The Boy Who Spoke With Ghosts

by AvocadoLove

Summary

No one suspects Arthur. He's too practical, too organized, too sensible to believe in the supernatural.

Based on the kink meme prompt: Arthur's real name is Cole Sear.

Notes

This is my first time writing Inception... and probably my first time in years writing something based in the real world. So feel free to crit me on characterization/what-have-you.

This chapter is edited from the original version on my LJ. (Both have now been updated.) The plot finally decided to show up, and I had to change some important points in the previous version to get it to work.
Sometimes, it seemed to Arthur that he was forever doomed to play the role of point-man, even out here in the real world.

He more or less invited himself to stay at Dom's house the night of Mal's memorial.

Dom was a wreck through the service, hair unkempt and retreating to his hole of a bedroom as soon as he could escape. It had been up to Miles and his wife to wrangle the kids, field calls from agitated law enforcement and even more agitated lawyers.

As for Arthur… he accepted condolences on behalf of the grieving family, made sure food was sent up to Dom's room, and took over babysitting duty while the two grandparents sat out on the porch, holding one another and speaking softly. And he waited.

But he knew he wouldn't be waiting for long.

It was late. Attendees had left hours ago leaving the house dark and quiet, save for the crackle of the fireplace and the slight creak of worn leather as Arthur leaned back in an almost obscenely comfortable recliner. Mal's purchase, of course. The woman had an eye for the absurd, and a burgundy leather chair which had been cracked and abused by years of sea salted air, had stood centerpiece in an otherwise put together living room.

Her touch was visible everywhere in this house, from framed pictures of land, sea, and air dotting every wall, to a half completed jigsaw puzzle – a shameless tourists' vista of The Eifel tower – taking up nearly the whole of the coffee table.

Arthur waited, the very picture of a man with infinite patience; a glass of merlot in one hand, a glock 19 with silencer already attached, resting comfortably by his knee.

If he found Dom had pushed Mal out that window, Dom wouldn't have to worry about the police closing in. Arthur would take care of the problem himself, and there would be no closure for his unquiet spirit.

So Arthur kept waiting, fighting the drowsiness caused by the warm fire, excellent wine, and too many nights looking into his friend's haunted eyes and wondering if he had killed his own wife.

He knew she had come at last when he drew in breath and the air tasted chill. When he exhaled, it left his mouth in a visible cloud.

Arthur closed his eyes briefly, seeking his center to steel himself, before he placed the wineglass on the side table and rested his hands loosely in his lap.

"Is there something you want to talk about?" he asked.

No answer. Not that he truly expected one. And when he opened his eyes again she was standing there, looking out the window, her back to him.

Mal wore the same open-backed black dress she had in death. One shoe was missing, canting her
balance awkwardly to the right. She hummed three notes to herself, as Arthur quietly watched, but didn't turn.

"Dom will be along shortly, I think," she said, at last.

"Why do you say that?"

She laughed, then. One hand braced against the wall, fingers spread. "But of course he will follow me. We are together. And besides… I have made all of the arrangements."

Arthur let a low, expelled breath. Something he didn't even realize was frozen, seemed to thaw in his chest. His fingers were resting on the handgun, he realized, and he quietly thumbed the safety back on. There was no need for that now.

When he looked up again, she turned to face him.

Mal's skin was paler than it had been in life, and there were now rivulets of blood dripping from under her hair and down her face. Her eyes were shadowed bruises, glinting hard when she raised her head under the lamplight. She was beautiful. She was terrible.

He was used to this, but it always hit harder when it was someone he knew. Arthur felt a muscle in his cheek twitch, and knew at once she saw it – Mal had always been able to read him like no other. Her mouth pulled to the side in her classic sardonic smile, as if she were the only one in the world who knew the joke. But it was a touch too wide and brittle, and the air about her nearly crackled with cold.

"Dear Arthur," she purred, stepping closer to him – her walk a limp without one shoe. "Don't feel sad for me. You can come, too. It's as simple as… waking up." She said the last two words with a slight giggle, tossing her head which only exposed more blood and bruising. She had hit the ground hard when she fell. "We all have to wake up, sometime."

