abdomen. He could feel lumps hardening under his skin, stretching the yellowed jaundice skin under his jaw and over his torso. Alfred was under the impression that Arthur was suffering from a particularly persistent cold, but Arthur knew he couldn’t keep deceiving Alfred for much longer. Arthur hadn’t left Alfred’s trailer in over a week; he couldn’t muster up the energy to drag himself out from under the heap of blankets.

“Hey Artie!” Alfred’s voice called from outside the trailer. “Feeling better? My hands are kinda busy right now so could you open the latch?”

Could he?

He couldn’t, and Arthur knew he couldn’t, but that did not stop him from kicking away the blankets. Grunting, Arthur slowly forced his body into an upright position. His organs twisted inside him; they did not approve of the sudden movement. Arthur had barely taken two steps before he was overcome by excruciating pain in his abdomen and collapsed.

From outside, Alfred heard the crash of Arthur’s body hitting the ground. Without a second
thought, Alfred threw the two trays loaded with food to the side and burst into the cramped little space.

On the ground, curled in the fetal position, lay Arthur, just barely conscious and in so much pain.

“Arthur!” Alfred cried. “Hey! Someone call an ambulance! Where’s the on set medic?”

Alfred didn’t know what to do, other than to sit on the floor of a trailer with the most important person in his life nearly lifeless in his arms.

Outside the trailer, overturned trays had spewed their contents all over the ground.

All that time I had taken for granted...

Why didn’t you ever tell me?

It didn’t take long for Alfred to decide he hated hospitals.

He hated the permanent stench of antiseptic and death and of cleanliness and how white everything was. It was everything he hated, colourless, lifeless, heartless.

He also hated that Arthur had been dying for the entire three months of their relationship and somehow, somehow he never noticed. The jaundice yellow skin, lack of appetite, constant lack of energy...

...Stomach cancer, tumours, and a high fever brought on and worsened by Arthur’s incessant workaholic habits.

And the cherry on top were the ulcers that came as a result of poor appetite and stress.

Alfred had noticed how Arthur had been out of it, had not been himself ever since they left
England. Alfred had summed it up to an especially bad case of homesickness, but it was really just a bad case of sickness. Period.

Now, as he sat beside Arthur’s sleeping figure, Alfred decided that he really, really hated hospitals.

Also that he was *this close* to punching the hell out of that stupid beeping machine displaying Arthur’s heart beats. And ripping out that *stupid goddamned* bag of sugar water and painkillers and antibiotics that Arthur was hooked up to. And snapping the feed tube right in two so he would never have to think about how Arthur was so malnourished again. And the catheter could go too, until Alfred actually took a look at the thin plastic that led to a certain organ between Arthur’s legs. The catheter could stay. For now. But Alfred would definitely maybe give Arthur an impressive black eye as soon as he waked up for putting him through this. And since he was on a one way path of destruction, he might as well squeeze the cancer out of every single tumour, lump, organ, and cell in Arthur’s body.

But that would all be counter productive because at some point, in the short time Alfred had spent with Arthur, Arthur had become someone who dominated Alfred’s life. And Alfred had come to the startling conclusion that he didn’t really know how to go on with his life without Arthur around to keep him on the right track.

Alfred sighed. Arthur needed to hurry up and wake up; he had a lot of explaining to do.

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*Dreams are telling of a person’s inner turmoils.*

*My reality is a dream.*

*Someday, I will lose the distinction between dreams and reality.*

*And that is fucking terrifying.*

---

Two days later, Alfred returned to the hospital after having a 24 hour ban placed on him for being disruptive.

(It wasn’t technically *his* fault that the stupid machine just couldn’t stop its annoying incessant
beeping.)(Likewise, it wasn’t his fault that the nurse just happened to walk in on him about to drive his fist into Arthur’s heart monitor.)

Arthur was awake now, finally, but he was preoccupied. Someone Alfred did not recognize had taken over Alfred’s chair beside Arthur’s bed.

A lanky, redheaded figure was deep in conversation with Arthur.

“What are you planning to do now?” The redhead had a thick Scottish accent. His posture, though slouched and casual, emitted a menacing presence.

Arthur, now awake and alert, was looking much better though still far from appearing healthy. “There’s not much I can do. Look at me,” Arthur laughed bitterly. The sound unsettled Alfred. “Involving myself in this film was a mistake from the start. Take me home, Alastair. The clock is ticking, and I owe a great many people apologies.”

“Aye, starting with me. What on earth were you thinking? You cut yourself off from all of us and then end up in America with some pretty boy actor? You hate that book and end up working yourself to death for it? I don’t understand you.”

“Alastair, please stop. I’m tired. Take me home.”

All too late, Alfred abashedly realized he had been eavesdropping on what was probably a private conversation.

Before he could slip away and pretend he had never been there, Arthur’s redheaded visitor saw him. “We have here a little spy, I see.”

From his position lying down on the bed, Arthur couldn’t see Alfred, and he made no effort to shift his position to include Alfred in his line of sight. Instead, he closed his eyes and said, “I am tired. Please let me rest.”

On his way out, Alastair pulled Alfred in line with him, not giving Alfred the chance to see if Arthur was alright for himself.

“So,” he said, thick Glasgow accent dripping off his words, “you’re the pretty face who kidnapped my brother.”

“Er, I’m sorry?” Alfred stumbled to keep up with Alastair’s long gait.

Without releasing his hold on Alfred’s wrist, Alastair said, “This is a conversation better had over a hot drink. We have much to talk about.” The pair did not exchange another word until they were seated in the corner of a coffee shop.

Sitting across from Alfred, Alastair extended a hand to Alfred. “Alastair Kirkland. If you didn’t already realize, I’m Arthur’s big brother.”

Warily, Alfred reciprocated the handshake. “I, uh, didn’t realize he had any siblings. He never talked about himself very much. And sorry for spying on you guys like that. That was a dick move.”

Waving a hand, Alastair brushed off Alfred’s apology. “Don’t worry that wee little mind of yours too much. From what I hear, we all owe you a lot more than a few drinks. You know, after the last round of treatment, Arthur just shut everyone out. Packed a bag and left. No medicine, no warning, just a note and a will. Didn’t even tell us where he was going, only that he was waiting to die and would leave us a ring once in a while. Damned little brat, always making everyone worry for him.”

Alfred vaguely registered the vibrant green eyes both Kirkland brothers shared. “So what exactly does this have to do with me?”

Alastair laughed, an empty laugh that never reached his eyes. His eyes remained fixed on Alfred, dead serious and more than a little intimidating. “Why, it has everything to do with you. I barely have the damndest idea where my baby brother has been in the past year but you’ve brought him back. He wants to go home. Home! He hasn’t wanted to go home in nearly a decade! I don’t know what you’ve done to Arthur, but I like it.”

“Wait, so what exactly did I do?”
Sighing, Alastair ran a hand through his hair. “You are someone who never knew Arthur wasn’t well and you gave him a few months of normality. Something we never would have been able to give him. He’s never had that, you know.”

Outside, through the window, the sun was preparing to set. The end of another day. “So what happens now?”

“I will taking Arthur back home once the hospital releases him, and your life will move on as it always has.”

Some conversations are never meant to be easy, but those are the ones most important. The ones that must be had.

Stop delaying.

It would be another day before Alfred could have a much needed conversation with a certain author.

Foregoing all niceties, Alfred greeted Arthur with a confrontation. “You have a lot of explaining to do.”

A nod. “You would be correct.”

Taking a seat beside Arthur, Alfred said, “Start from the beginning. How long have you had cancer?” A couple of scrunched up tissues dotted with stark, red drops of blood sat on the table by Arthur’s head. Pointedly, Alfred avoided looking in that general direction.

“Since I was a child. I believe I was four at the time.” It was robotic, how their conversations progressed. Angry questions and monotonous answers. It made Alfred feel distant, like they were strangers, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”
“You didn’t need to know.”

“Did you think I didn’t deserve to know?”

“Would it have changed anything? The fact is, I am going to die and you can’t change anything.”

“Does our friendship mean anything to you?”

Sighing, Arthur looked past Alfred, fixated on a spot on the white walls. His glassy eyes were not entirely focussed, glazed over and staring blankly at the wall. “Our friendship meant everything. Means everything. But the progression of time is not so easily changed.”

The wall was blank, but Arthur’s eyes remained fixated on that one spot, just above Alfred’s ear. The glassiness of Arthur’s eyes made Alfred feel as though he was being looked through, and a shiver ran down his spine.

“You know now that I’ve been sick for a very long time now,” Arthur said. “I was diagnosed with a form of stomach cancer when I was four. Gastrointestinal stromal tumour. Did you know,” Arthur chuckled bitterly, “that there are only twenty children in the United Kingdom who are diagnosed with this every year? At first it was benign but then it wasn’t. I don’t remember very much of what happened, it was all a blur, but I had a scan of some sort and I lit up and everywhere was cancerous. I’m just a walking mass of cancer that occasionally turns out for short periods of time. But it always came back. And it’s back again.”

Not once did he look at Alfred.

Alfred had a lot of questions, so many words he wanted to say, questions to ask, a couple accusations jumbled in as well. But he kept silent. Right now was Arthur’s time; Alfred could wait.

Grasping Arthur’s cold hands with his own, Alfred warmed cold, yellowed fists with his own sweaty palms. “You should know, I’m going to be going to England with you.”

Arthur’s gaze flickered, but didn’t budge from that spot on the wall. “You are being ridiculous.
"You have a job to do here."

"Only because of you," Alfred said, with a soft smile on his face.

Arthur’s expression didn’t change, but he finally looked away from the wall, at his and Alfred’s entangled fingers.

His fingers weren’t so cold anymore, slowly warming up from Alfred’s touch.

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**Whether or not rules were meant to be broken will, in itself, remain a paradox for the entirely of civilization.**

**That will do nothing to stop rules from being broken anyway.**

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"Jones, filming start tomorrow. You are not leaving this set, are we clear?"

As it turned out, time was not in Alfred’s favour.

In a small conference room, Alfred sat across from Braginski, who was standing. With balled fists and heavy breathing, Alfred glared at his manager. “Crystal. Unfortunately, I will have to inform you that I will be seeing Arthur off and nothing you do will stop me.”

Braginski glared back, violet eyes narrowed and dangerously flashing black. “Perhaps it is time, then, for you to invest in a dictionary. I do not believe that is what clarity means in the English language.”

“Yeah, it isn’t, but you can’t stop me from going. It’s not like I’m hopping back over the pond or something. All I want is a couple hours to say goodbye to a friend and I’ll be back. Really, you’re being unreasonable here.”

With a loud crack, Braginski slammed his palms face down onto the table separating the two feuding men. A smile rested on his face, but his glare was steadily fixed on Alfred. “Given that you just recently took an unannounced and unapproved three month foray with Mr. Kirkland, I
am sure you have had more than enough vacation time. It is time for you to pull your weight and get some work done. Mr. Kirkland can wait until after filming ends. You need to stop wasting the time and energy of everyone working on this film and put in your fair share of work. You are responsible for bringing Mr. Kirkland’s creations to life and I am sure he would care for the his legacy far more than a mere goodbye from a spoiled actor.”

“And I beg to differ.” Having reached the end of his line, Alfred gave up on any hope of negotiating with his manager. Ivan Braginski was only mildly sociopathic, but attempting to explain the multifaceted dynamic of Alfred’s relationship with Arthur to Braginski really was not worth the effort. Forcefully pushing his chair back from the table, Alfred stood. He pulled his jacket off the back of his chair and made wide strides out the door. “Tell the crew to start the table reading with the cave scenes since Kiran isn’t in any of them. I’ll be about half an hour late.”

No doubt, Braginski was seething, and would grill Alfred to the bone for this stunt. But, Alfred also knew that filming started tomorrow and never would Braginski ever lay a hand on him. Alfred had to be in tip top shape for the make up artists, and absolutely nothing could happen to him during filming. Not even the slightest scratch.

So, it was with utter and complete confidence that Alfred strode out the makeshift meeting room.

After all, he had an impatient and grouchy Englishman waiting for him.

Permanent is an idea, but is in itself a fallacious one.

Nothing is permanent.

Three people of varying figures stood in a rigid line in front of the security check at Yellowstone’s airport. Yellowstone’s airport was never a particularly busy place, and people only sparsely passed through the security gates.

“Well,” Alastair cleared his throat, “I’ll go through first. Give you lads some time to speak. Don’t take too long though, the flight leaves in forty minutes.” And he stepped past the gates, removing his boots and lifting his bag onto the conveyor belt.

Alfred turned towards Arthur, who was already looking up at him.
“Hey,” Alfred said, “you going to be okay?”

Now having returned to his medication and looking almost passably healthy, Arthur scoffed. “I hardly even know what happens now. And you, Alfred, should have more important things on your mind. Have you managed an adequate presentation of Kiran yet? I do expect you to give my character justice.”

Alfred grinned. “Don’t worry a thing, Artie. I got Kiran down pat. Kiku approved too. We got it all under control, you just worry about getting better, yeah?”

“It’s rather too late for that,” Arthur said, but there was no bitterness to his voice. Resignation was the only emotion there, and Alfred admitted to himself that he was impressed with how poised Arthur was in the face of death. “I’d say, twenty years too late, give or take a couple of decades.”

Wanting to bear a strong face, Alfred’s grin faltered only slightly. “Make a deal with me, Artie. I will be the best Kiran, better than you could ever imagine, and you live long enough to see the final movie at the premiere. Deal?”

Smiling bitterly, Arthur said, “How very American of you, what with all this optimistic nonsense.”

“You know you love it,” Alfred said, smiling gently. He raised his arm, setting it on Arthur's shoulder. Even through three layers of clothing, Alfred could feel the bone of Arthur's shoulder. “You'll make it, yeah? You are going to be my date for the official premiere and my date for the Oscars and I'm going to make you so proud, Artie. I'll make sure that you won't ever regret meeting me!”

Arthur's eyes were becoming dangerously wet, a sensation that was occurring more and more often. Especially when Alfred was involved. “Foolish American, how could I ever regret meeting you?”

It was quiet, and there were not many people, but the hustle and bustle native to all airports was a buzz in the background nonetheless. People carrying briefcases, scientific cases, stringing along a line of young children, and young couples navigating their first trip, they all molded into the background. They all became a blur.

But in the centre of it all, Alfred leaned down to wrap Arthur's frail body in his arms, memorizing
with his hands the curve of Arthur’s spine, the protruding ridges that were his ribs, and the pronounced edges of his shoulder blades. And Arthur leaned in, reciprocating this blatant show of affection. Underneath Arthur's bony fingers was lean muscle and a healthy layer of fat and chub (that Alfred would never admit was there). Alfred was warm and welcoming and so, so comfortable, and Arthur wanted to never leave.

But Arthur had to pull away, when Alfred released his hold. Neither shared a word, only emotions burning through cerulean and emerald lenses. Raising his hands, Alfred cupped Arthur's gaunt face. His fingers gently stroked the ever so slightly sunken in skin.

Alfred grinned good naturedly. “What can I say, we Americans sure are a good catch,” and he winked.

In response, Arthur slapped lightly at Alfred's arm, joy and laughter emanating from his gaze.

Alfred said, still holding Arthur's face, “But I will miss you, yeah? You better message me everyday with a picture so I know how you're doing!”

Leaning down, Alfred lightly placed a kiss on Arthur's forehead before Arthur turned away to enter security. Just before Arthur placed his bag on the conveyor belt, he turned around to give Alfred one last look.

Alfred waved wildly and enthusiastically, with his characteristic American optimism. “I could never regret meeting you either, Artie!”

Smiling a rare open mouthed smile, Artie raised his hand to wave back.

Then he passed the gates, joining his brother on the other side.

Alfred stayed where he was, not moving until Arthur and Alastair had entered the terminal and had exited Alfred's line of sight.

Only then, did Alfred turn, and walk away.
After me, the deluge shall come.

Only downfall awaits those who dare to dream.

You, darling dearest, shall be my undoing.

Mid November, London:

Alfred, I have arrived in London safely and am currently staying with Alastair. For now, there is no rush to enter inpatient treatment, and I endeavor to enjoy what freedom I have left. How has filming been? I do hope that you are doing my creation justice; I seem to recall a certain premiere date a certain American owes me. Please refrain from causing Kiku too many headaches, and at least try to listen to poor Ivan some of the time. He means well.

Mid November, Yellowstone National Park

Yo, Artie!!! I'm going to join you as soon as filming ends and we're going to explore all of England! You gotta show me some of your favourite places and I gotta find out for myself if British food is really as bad as everyone says, or if you just can't cook! (I bet it's both though XD) Filming’s been pretty boring so far, but Kiku’s been happy with the footage we have. There’s this one scene that took a lot of shots (like 50 or something) to get down perfect, but I did it in the end! See? I’m being a good, honest man :P Remember, you need to uphold your end of the deal too! P.S: remember to take your meds. P.P.S: I haven't done anything to Braginski that he didn't deserve! P.P.P.S: I miss you xx

Late November, London

Wanker! My cooking is just fine! And how dare you insinuate that I lack the ability to care for my own health! I'll have you know, I have yet to forget a dose! (By accident, that is) And surely you know that I know little more of the city than you? Do remember that my childhood consisted of a rather white and dull room and bloody beeping machines. If your intention was to learn, you may as well hire a trained tour guide. And bullocks, that poor man. What ridiculous antics have you put him through this time?
Late November, Yellowstone National Park

Is that what you think of my plans? I'm hurt, Artie, I thought you had more faith in me than that! Filming’s been super hectic since wow, can Kiku ever work. He makes us do 24 hour shifts until he's happy with everything he has and it's pretty tiring, even for a hero like myself. Once we all stayed up for 48 hours straight so he could get that cave scene perfect. It's great though! I don't want to spoil anything for you, but Kiku says I'm doing a better job than he could've ever imagined. Take that, Artie! And ew those tour guides are so snobby. You have to be my tour guide! I refuse to use anyone else! Gotta go now though, break is over! I swear to God that Kiku is running a slave machine here. I’m not complaining though!

I miss you xx

Early December, London

Bloody Americans, you. Truly it is a blessing in disguise that Kiku is able to restrain you. Please don't wreck too much havoc on the set. And give Kiku my regards, will you?

In case I am unable to contact you before the holidays, I wish you a very Merry Christmas, and for the love of God please do not eat yourself sick.