"I am awake, Mal," he said, evenly.

Her smile showed teeth. "Are you sure? Where's your totem?"

"I don't need a totem." His voice was quiet, pained. "I can see you."

The reminder struck home. Her face contorted in a flash – going from the friend who had once completely taken over his apartment when he was flat on his back from the flu, and force-fed him chicken soup and made him watch horribly sappy romantic-comedies for three days until he was back on his feet, to a mad-woman. She screamed at him, "You're LYING!" and the whites of her eyes showed around her pupils as she struck the wineglass from the table. It fell to a floor with a shatter, the dark red liquid spilling like blood along the wooden floor.

Arthur himself kept very, very still. It had been a long time since one of them had hurt him physically, although it could happen. It had happened.

"Why did you do it?" he asked. "You had a loving husband, Mal. Children—"

"Those aren't my children! They aren't r—" she stopped at once head snapping sideways to stare at the stairwell leading down from the upper level of the house.

*What is she doing?* Arthur had time to wonder. *They're not usually aware like this*, before he, too, heard the sounds; someone coming down the staircase with heavy feet.
"Arthur?" came Dom's voice. "You still here?"

Arthur blinked, and between that moment and the next, Mal was gone, leaving behind the spilled wine and shattered glass. He took in a breath of relief – the air was noticeably warmer now – and quickly slid the gun under his folded vest, left on the couch. "Yeah, I'm here," he called, and a moment later Dom peeked into the room. His blond-brown hair still mussed and his eyes red-rimmed.

"Huh. I thought I heard voices."

"No," Arthur said. "Just me." His hands were shaking and he closed them into a fist, scrubbing at his face. When he lowered them again, Dom had walked to the thermostat to check the temperature.

"Dom."

"Yeah?"

"You said you and Mal became lost in limbo, and when she came out..." he trailed off meaningfully, a hawkeye on the other man.

Dom's shoulders tightened for a beat. Almost as if... as if he, too, were waiting for the gunshot. After all, Arthur reflected glumly, Dom was a master at reading people's emotions, and perhaps Arthur had not been as subtle as he had thought.

But the other man never answered his question. He only turned to regard Arthur, blue eyes wary.

"Do you believe me?"

Arthur met his gaze squarely, even as out of the corner of his mind he caught a flash of movement – a limped walk. "Yes," he said. "I do."

****

Arthur had learned how to speak French from a woman named Dafna Sinclair. She had drowned in a pond on sweltering summer day while her sweetheart at the time had watched from the banks, either unwilling or unable to help. Eventually, she said, the pond had been drained away and bulldozed over; made way for the park where Arthur played kickball at school.

He learned his German from a black man named Frank who had learned it from his Master. Frank's back had been split into dozens of weeping lashmarks, but he had a kind, mellow demeanor and taught Arthur with a patience which had always seemed infinitely deep.

When Mal had heard him speak both languages, she had laughed right in his face, declared him "charmingly old fashioned" and set about teaching him the more modern versions, complete with slang and curse words. He couldn't tell her he'd learned it from people who had died before the 20th century.

When she had figured it out, after an ill-fated trip into his subconscious mind, she had held his hand and promised to keep his secret.

Now Mal was a ghost as well, and Arthur knew from hard worn experience she wouldn't be the type to sit down and keep company of lonely little boys.
Arthur had never truly needed a totem. Ghosts could never follow him under, and he held onto that fact as his grip on reality – knowing that if he couldn't see them, then he was truly asleep.

Until the day, six weeks after Mal's death, he and Dom were doing what was supposed to be a simple extraction from a mark in Johannesburg. Arthur had been keeping quiet watch as Dom sat with the mark, calmly discussing business over a dreamscape steak dinner, when he felt a tap on the shoulder.

Mal was standing behind him – still in her black dress and more beautiful than she had ever been in life. And all Arthur could do was stare at her, frozen, the hair prickling up the back of his neck.

He swallowed, making a dry click. "What are you doing here, Mal?"

She only smiled at him as she brought her hand around, slamming a steak knife up to its hilt in his neck.

Arthur came back to himself, gasping, only to see Mal standing over him again; eyes now dark and face bloodied, but wearing that same eerie smile as she had in the dream.

She raised her empty hand as if in greeting, but he'd been stabbed only seconds before and he lurched back in pure panic, falling out of his chair onto a thinly carpeted office-room floor, IV ripping from his wrist.

"Your totem," Arthur rasped. His hand fisted in Dom's shirt – he felt he was holding onto reality by the strength of his fingers alone. "Where's your totem?"

Dom stared at him a moment and some distant part of Arthur realized the other man had probably never seen him this undone – Arthur had not felt like this for a very long time. Not since he was nine.

But Dom hesitated only a moment before fishing out his top – Mal's old top – and set it spinning along a smooth tabletop. It toppled only moments later.

"You see?" Dom said, and his smile was overly bright – strained and false. "She was just a projection. I – it won't happen again, Arthur. I promise. I got it under control."

Arthur shoved him away and stood, breathing deeply and taking care to straighten the rumples out of his vest and tie. Mal didn't make a move towards him, Dom couldn't see her, and Arthur finally made himself to look away.

He didn't say anything to Dom, but the man was a trained extractor. Dom could probably read his
expression almost as well as Mal once had.

Dom took one look at his face and winced. "We can try again tomorrow."

The mark, thankfully, was still hooked up to the PASIV machine with enough sedative to let him wake up in an hour or two – with any luck he’d think he had only fallen asleep at his desk.

Arthur nodded and left; Mal’s leering smile at still his back.

...

It was a long, surreal trip back to his hotel. Arthur opted to walk; the better to study the faces back on the street. But they were all people, alive and normal, and he felt his hand itching to the concealed gun in his pocket because he wasn’t sure he wasn’t still dreaming and –

Someone approached him from behind at a jog; a young woman who suddenly stopped and grabbed his elbow to get his attention.

"Have you seen my child? He's a brown haired little boy about this tall." She held up her hand to her waist, just under where fresh blood had spilled from the gaping cut in her neck and down her dress. "He's supposed to be in school, but when I went for him he wasn't there."

Arthur let out a breath, half laugh and half a sigh. His hand fell away from the hidden gun and rubbed at his chin, instead.

Always the point-man. It was what he was born to do.

"I'll walk with you," he suggested. "Maybe we can find him together."

****

That night, Arthur stopped at a tourist gift-shop. He bought a pair of trick loaded-die which reminded him of the time when he was fifteen and his mom had gotten remarried in Atlanta Georgia. He'd had spent the night before the wedding talking with old school card sharks (very old school – they'd both died in the Depression when their hotel had caught fire), and spent the day entertaining his new step-sisters with card games.

They were both eleven at the time and therefore would be thoroughly unimpressed with his magic disappearing penny trick.

Arthur promptly crushed one die under his shoe when he got to his room and pocketed the remaining – the one set to always land on four.

The thing was, it wasn't long before it started to land on four in his dreams as well. Eventually, Arthur took to carrying it with him to keep up appearances. It would be child's play to memorize and duplicate the weight of a loaded die. He had his own secrets – as imperfect as they might be – to tell
him which end was up.

Mal was the only exception.

"You know, you don't really strike me as an Arthur," Eames said, settling back into the cheap warehouse lawn chair.

Arthur didn't answer for a long count of ten: choosing to let the silence speak his annoyance for him. He busied himself by bringing out the case for the PASIV. With a smooth click, he flipped it open. "Is that so."

"It is." Eames took a long pointed moment to let his gaze wander over him. "You look more like a Phillip or a Malcolm."

Arthur spared him an irritated glance and unrolled the main lead, handing it over. "Five minutes on this new solution should give you an hour of dreamtime. Will that give you enough practice?"