Mid December, Alfred's family farm

Sorry for the late response, Artie! Christmas is coming up so Kiku’s really been pushing us since we wanted a Christmas break. What a workaholic, it's like he never takes a break! He's basically a robot with all that work. I’ve never seen him sit still for more than ten minutes at a time, and I even followed him around all day yesterday! Man, Kiku...what a guy. We're a quarter done filming now though and everyone is happy with what we’ve got so far! Can't wait until I can see you again! I miss you xx

Mid January, London

Dearest Alfred, have I ever told you how I despise the holidays? There are simply too many nosy people who really only want gossip in this family and I simply cannot stand them. Thankfully I was able to seek refuge with how tired I am. Do take your job seriously Alfred, I expect only the
best for my creation. After all, even if I hate the book, it is still my story, my work. I trust you to do me justice, Alfred. You are so, very talented.

Late January, Yellowstone National Park

Woah there Artie, you okay? Have you seen your doctor yet? Should you be that tired?

The movie’s doing great though! Kiku says we’re basically three quarters done and we’re finally getting breaks. Like real breaks long enough that I can take a quick nap or eat a full meal without worrying about time. And everyone says this is gonna be my year and I'm going to win an Oscar! Even Kiku! The Kiku Honda thinks I’m going to get an Oscar! A dream come true! See, nothing to worry about, we got everything all under control!

By the way, ha, ha, very funny. I can act just fine! I don’t need no damn kids books to teach me to act! I bet I’m a better actor than the writer of the book ever was! He wishes he was as good as me!

Don't strain yourself worrying about unnecessary things, Artie! Make sure to listen to the doctors and get lots of rest! I miss you xx

Early February, London

Alfred, do concern yourself with more serious matters, such as your portrayal of Kiran. I do hope you have worked hard to bring the best of your ability to the cameras. It is far too soon for you to let the praise get into your head.

I’m glad you enjoyed my gift, though. I most certainly enjoyed myself choosing it out!

One last thing: I miss you too.

Mid February, Yellowstone National Park

Awww, Artie! I knew you missed me! But don't worry cuz I'll be with you again in six weeks!
Working with Kiku is just so amazing though! He's just so talented and good with cameras I can't believe I'm actually working with him still! Elizaveta also says hi!

How have you been? I'm really sorry my letters have all been so short but Kiku really works us hard. (You already knew that though XD) How did your last appointment go?? I hope you aren't in too much pain....and don't skip any doses!!!

I also forgot! Happy Valentine's! I hope you like the chocolate I got you! The little bird shapes are just so cute! (And sorry I couldn’t help myself. But give me some credit, I only ate one!!)

I miss you xx

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Late February, London

Elizaveta is a dear, do give her my regards. I do hope your lack of news about Ivan does not mean you have slit his throat and stuffed his body in a wall. Ivan is good for you; he keeps you in line. There is a new cyst growing on my lung but there isn’t much that can be done. Dr. Wang believes it to be benign, so don’t worry your pretty little head.

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Early March, Yellowstone National Park

Only one month until I can join you!!! We've finally finished filming the movie. There's only some extra filler scenes left to go. And Of course a couple scenes Kiku wants to redo because it wasn't good enough for him.

Braginski is on vacation and I hope his plane crashes a little. Nuff said.

Artie, I hope you aren’t doing too badly. Remember, you can't leave me dateless for the grand premier!

I’m joining the producers meeting today so I'll have to cut this short. See you in a month!

I miss you xx
Mid March, London

I eagerly await your arrival then, Alfred, dear. I am doing as well as can be expected. Don't shirk on your duties to my story!

How tiring it is, to wait, and wait, and wait, and wait.

Patience truly is the most virtuous of humanities’ traits.

Early April, London Heathrow Airport

Alfred stepped into the open human sea of London’s Heathrow Airport. Having wrestled his bag from the carousel, he now stood in the middle of the crowd where he was jostled endlessly by impatient businessmen and eager travellers.

Standing on his toes, Alfred looked around, skimming the crowd for a sleek, blond head. Francis would be picking him up. Alastair was in Scotland, visiting extended family, and Arthur, for obvious reasons, wasn’t permitted to drive anymore.

Before he boarded his flight in New York, Arthur had called Alfred, saying Francis would meet him at Heathrow, and that the frog would stand out like a sore thumb.

Sure enough, Francis was leaning rather suavely against a column mere metres away from Alfred, easily within hearing distance. But Francis said nothing, watching Alfred with a bemused expression, as Alfred scanned the crowded hall in the wrong direction.

A lady then rammed through the crowd with a cart full of luggage, and embarrassed teenagers scrambling behind her. In her trail was further chaos and a string of colourful words and angry muttering. Alfred himself, having been so immersed in his search for a certain Frenchman, had been oblivious to the commotions surrounding him until a pair of arms forcefully shoved Alfred into Francis’ column.

Seconds after Alfred crashed into the column, the lady’s cart rammed its way straight through
where Alfred had been standing moments earlier. For Alfred’s part, he was now unceremoniously flattened against a marble pillar, even though the crowd had begun to resume moving again.

For his part, Francis had simply stepped to the side when Alfred hurdled his way and was now standing right beside Alfred. Looking at the crowd, Francis said, “Bonjour, Alfred. It took you long enough to find me. Tell me, do you always make such a grand appearance?”

“Francis?”

“Yes, I believe that is my name.” Leaning down, Francis picked up Alfred’s fallen suitcases and propped them against Alfred’s side.

“Uh...” Alfred wrapped his hand around the handle of his larger case. “Have you been here the entire time?”

Francis gave Alfred a wry smile. “You aren’t the most aware person in the universe, are you? I suppose that can be overlooked, since you are quite a fine face for Arthur’s story. Ah, the poor dear, he’s been so restless lately. He’s quick the prickly Englishman, isn’t he?”

Francis grabbed Alfred’s backpack off the ground and slung it over his shoulder. He headed for the exit, leaving Alfred scrambling to keep up with Francis’ pace.

“Arthur’s not that prickly,” Alfred argued, huffing as he tried to navigate his massive suitcase and keep up with Francis. “I mean I guess he’s not the easiest person to get along with, but he’s a marshmallow at heart.”

Though Alfred couldn’t see, Francis arched an eyebrow. “Oh? A marshmallow? That is a rather interesting metaphor, Alfred.”

“You can never go wrong with comparing things to food!” Alfred defend himself.

“Hmm, you may have a point. You are a good influence, Alfred. We expect great things from you.”

Alfred opened his mouth to question what Francis meant, but was promptly cut off by a troop of
students on a school trip. Francis did not notice, or did not care, leaving Alfred to fight his way through the pack before he lost sight of Francis.

Never will a door remain open forever, but never will it remain closed.

Doors are by definitions are gateway to the unknown. Embrace them.

Underneath a blanket, Arthur laid on the couch, staring into space.

He wasn’t tired, yet, but absolutely elated. And conserving all his energy for Alfred because filming for the movie had finally ended.

And Arthur was shamelessly excited to reunite with Alfred.

When the doorbell rang, Arthur jumped off the couch, letting the blanket fall to a heap on the ground.

He swung open the door and threw himself at Alfred.

“Woah there,” Alfred did not expect Arthur to have quite so much energy and had to take a step back from the force of Arthur’s embrace. “Hey Artie,” Alfred said, smiling gently and rubbing Arthur’s back. Arthur was no better from when Alfred had last seen him, with the cancerous lumps still lining his jaw, but Arthur was no one worse and Alfred took that as a blessing in itself. “Looks like someone really missed me.”

Arthur buried his face in the crook of Alfred’s neck, inhaling the grassy scent of Alfred’s cologne. His voice was muffled by Alfred’s collarbone, “You have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

((Ugly screaming))
Once again, thank you so much for taking the time to read this ♥
A hospice is a hospital-esque facility where patients with untreatable terminal illnesses, or who don't want to treat their illness go.

Sorry I'm terrible at defining things ^_^;;

Also, you should be very cautious about this chapter if you're extra sensitive about hospitals/death.....

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Act III

For everything that has a beginning, there is also an ending.

If we never begin, will there be no end?

Mid May, London

“Hey Artie, do you have any regrets?”

Arthur and Alfred sat together on a bench in an empty residential park, perched shoulder to shoulder. Arthur’s head tilted sideways, resting on Alfred’s shoulder, eyes closed and breathing even.

He wasn’t asleep, exactly, but in a drowsy state of half awareness and he couldn’t be bothered to shake the sleep off. Having accompanied Arthur to his last appointment, Alfred had followed the nurses’ recommendations to the t. They went on daily walks in the afternoon, Alfred did his best to cook and stomach healthy meals, he stayed with Arthur when he woke up in the middle of the night in pain, when he couldn’t keep anything down, Alfred made sure Arthur was as comfortable as he could be. Alfred was a nurse in all but name.

And Alfred was proud of his new status as Arthur’s nurse.
His greatest achievement was bringing Arthur’s weight up half a dozen pounds over the past month and seeing Arthur smile at least once, daily.

“Hmm?” Arthur responded to Alfred, mildly slurring his words. His eyes remained closed, and his posture relaxed. “Regrets? Me?”

“Yeah, your regrets. We talk about me all the time, but I barely know anything about you.” Alfred leaned back slowly, as to avoid jostling Arthur, and rested his arm along the back of the bench.

“Mmm, I daresay you know quite a bit about me. I can’t even head to the loo without you standing at the door listening. It’s rather off putting, I must say.” The drowsy slurring in Arthur’s voice was wearing off, but his eyes stayed shut.

“Hey it’s for your own good! You never even told me you were sick! I found out by breaking into my own trailer!” Alfred pretended to sound angry, but a gentle shoulder rub told Arthur that Alfred was only playing with him.

Finally cracking open an eye, Arthur smiled. “Touché.”

Alfred’s hand continued rubbing Arthur’s shoulder, easing out what little tension there was. A disease like cancer was always taxing on the patient, physically and mentally, and Arthur had been under huge amounts of stress for much of his life. He couldn’t do much, but Alfred did everything in his power to ease some of the burden. “But seriously, do you have any regrets? About anything?”

Cracking his other eye open, Arthur lifted his head slightly so he could look Alfred in the eye. He sighed. “Regrets? Many. Every moment, every memory, that is lost to time is a regret. But most of all, I regret not meeting you earlier. You, you absurdly cheerful American ray of sunshine, you.”

Arthur laid his head back down.

“Awww, you’re such a sap,” Alfred said, teasingly. His hand slid from Arthur’s shoulder down to rub up and down along Arthur’s upper arm.
Raising his hand, Arthur smacked Alfred lightly in the chest. “Hush. We can’t all be cold hearted bastards like yourself. The world would be a very dark place, indeed, if that were to ever occur.”

Exaggerating the force of Arthur’s hit, Alfred jerked back. “Ouch, Artie. You’re breaking my cold heart here.”

Arthur chuckled softly, before closing his eyes again.

Between them, there were a couple seconds of silence that stretched into minutes, possibly hours. They simply relished each other’s company, and appreciated the warm May sun. To others, they did nothing.

And that was just fine.

What is best is not always clear, and what is clear is rarely what is best.

Murkiness muddles so much of human life, yet somehow we have still survived until now.

The kitchen island stood between Arthur and Alfred, separating them, but also entrapping them into an infinite loop.

The two glared at each other. Arthur crossed his arms over his chest, and Alfred was holding a bowl of plain yogurt with banana slices and minced ginger root mixed in.

(And some crushed vitamins and nutrient supplements that Alfred had snuck in because Arthur would refuse to take them otherwise.)

“I am not eating that. You are not coming near me with that,” Arthur said crossly, his glare shifting between Alfred and the bowl in Alfred’s hands.

It turned out that Alfred was nearing the end of his patience, as well. “Look, I know you don’t like it. And you don’t have to like it. But you have to eat it. Doctor’s orders.”
The two were just circling the island, facing each other like predator and prey.

“I see no reason why I should have to eat it if you don’t. You give me this ridiculous concoction of plain yogurt. Plain. While you eat the good fruit kinds.”

Sighing, Alfred squeezed out what little patience he still had. “Artie, the last time you tried strawberry you got a stomachache for the day. Blueberry and blackberry and raspberry made you throw up all day. Peach and vanilla were too sweet for you and you felt sick for the day. And you straight up refused to touch mixed berry because you complained the scent was too strong for you. Plain is the only kind that hasn’t given you some terrible side effect.”

“And what of the ginger? Ginger is a rather ridiculous addition to yogurt. And you know I hate the strong taste.” Arthur was in one of his moods, and refused to give up his fight.

Alfred was on the end of his patience. “Ginger is good for you. It lessens your heartburn and indigestion and you hate that just as much.”

“I don’t see why it has to be with the yogurt.” For all his experience with what foods sat well with him, Arthur’s petulant inner child still made an appearance every once in a while.

Exasperated, Alfred finally snapped. “Okay, Arthur, you’ve gotta give it up. Here’s the reality: you’re not healthy, and you don’t have a stomach of steel like me. You need to eat. And there are a lot of limitations to what you can eat. So you need to work with me here or else Dr. Wang will throw you back into a hospital bed and stick one of those feeding tubes into you. You know he would.”

Several long seconds of tense silence passed between them.

Arthur blinked slowly, wide green eyes opening and closing as he processed Alfred’s words. Then his eyes began to pool with tears and his face scrunched up and his arms uncrossed to wipe at his eyes. Cue the waterworks.

And Alfred stood there, dumbfounded, his irritation melting into guilt as he watched Arthur break down. He set the bowl on the counter before him and walked around the island in long strides with his arms open.
Alfred pulled a crying Arthur into his chest, rubbing Arthur back and head and murmuring comforting words into Arthur’s ear. Alfred tucked Arthur’s head under the crook of his neck, and continued rubbing gentle, soothing patterns into Arthur’s back.

“Shh, shh, just breathe. It’s okay. You’re okay. I got you. Shhh,” Alfred said softly, lips against Arthur’s ear. Alfred kept his arms wrapped around the shaking figure, willing Arthur to calm down.

Arthur clutched at fistfuls of Alfred’s shirt as if his life depended on his. His grip was so tight that his knuckles had turned white. “I-I....” Arthur’s words were choked back by his sobs.

Soothingly, Alfred continued his gentle ministrations on Arthur’s back. “Shh, it’s okay. Take your time now.”

Several moment passed, with Arthur simply crying into Alfred’s chest and Alfred soothing Arthur as best he could.

Finally, Arthur took a few deep, shaky breaths before pushing back so he could look up at Alfred. Arthur’s eyes were red and puffy and dark bags loomed under his eyes and tear tracks were clearly visible on his cheeks.

“Why couldn’t I be healthy? What did I ever do to deserve this?” At that moment, Alfred saw Arthur as a child, through his many years of sleepless nights and unsuccessful operations, through the many years of painful treatments and unknown, through the many years of wondering why he wasn’t like everyone else, through the many years of seeing other children come and go when he lived in those four sterile permanently. Alfred saw those wide green eyes swirling with a mix of innocence, fear, and hurt belong to a small child, a temperamental preteen, a rebellious teen, and a hopeless adult. And Alfred understood.

Because it wasn’t about Arthur’s distaste for plain yogurt, or his hatred for ginger. It wasn’t about Arthur being difficult simply for the sake of making Alfred’s job that much harder. It wasn’t about Alfred at all. Nor was it about the food.

All his life, all Alfred had ever wanted was for the admiration and adoration of others. To stand out from others. To be different. Special. All Arthur had ever wanted was to be like everyone else. Unbound by the limitations of poor health.
And Arthur finally got what he wanted, in that little shop in Portland where he sold flowers and minded his own business and no one was the wiser.

Then Alfred dragged him back into a world where he was different and could never quite fit in anymore because it was tainted by the memories of his childhood.

And at that moment, Alfred truly understood what a terrible fate it was, that Arthur had been condemned to. Only a handful of words could have expressed how Alfred felt, finally understanding Arthur’s loss.

A stray tear was on the verge of overflowing from the corner of Arthur’s eye, as he waited for someone, something, to break the silence that had fallen upon them.

“I’m sorry, Arthur. I’m so, so sorry.” The tear finally tumbled from the edge of Arthur’s eye, but Alfred’s thumb was there to wipe it away. To erase the traces of pain as best he could. “You never did anything wrong. You don’t deserve this. God damn it,” the hand that had been on Arthur’s back curled into a fist, “God fucking damn it. This is so fucking wrong and unfair and I’m just so sorry, Artie. Because you don’t deserve a single fucking shitty thing that’s ever happened to you. And I’m sorry.”

With trembling knees and blurred vision, Alfred lowered both of them to the floor. And they cried and sobbed while holding each other, pouring their hearts out in their actions because words could never be enough for them.

There were too many words that could never be said.

On the counter, a mildly scented candle flickered for several seconds, treading the fine line between life and death, before finally fizzling out.

“Maybe if you turn around, you’ll see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“There is nothing. Only more darkness.”

“Not every tunnel has a light. Sometimes, you have to make your own.”
Leaning against the wall by the doorway of Arthur’s room, Alfred rubbed the bridge of his nose.

In the end, Arthur had eaten the banana yogurt and ginger with no complaint after their much needed heart to heart. He was now sleeping, taking his regular mid afternoon nap.

And Alfred was tired.

But he felt so enormously guilty about his tiredness because who was he to need a break? Because he was healthy and still had his future, limitless, and before him.

Then a sudden vibration against his leg pulled Alfred out of his thoughts.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Alfred walked into another room to allow Arthur his much needed rest.

Without looking at the screen, Alfred swiped to answer the call. “Hello, Alfred F. Jones here.”

“Yes, hello Jones. Have you forgotten you have a job?” Lovely. Braginski was calling.

“Hey Braginski. Have you forgotten we made an agreement?” Alfred said, mocking his manager’s tone of voice. He took a seat on the armchair facing the front window, overlooking a quiet residential neighbourhood.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe part of that agreement included your immediate attention to any and all scheduling changes and updates.”

“Yeah? What about it?” A sinking feeling appeared in Alfred’s stomach.

“Well,” Braginski said, intentionally drawing out his words, “I sent you the dates for the refilming of your scenes for A Graveyard of Buried Infinities. Fifteen hours ago, to be exact. And what did you not do? Respond.”
Groaning, Alfred leaned back, melting into the armchair, with his eyes closed. “Braginski. A vacation means you kinda need to give me a lot more than just fifteen hours. Especially since I was sleeping for about eight of those hours.”

Ivan ignored Alfred’s complaints, and continued detailing Alfred’s schedule. “You’ll be back on set in a month. All your flights are booked and I’ve sent all the details to your mail.”

“Yeah, yeah, anything else?”

“Just one last thing.” Ivan’s voice softened, and Alfred opened his eyes in surprise. The only other time he had ever heard Ivan speak in such a mild manner was when he talked to his sister. “Tell me, how is Arthur faring?”

“I...I didn’t know you cared.” Alfred said, hesitantly, as he watched a young pair walk down the street through the glass window. And Alfred couldn’t help feeling ever so slightly envious of the pair. “I didn’t even know you and Arthur spoke. Ever.”

Braginski responded, just as hesitant, “We’ve exchanged a few words on set. It’s a shame, really. He had so much potential. Possibly even more than you.”

Clutching his phone a little tighter, Alfred’s voice hardened, “Arthur isn’t some business venture to be pawned off and exploited.”

“Defensive, I see. I only wish for an update on his condition. Nothing more.”

“It’s...He’s been great, but I think it’s going to be touch and go soon...” Alfred pushed himself out of his seat and began pacing before the window.

“I see. Well, give him my regards.” And Braginski hung up.

Alfred continued pacing, absentmindedly flipping his phone around in the air, then catching it.

He had to do something with his hands, or else he’d rip Arthur’s living room apart.
Alfred was not at all looking forward to leaving Arthur.

Step forward, two, three, and back, two three. Forward, two, three; back, two, three.

Life is a dance.

You will often go in circles, to the side, backwards, in extraordinarily complex steps.

It takes many steps, to move a small distance.

Alfred sat across from Arthur at their little round dinner table, nervouslly fiddling with his thumbs. Arthur had remained unaware of Alfred’s disease, instead tentatively stirring his bowl of mushroom stew.

They had their meal in relative silence, the only sounds were Arthur’s spoon scraping against the sides of the bowl and Alfred’s foot tapping against the cool tile.

Halfway through his burger, Alfred took a deep breath and made his decision.

“I’m going to have to hop across the pond for a bit.”

There were many ways Alfred could have broken the news to Arthur. Instead, he chose to blurt it out in the middle of their dinner, when Arthur was distractedly making distasteful faces at the protein smoothie he was sipping.

In other words, the perfect recipe for Arthur to choke.

Spluttering and coughing, Arthur reached for his glass of water to wash the smoothie down his throat. He was still coughing and clearing his throat when Alfred had moved to stand behind him, rubbing his back.
“You okay? Maybe you should drink slower. Did I not blend it enough?” Alfred’s concern was genuine enough, but if Arthur hadn’t been trying to cough down his innards, Alfred probably would have found himself with a nice bruise on his cheek. After all, Arthur was no weakling and Alfred couldn’t just spring something like this on him.

Once Arthur had recovered, he immediately fixed his glare on Alfred.

“And you decided,” Arthur said, slowly, “that during the middle of a meal was the best time to bring it up?”

Alfred continued rubbing Arthur’s back, though a little voice at the back of his mind suggested running away. Far away. Quickly. Before Arthur could induce any bodily harm.

“Uh...” Alfred laughed nervously without humour, “well, I kind of have to go pretty soon so there wasn’t very much time left?”

Narrowing his eyes, Arthur asked, “Then tell me, Alfred, just when are you leaving?”

Braginski’s call had been a month ago, meaning Alfred would be leaving in two days time. Suddenly, with Arthur’s piercing gaze fixated on him, Alfred realized that maybe he shouldn’t have waited until the last minute. “The day after tomorrow?”

Arthur’s response was careful, poised. “Okay.”

There were a few seconds of silence as Alfred blinked, confused. “Okay? Just okay? You’re okay with this?”

“I’ve been alone before. I can handle myself. You have your career, and with that comes other responsibilities. I understand that, Alfred.” Arthur was possibly the most understanding person Alfred had met, but Arthur’s glare kept him wary and on his toes.

“Uh, but you look like you’re about to kill me?” Truth be told, a lesser man (or a man with a brain) would have fled by now. Alfred, however, didn’t budge.

“Alfred, there is a difference between understanding and acceptance. Yes, I understand that you
have responsibilities to people other than myself. But no, I do not accept that you could not have found an earlier time to inform me?” Arthur had a point that Alfred couldn’t argue with.

With no reasonable response, Alfred simply laughed nervously. “Sorry. I totally get that you would’ve liked to have some warning. There just never seemed to be a good time to tell you and --”

Arthur interrupted, saying, “But is there ever a good time? Sometimes you just don’t get that choice.”

Having repeatedly run his hands through his hair, Alfred’s hair now resembled a rat’s nest. “I’m really sorry. I just didn’t want you to dwell on it for too long and bring down your mood because you’ve been so happy lately and I’ve been happy and it’s kind of like a honeymoon stage and I didn’t want to end it.”

“It’s too early for us to be in heaven, love,” Arthur said, no longer glaring at Alfred. “There’s still time.

“Reality is such a cockblock, God.”

“Perhaps, but I think I’ve grown rather fond of this reality.”

Arthur picked up his smoothie again, and resumed his meal.

Alfred, however, couldn’t quite relax because he wasn’t sure if he would ever be able to spend enough time with Arthur.

"Tick, tock, tick, tock."

“Our hearts are beating right on schedule."

“Heartbeats change. You’ll see.”
Arthur was never going to move again.

He was curled up against Alfred on the couch, warm and far too comfortable to even fathom moving. Because Alfred was nice and warm and his arm draped over Arthur’s body, further sharing his body heat. And, Alfred’s hand tucked up against Arthur’s chest was a sweet reminder that he still existed.

Then the phone rang.

Loud, piercing, screeching rings from the landline interrupted the peaceful silence.

Arthur frowned, but made no motion to move. Instead, he burrowed further into Alfred’s warm chest and left the phone to ring. Whoever it was could leave a message. If it was important, they would call back. Either way, whoever the caller was could wait.

But Arthur just kept ignoring it. His time was limited, his time with Alfred even more so, and there was no chance of him leaving the warmth embrace. Ever.

In less than twenty four hours, Alfred would be on a plane back to America and this time Arthur would be left behind. And Arthur hated that he was always the one left behind. Always the one who couldn’t play with the other children, the one who was kept in isolation rooms, the one who stayed behind when other children were long gone from the hospital forever. The one whose own family had begun the slow process of moving on from a doomed son years ago.

But then there was Alfred.

Alfred, who had always stayed behind for Arthur, waited for Arthur, moved at Arthur’s own pace. Arthur was the one who always left Alfred in the dust, and it wouldn’t be long before he would have to leave for good.

So, Arthur made peace with the fact Alfred would be leaving, because Alfred always came back to him.

Just as the phone stopped ringing, Alfred began humming softly, stirring from his sleep. “Mmm, hey Artie. ‘S bright outside.”
Though Alfred couldn’t see his face, Arthur smiled brightly. “It’s two in the afternoon, love. Of course it’s bright.” A hint of joyful laughter could be heard in his voice, and Alfred just pulled Arthur in closer.

Nope, Arthur wouldn’t be moving at all, ever.

Being alive is easy. Eat, breathe, drink, sleep, and repeat.

To live, is difficult. Because living means giving a part of yourself to someone else. Living means leaving behind a part of yourself, after you’re gone.

Living, means your legacy will live on.

Standing on set, watching all the people hustle around behind the scenes, gave Alfred a sense of deja vu. He was standing in front of his trailer alone, and was generally being ignored by everyone working on set. His co-stars chose to remain in their trailers and tweet trash talk at each other, the make up artists were hiding in their tent playing with powders, the director and producers were off doing some editing, the everyone else was scrambling around set to prepare for filming the next day, and Ivan was off at some manager meeting with his agency.

And Arthur was still in London, though Francis had flown in to watch over Arthur’s condition while Alfred was away. Francis would play babysitter for the two weeks Alfred would be filming.

Alfred was lonely without Arthur.

With nothing better to do, Alfred pulled out his phone to see if Arthur had responded to his text.

Nothing.

It made sense, really, since it would have been time for Arthur’s afternoon nap, but Alfred liked to keep his hopes up.
“Excuse me Mr. Alfred, do you have a moment?”

Alfred jumped when he heard the voice sneak up from behind his trailer. He shoved his phone in his pocket and looked up to see Kiku Honda standing beside him.

“Oh, hi Kiku,” Alfred said, pushing himself off the trailer so he would appear more professional. “Do you need me anywhere? Screen testing or anything?”

Kiku shook his head. “No, I just felt we have not interacted much recently and felt it would not hurt for us to reconnect before filming.”

“Oh? I thought you had an executive meeting with the producers?”

“Yes, the meeting is rather unproductive and I will have no role to play until this afternoon,” Kiku said, waving his hand dismissively. “Come.”

Kiku then turned and walked towards a wooded area, gesturing for Alfred to follow. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Alfred broke into a light run for a couple steps to catch up to Kiku.

They walked wordlessly for a few minutes, only the sounds of crunching leaves and snapping twigs and singing birds filling the air. After they walked past a small stream, Alfred spoke, no longer able to bear the looming silence.

“Hey, are you doing this with all of us or something? How do you plan on getting through the whole cast today?”

“I believe that would be quite difficult,” Kiku said, “rather impossible, actually.” Kiku chuckled under his breath as he slowed down his brisk walking pace slightly.

An area especially dense with trees and shrubs was up ahead, so dense that they wouldn’t be able to pass through. Kiku lifted his arm, gesturing towards the right.

“Here, Mr. Alfred, we should turn to the right. Left is a direction that brings only poor fortune
“Huh?” Kiku was speaking in riddles and despite how much Alfred revered Kiku, he had to admit that he often found himself confused by how Kiku spoke.

But Kiku paid Alfred no mind, instead shifting the conversation to answer Alfred’s initial question. “I am only interested in you, Mr. Alfred, as you are now the face of Mr. Arthur’s book. From this point onwards, you will become synonymous with A Graveyard of Buried Infinities and how you act and perform and what you say will all reflect on Mr. Arthur’s creation.”

Confused, Alfred said, “But all the other movie adaptations I was in were fine! No one remembers them, but I mean there’s still a gap between me and the characters I play, right?”

There was no path, where Kiku and Alfred were walking, but somehow Kiku led them as if he knew exactly where he was, and had a destination in mind.

“Mr. Alfred, I am quite confident that you will understand how A Graveyard of Buried Infinities is different from your past films. This role will make you a true actor, someone worth remembering. From this point on, your legacy will be intertwined with Kiran D. Lurkrath.”

Alfred scratched his head, still not entirely understanding what Kiku was saying. “I...er....what?”

Sighing, Kiku said, “Allow me to say simply this, Mr Alfred: this is a turning point. From this moment on, there will be a new meaning to your life. You will be a new person. An improved one.”

When he finished speaking, Kiku increased his pace again, looking around before changing their path slightly towards the west.

Alfred followed behind, choosing not to question Kiku anymore. The Japanese certainly had a strange way of speaking, but Kiku usually made sense later.

For several minutes, they walked in silence. Then Kiku led them out of the line of trees and into a clearing. Looking around the clearing, Alfred felt a sense of déjà vu.
“Hey,” Alfred said, eyes lighting up with recognition, “this is where you saw me practicing Kiran for the first time, right?”

Remaining silent, Kiku nodded.

For several moments, Kiku simply watched as Alfred looked around the field with a sense of boyish wonder reflected in his face.

“It’s pretty amazing,” Alfred said, “I had a lot of issues with Kiran, you know? Like nothing seemed right and Arthur was being a grump and refused to help me because I was so bad. He’s the only reason I ever ended up here, actually. He was being difficult and I was annoyed because he wouldn’t ever give me advice, not even the smallest hint! So I kind of just started walking and somehow I ended up here and everything made sense, you know? Like Kiran is just lost and wants to do what’s right and --”

“But what is right?” Kiku interrupted.

“Nothing.”

“Is that so?”

Alfred continued, confidently, “Absolutely! Because all Kiran ever did was worry about how he would look to everyone else and how he could save everyone from himself but really he was the only one who needed saving because you can’t live unless it’s for yourself! So he was never really alive in the first place and that’s why he always ended up along, no matter how much he gave to others.”

The end of Alfred’s epiphany was met with applause from Kiku, who had his characteristic mysterious half smile on his face.

“That was wonderful, Mr. Alfred. I am certain Arthur will be pleased when you return.”

“What? Why would Arthur be happy?”

“Why, because all Arthur ever wanted was to be alive. And you, Mr. Alfred, have given him that
Because why would anything that goes well, stay well? Why would anything ever go smoothly?

Things only ever go well, when something is about to go extremely wrong.”

“Frog, don’t you dare bring your ridiculous snails into my house.”

Arthur was sitting on his couch with a blanket and book, and had called out Francis without ever looking up from his book. This was a regular occurrence, as Francis had discovered Arthur’s inability to stand snails from an early age and would stop at nothing to sneak snails into Arthur’s food.

Twenty years later, they were still playing at this ridiculous game, having never quite let go of their childhood.

So far, Francis had yet to succeed in getting snails into a kitchen when Arthur was around. The closest Francis had ever gotten was only halfway down the hallway leading to the kitchen.

“What? I would do no such thing!” Francis, as per his babysitting duties, was standing at the front door having just returned from the market. Standing rather guiltily, Arthur assumed. His assumption was correct, with Francis attempting to hide the bag of groceries behind his back.

“I can smell the slime from here.”

Indignant, Francis huffed, “Snails are the centrepiece of fine cuisine! You English rosbifs do not have the slightest idea what gourmet dishes you are lacking!”

Ignoring Francis’ dramatics, Arthur finally looked up from his book and simply said, “Are you that interested in seeing the contents of my intestines? I must say, I’m quite touched at your interest with my innards. I didn’t know my organs were of such interest to you!”

Pulling the door open, Francis stepped out again (with heavier footsteps) and called behind him,
“Ungrateful Englishman, you! You should consider yourself lucky that I am willing to deal with you and your poor taste!”

Rather pleased with himself, Arthur smiled and decided that he would reward himself and see if Alfred was available.

Alfred had left nearly two weeks ago and was quite excited for how the final film would turn out. Despite his concerns and apprehensions about Hollywood, Arthur had to admit that he was not exactly unexcited to see his story on screen, either.

Setting his book and blanket aside, Arthur pushed himself off the couch so he could retrieve his phone. A smile adorned his lips and he hummed a joyful tune as he exited his living room.

Arthur was just barely in the hallway, when a sudden rush of blood left his rather dizzy and disoriented. He reached out, trying to feel for the wall so he could reorient himself until this wave of dizziness ended. Instead, his movement only served to unbalance him and his legs gave out from underneath him.

Arthur was still smiling when he hit the ground.

---

*No matter how much time you think you have, even if you have all the time in the world, it will never be enough.*

*Time has this way of slipping away from us, only to return in the most brutal manner.*

---

Alfred’s phone was ringing rather obnoxiously. He was in the middle of a scene and had forgotten to set his phone to mute. Many of the crew members were shooting him dirty looks as his phone continued its shrill cries. He had ignored his phone several times now, but the caller was persistent and refused to give up. The scene being filmed was constantly being interrupted by Alfred’s phone.

Finally, even Kiku had lost his patience and decided for a break so Alfred could answer his phone.

With people grumbling as they filed out around him, Alfred picked up his phone, fully prepared to
give the obnoxious caller a piece of his mind.

He opened his mouth, but was instead met by a panicked wall of French and English, none of which was comprehensible.

“Oh mon dieu! C’est horrible! Arthur, le rosbif, he is dans l’hôpital and les médecins sont attending and mon dieu! C’est une catastrophe!” Francis was only half sane at this point, rapidly pacing back and forth in the emergency room of a hospital.

“Uh, hey Francis. What’s up?” Alfred sat down, on the ground, a knot growing in his stomach. Before Alfred had left, they had agreed to communicate about Arthur’s condition through text since it would be most convenient. So, the fact that Francis was calling him, so incessantly, did not bode well.

“Alfred. It is terrible. Arthur….he….” Francis broke off suddenly.

“Arthur? What happened? Is he okay?” Alfred asked, with a hysterical urgency in his voice that had never been there before.

There was no response, except for hurried voices in hushed tones. Arthur could hear Francis speaking to someone in the background, but couldn’t make out what was being said, or who Francis was talking to.

Indistinguishable voices continued speaking for a few moments, and Alfred patiently waited for Francis to update on Arthur’s condition. Alfred remained on the ground, back straight and fingers nervously clenching into tight fists.

Though he did his best to not jump to conclusions, Alfred couldn’t help all the potential scenarios that drifted into his head. In his head, he saw Arthur lying still in a bed, or coughing up blood, or in a coffin, or hooked up to so many machines that Arthur could only be artificially alive.

Then Francis’ voice returned and shook Alfred out of his reverie.

“Alfred? Pardonnez-moi, I was just given an update on Arthur.”
Leaning forward, Alfred was about to burst with how much he needed to know how Arthur was doing. He pulled his legs up to his chest, curling into a ball, and snapped at Francis.

“So? What’s going on? What’s happening? Is Artie okay? Where are you?”

“Now, please,” Francis said, trying to get Alfred to slow down. “I apologize for the panic I brought on you. I am currently in a hospital, but a lovely little nurse told me, just now, that Arthur is fine.”

Alfred released a breath he didn’t even know he had been holding. His muscles all relaxed, and he longer longer held himself in such a tense position. “But what happened? Are you with Arthur right now?”

Across the pond, Francis ran a hand through his long locks. It had been a long day, and he had waited hours in the emergency room before deciding to call Alfred. His eyes were lined with dark bags and his face sagged from worry. “I left to retrieve some groceries and returned to find Arthur on the ground.”

Though Francis continued talking, Kiku and Braginski were approaching where Alfred sat on the ground. Both wore identical worried expressions, though Kiku’s did show a hint of irritation.

The pair stopped in front of Alfred, who nodded and gave a weak thumbs up. Like Alfred, Kiku and Braginski visibly relaxed.

“So Artie’s okay now?” Alfred asked, just to be on the safe side.

Though Alfred couldn’t see him, Francis nodded as he finally left the emergency to head back to his flat. With his thumb and index finger, Francis pressed the corners of his eyes. “Yes, Arthur will be fine, for now. He will be fine at least until you return. But the hospital doesn’t have any plans to release him because Arthur’s white blood cell levels are too low and he’s extremely anemic so he’s being kept for observation.”

Finally, Alfred released a sigh of relief. “Man, that’s great to hear. For now, he’ll be okay.”

“Yes,” Francis agreed, as the buzz of hospital life died out behind him after he exited the building. “You will finish filming in a couple days, yes?”
“Yeah,” Alfred said, pushing himself off the ground as Kiku and Ivan watched him with curious eyes. “I’ll text you my flight info and stuff in a couple days.”

Alfred had just barely removed his phone from his ear when Kiku pounced.

“Mr. Alfred, is everything alright?”

With a small smile, Alfred dropped his phone into his bag. “Yeah,” he said, rather distractedly, “it’ll be okay. Artie’ll be okay. Everything is fine.” Then, without warning, he jumped off and brushed himself off. “Come on, let’s finish this thing and make it the greatest movie ever.”

Be careful when you make your choices.

Every action has a consequence; one that will be felt by someone else.

Who are you, to change someone’s life so completely?

Arthur was rather bored.

He had his books, his phone, his laptop, an annoying Scottish brother and an equally annoying French frog in his room. He even had an array of nurses who’d come by and check on him every few hours.

But none of that could quell his boredom.

It was his third day in the hospital and Arthur was alone. The brother had gone to arrange his transfer to a different health facility. A hospice. The frog had gone to pick up a certain American actor who may or may not have a special place in Arthur’s heart.

Arthur couldn’t help the little smile that graced his features when he thought about Alfred.
In perhaps an hour, or so, Alfred would walk through those doors and Arthur would be a little less bored.

At the very least, Alfred would be the easiest to convince to have wheelchair races with him and to go on walks and explore. Because no matter how much Alistair or Francis cared, Arthur always found them to be overbearing and overprotective and simply could not stand to let them keep him company for long periods of time.

A long tube led out of the junction between Arthur’s upper and forearm, first curving down towards the ground, then winding up and around a metal pole. Finally, it connected to a bag containing a solution of sugar water and painkillers. No more chemo drugs or anything, because Arthur was long done with treatment.

Just a smooth and painless death, and Arthur would be content.

Arthur sat in the corner of the hospital room, in a plastic chair meant for visitors. His fingers were fiddling with his phone, but Arthur was staring at a wall, waiting. He wasn’t in the mood for Munro or Plath, nor was he in the mindset to play another game of chess on his phone. So Arthur simply sat there, admiring the patterns on the wall.

The walls were rather exciting, he supposed, for hospital walls. Like every hospital he had been in, the walls were white; but at least these walls had a unique swirling design created through various shades of white. It was subtle, but the added shades gave the room a different feel and Arthur found that extra attention to detail comforting.

It was captivating, how such a simple design could lure Arthur in so deeply.

The artistry would be overlooked by most, but it was comforting to Arthur, that someone had added such a personal touch to a wall they would likely never see again.

Then the sound of footsteps, particularly loud footsteps, in the hallway outside pulled Arthur out of his reverie, and back into his present reality.

They were familiar footsteps; there was only one person Arthur knew with such obnoxiously thundering steps, and they were coming closer.
Then the door burst open.


What do you do when the heroes of your childhood are the villains of your adulthood?

Dr. Wang sat at his desk, across from Arthur. An open file overflowing with charts and graphs lay on the table between them, showing all of Arthur’s progress -- all his remissions and recurrences -- over the past twenty years.

“I suppose this is it, then,” Arthur said, rather monotonously. “We’re done. We’re actually done.”

“Yes,” Dr. Wang said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “You’ve made your choice, that you don’t want any emergency treatment and that you wish to withhold consent to resuscitation. And you will be relocating to a hospice outside the city, yes? I trust that the paperwork has been filled out?”

Nodding, Arthur said, “Yes, Alistair has it taken care of.”

“Very well.” A sudden burst of emotion rose up in Dr. Wang. Unable to meet Arthur’s eyes, Dr. Wang dropped his gaze to the various charts scattered over the surface of his desk. “The tumour is inoperable, the cancer has spread throughout most of your major organs, and we’ve exhausted almost every available treatment option short of an organ transplant. Is there anything else you were interested in?”

Arthur shook his head. “No, I’m quite satisfied.”

“Well then,” Dr. Wang said, standing up, “you are now free to go.”
“I suppose this is it then, doctor,” Arthur said, using the IV pole to pull himself up.

“You’ve fought hard, Arthur. I wish you the very best, no matter happens after today,” Dr. Wang said, lips curving into a small smile.

Arthur shook Dr. Wang’s hand, feeling a weight dissipate from his shoulders. It was one that he had carried his entire life, one that he had never noticed until it was gone, but one that was so liberating now that Arthur would no longer have to carry it around it.

“Not everyone makes it,” Dr. Wang said, “But I am proud that you’ve made it this far. You deserve your rest, now.”

When Dr. Wang watched Arthur walking away from him for the last time, dragging his IV line beside him, Dr. Wang quickly blinked away a few tears before they escaped.

*What are dreams, but lies we trick ourselves into believing?*

*What are lies, but a manifestation, an acknowledgement, of our deepest desires?*

Alfred watched, seated on the hard plastic chair, as Arthur returned to the white hospital room alone, wheeling his IV pole with him.

There was a new lightness to Arthur, Alfred observed, that had never been there before.

“So?” Alfred asked, as Arthur took a seat on the bed so that he faced Alfred. “Are you the bearer of good news?”

“Indeed, I bring good news.” Once seated comfortably, Arthur reached out to grasp Alfred’s considerably larger hands in his. “It’s settled.”

Tilting his head to the side, Alfred asked, “Huh? Settled? What’s settled?” Though he didn’t really understand what Arthur was talking about, Alfred had a feeling that he wouldn’t like it.

Arthur was smiling as he spoke. “I just had my last appointment with Dr. Wang.”
Alfred’s expression brightened. “So you’re cured? You did it? You’re healthy?” Forever the optimist, Alfred had immediately jumped to the best possible scenario, only for his joy to be crushed when Arthur shook his head.

“No, there’s no cure. It’s too late; it’d be impossible.” Alfred face continued to fall as Arthur continued speaking. While Alfred’s expression continued a downward spiral, Arthur maintained a steady expression of contention. “Alistair arranged for me to relocate to a hospice in Greater London. It’ll be much more comfortable for me there.”

“Isn’t a hospice where people go to die?”

Arthur frowned, “Well, when you say it that way --”

Arthur was interrupted by Alfred, whose face no longer held any trace of his earlier excitement and whose eyes were shining with unshed tears. “Why are you so determined to die?”

“I’m not.” Arthur was blunt. He could feel Alfred reciprocate his grip, though it was far too tight for comfort, almost imprisoning.

“Then why are you rejecting everything that could help you? Why do you fight against everything that could make you better?” Alfred asked, fighting back tears.

With his own vision beginning to blur from tears, Arthur snapped, “Why do you keep trying to force me into more pain? Do you know how it feels? To be so sick you can’t even keep your own stomach fluids down? To be so weak you can’t even turn over in your own bed? To wake from another surgery hoping for some good news only to find another tumour instead? Another diseased organ? To come in for a scan only to find yourself lit up with cancer everywhere? To think you’re cured until you collapse from the pain of your own body fighting itself, time and time again? It’s exhausting. And I’m exhausted, Alfred. I’m so, so, exhausted.”

With his tears now running freely down his cheeks, Alfred said, “I only want to make this better. Make you better. I want you to stop hurting.”

Turning away from Alfred to face the wall, Arthur said bitterly, “Then do me a favour and stop trying to make this better.”

“You never discussed this with me...” Through teary eyes, Alfred looked at Arthur in desperation,
“You never discussed this with me...” Through teary eyes, Alfred looked at Arthur in desperation, watching Arthur refuse to look at him.

“I’m tired of making choices that would be easiest for other people,” Arthur said, still facing the wall. “For once, I had to do what was best for me.”

“You think dying is the best choice!?” Alfred cried, nearly hysterical.

Arthur sighed, and turned back to look at Alfred after hearing the note of hysteria in Alfred’s voice. He reached out to stroke Alfred’s face. With his thumbs, Arthur brushed the tears away. “There comes a point, when you must accept defeat. Sooner or later, it was going to happen.”

Alfred’s tears kept flowing, and Arthur kept wiping them away with a new patience he never had before.

“I...I barely even know you. I wish it didn’t have to happen. Reality is a bitch.”

With a wry smile, Arthur said, “Perhaps, but know this, Alfred. I am so very, very glad you happened upon my life, and I can enjoy the rest of my days with no regrets because I met you.”

Somehow, my life -- all these years -- they’ve somehow gotten away from me.

Here I am, at the end, and all I want is more time.

In the shade of a tall yew tree, Arthur sat in a wheelchair. On the ground beside him, Alfred sat, elbows on his knees. Alfred was eating a sandwich, some monstrosity with more meat and cheese than bread. There, the two of them saw, enjoying the warm July breeze.

“You’re going to die of a heart attack if you keep eating like that,” Arthur said, one hand ruffling Alfred’s already tousled hair.

With sauce and crumbs smearing his cheeks and his chin, Alfred looked up at Arthur. Laughing, Arthur couldn’t help but admire the innocence in Alfred’s wide baby blues. Alfred’s cheeks were puffed out, full of food, much like a child.
“Not if I choke to death first!” Alfred joked, after swallowing his mouthful of sandwich.

Arthur moved the hand that was buried in Alfred’s hair down, and gently brushed the crumbs off Alfred’s face. Chuckling softly, Arthur said, “You silly Americans, you. Do me a favour, love, and remember to chew before swallowing?”

Alfred hadn’t been listening, though, his attention fixated on Arthur’s hand instead. So thin, so bony, a pale yellow with cracked skin and so, so cold. It served as a reminder, of just how frail Arthur really was. It was just so unfair, how Arthur was nearing the end of his life when Alfred’s had just barely begun.

Looking down at his own hand -- with its fat fingers gripping half a sandwich and the healthy, muscular arms it extended from -- Alfred shuddered.

With a serious face, Alfred asked, “Hey Artie? How much longer do you think you have?”

Arthur turned away at Alfred’s questions, gaze distant and unfocused. His response was short, clipped. “Who knows? I was supposed to die six months after my first diagnosis. I should be dead a hundred times over by now, but somehow I’ve held on. Maybe a month, a couple if I’m lucky. There’s really no way to gauge a life,” Arthur sighed, his eyes refocusing though he kept his gaze downcast, fixated on his lap. “Sometimes people just roll over and die. That’s how the world works, after all. As you would say: predictability is overrated.”

Though Alfred laughed at that, his mood quickly sobered. Finishing off the last of his sandwich, Alfred brushed the crumbs off his fingers and reached out to hold Arthur’s hands in his.

He spoke in a somber tone, though there was a hint of humour at the end. “You have to be at the Oscars, okay. You’re going to be my date, so you better not stand me up!”

In response, Arthur laughed, “You foolish boy, how do you plan on getting me halfway across the world?”

Alfred winked, “I’ll cure cancer, obviously! That’s what heroes do!”
A breeze blew by, ruffling the leaves overhead.

It was only mid July, but a handful of leaves fluttered down to the ground, anyway.

*No matter how prepared you think you are, the obvious will never fail to take you by surprise.*

*Never.*

It wasn’t long before Arthur stopped going outside.

Then Arthur stopped leaving his room.

Alfred started delivering Arthur’s meals to him.

Then Arthur stopped leaving his bed.

And Alfred sat at Arthur’s beside now, wracking his mind because he didn’t have the slightest what to do anymore.

Stirring, Arthur shifted slightly in his sleep.

“Artie?” he said softly, tentatively.

There was no response.

Arthur laid in bed, eyes closed, sound asleep.

Alfred knew Arthur was merely asleep. The heart monitor beeped steadily, displaying Arthur’s healthy (albeit a bit rushed) heartbeat. Any other person would have gone insane listening to the incessant beeping by now, but Alfred cried found it calming.
Because every steady beep meant Arthur was still breathing, his heart still pumping life.

Countless tubes led out of Arthur’s frail body, pumping him full of what he needed to live.

But Alfred looked at Arthur now, and he didn’t know where it all went wrong.

They had their picnic under the old yew tree just barely three weeks ago.

Where had all the time gone?

It’s easy to convince one’s mind to be accepting of death.

But only until you’re facing death, looking the grim reaper straight in the eye.

The end was near, and both of them knew it.

“Dear Alfred,” Arthur croaked out softly, weakly, lying in his bed. “You must know that I am fighting a losing battle, that I have been for my entire life. It would have been for the best if we had never met, but I must apologize for my selfishness in keeping you here.”

“No, Artie,” Alfred closed his large, warm hands around Arthur’s bony, cold one. Alfred leaned forward, ensuring Arthur could see him clearly, see how serious he was, from where his head slumped against the pillow. “You should never apologize for what’s not your fault.

“Al…Alfred?”

A new sense of urgency gripped Alfred’s heart, and he pushed himself off the hard, plastic chair to kneel right up against the frame of Arthur’s bed. On his knees, Alfred once released Arthur’s hand. Instead, he tightened his grasp on Arthur’s hands, trying desperately to press warmth and life back into him.
“Shhh, Artie, it’s okay. Everything’s gonna be okay. I’m here. Do you need anything? Water? Are you in pain?”

With some effort, Arthur shook his head. “Alfred, I…I...thank you. Thank you, Alfred. So, so much. For building me a bridge. For being a hero. My hero. For everything.”

Rubbing Arthur’s hands between his own, Alfred said softly, “Hey, it was nothing. It’s a hero duty to build bridges, not tear them down. Thank you for letting me be your hero.”

Arthur smiled weakly, though his green eyes were dull and bleary and not quite focused. “Alfred….I….I’m tired. I’m tired, Alfred.”

A couple tears had escaped from Alfred’s eyes, but he did his best to smile. For Arthur’s sake, and for his own. Alfred reached up to brush Arthur’s hair off his forehead. With his hand resting on Arthur’s cheek, Alfred said, “Rest, Artie. You can rest now. You’ve fought hard.”

Arthur blinked a few more times, before letting himself relax.

A smile remained on his face, giving him the image of the purest angel.

Forever.

~~Epilogue~~

That’s the thing about time.

It moves on.

Late February, Dolby Theatre, Hollywood, Los Angeles
“And winner of this year’s Academy Award Best Actor in a Leading Role is Alfred F. Jones!”

Standing on the stage, staring out at the black sea of faces, Alfred suddenly felt overwhelmed with confidence.

He began his speech with a joke.

“So, my date kind of stood me up, tonight, so I’ll have to stand up here alone.”

Most people would not understand the joke, or even acknowledge that it was a joke, but Alfred did. Everyone who needed to would understand. And that was good enough.

“I am so extremely honoured to stand here tonight, and I’m so honoured that I was given the opportunity to be Kiran D. Lurkrath. A Graveyard of Buried Infinities was absolutely amazing every step of the way and there are so many people I need to thank. Asides from my parents and Mattie who have always been the most amazing and supportive family a guy could have, I want to first thank Kiku Honda, the greatest director anyone could ask for for being an amazing inspiration and encouraging me to take this role. I want to thank Ivan Braginski, my manager, for betting that I couldn’t do this. I also want to thank Francis Bonnefoy and Alistair Kirkland for not beating me into a pulp.”

Alfred paused for a few moments, to allow the audience to chuckle at his speech.

“But,” Alfred continued, “most importantly, I need to thank Arthur Kirkland. He wrote A Graveyard of Buried Infinities and damn, it’s a pretty amazing book. But Arthur did a lot more than just write a book and a screenplay. Artie is really amazing. He encouraged me, pushed me, and helped me become the actor and person I am today. I am proud of who I am, and what I accomplished, and everything is all thanks to him. Arthur Kirkland is the reason I am still an actor, the reason why I was able to win this award, and I am so, so honoured to have had the opportunity to know him on a professional and personal level.”

Raising his award above his head, Alfred shouted, “Thank you Arthur Kirkland, for giving me the honour of loving you!”

Later, at the after party, Alfred ran into a familiar face.

“Hey Francis,” Alfred said, unsure of what Francis wanted with him. He hadn’t seen Francis in months, since before the funeral.
“Monsieur Jones,” Francis said, embellished with one of his signature bows, “may I just say that you look very dashing tonight. And allow me to extend to you my congratulations for the Oscar. Arthur would be proud.” At the last part, Francis’ voice cracked ever so slightly and his gaze dropped.

Alfred smiled wistfully. “I suppose he would. He never did like Hollywood though.”

Francis looked up again, back at Alfred’s face, and put a hand on Alfred’s shoulder. “You know, I can say with the utmost confidence, that your time with with Arthur were the happiest of his life. No matter how short your time together was, the moments with you meant everything to him.”

Teary eyed, Alfred nodded. “And he meant everything to me, too.”

The two men simply stood there for a few moments, saying nothing. All that needed to be said had already been shared. They simply stood together, reminiscing the highlights of the time spent with Arthur Kirkland.

And when Francis finally bid Alfred adieu, Alfred found that he felt different. A good different.

Finally, he knew where he was going, where his life was headed.

And it was a beautiful feeling, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

.......please don't kill me ;w;

First off all, I chose not to add the warning for death in the tags because I don't want Bridge Over Troubled Water to be defined by one action. Because Bridge Over Troubled Water is a lot more than that -- first and foremost, it's about how people cannot truly live unless it's for themselves and how we are not so easily defined by only one or two superficial characteristics -- and it's why I chose to focus Act III on the Arthur's character instead of his cancer.

Also, to help you recover, I suggest you watch Simon's Cat here

Or if you need fluffy fics to help you recover, read about runner!Arthur being chased
up a tree by Alfred's dog or Alfred being an idiot and failing to take Artie out on a nice date~~

Thank you so much for reading~~!!

By the way, if you were curious, here is the performance of Bridge Over Troubled Water that inspired this fic~~

((By the way, I'll be making a playlist for this soon ^_^;))

End Notes

Hello dear reader, and thank you so much for having made it this far! The second and third acts will be up shortly, within the month. I hope you enjoyed the first act, and feel free to leave me feedback ^^

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!