"Darling," Eames drawled, "I don't need an hour to practice this forge." He paused. "Why don't you come down with me? I can show you things you've never dreamed of."

"I have work to do," Arthur said, after wincing at that pickup line.

Again, Eames grinned. "Just thought I'd offer."

Arthur's reply was to push the plunger down on the machine, and within a few seconds Eames was asleep.

"Your name is Cole, isn't it?" came a high, breathy voice right behind him.

Arthur turned to see a little girl standing a few feet away– her sunflower yellow dress the only real color in the middle of his otherwise stark warehouse. He'd seen her before; always in the presence of Eames, which indicated she was attached to him somehow – a sister or niece or, God forbid, his daughter. Arthur had tried speaking to her before, but sometimes ghosts didn't want to talk to him. Not until they were ready.

"Who told you that?" Arthur asked, frowning down at her.

She shrugged and skipped over to the PASIV and read the blinking count-down timer. "The angry lady said so. The one with one shoe."

Arthur felt himself grow cold, and it had nothing to do with the ghost in the room. "Mal speaks to you?" Ghosts didn't interact with one another as a rule... They didn't see each other. Most of the time they didn't even know they were dead.

The girl shrugged a shoulder, now looking at Eames, and then said, "I'll tell you secret. Come here," and gestured for Arthur to bend down.

He did and chill wind touched his ear as she whispered, "His first name is James, but mommy calls
him Jamie. He *hates* that."

Then she was gone.

Arthur straightened and looked down at the still unconscious Eames. He knew he should be more than a little bothered – there was something off about Mal, even for an unquiet spirit. She wasn't typical, her actions were premeditated – almost *alive*.

Yet... Yet when Arthur breathed in, the air was warm and there was a small, half smile still lingering on Eames' face as he slept.

"Jamie," Arthur muttered, then shook his head and made himself turn back to his laptop with some important schematics and the task at hand. He had work to do.

****

TBC...
The forest stretched in every direction; thick pine trees with trunks bigger around than a mid-size sedan was long curved up, higher than Arthur could see. Frogs croaked in quiet symphony around them and some kind of blue bird with a ridge of black feathers along its head called through weavings of branches in a raspy voice.

Arthur scuffed a leather oxford along the ground, trying to get a feel for the texture of this dream. The forest floor was littered nearly six inches thick with sprigs and pine needles. If he wasn't paying attention it could hinder movement.

This was the last dry run before the extraction. Their mark was somewhat of an amateur naturalist. This was the setting Dom judged he'd feel most at home – and therefore most open to suggestion.

Some small animal scurried, unseen, in the underbrush and Arthur tried not to grimace. "Can you increase the lighting at ground level?" he asked.

"I can somewhat, but too much light may make the dreamscape look sterile," Dom answered. He tipped his head up anyway and squinted in concentration. The branches about them seemed to draw back and Arthur saw to his relief that the suspiciously shadowed bulge in the ground a few feet off was simply a gnarled tree-root.

Eames watched Arthur's examination of their surroundings with unconcealed interest. The forger was dressed wholly inappropriately for the dream, of course, with a horrible green paisley shirt, cream colored pressed trousers and an irritating smile every time Arthur looked at him.

"I take it your parents never took you camping as a child," Eames said, catching his eye.

Arthur was the first to look away. "No." He moved past the other man, casually taking out his handgun from its holster and checking the sights along its length. The large tree trunks were bare of branches up to fifteen feet high, so there was little worry about ambushes from projections above. "I grew up in North Philadelphia. We didn't have forests like this." And his mother had worked too many jobs at one time just to keep food on the table. They didn't exactly have extra cash for vacations.

"And you're going to be playing a forest ranger?" Eames asked, eyebrows raised.

Arthur shrugged. "I'll improvise." He turned to Dom. "So how do we keep from getting lost in all of this?"

He would never say it out loud, but Arthur always thought that Dom seemed more at peace with himself when he was building a dream. Calmer, even before Mal had died. At that moment Dom was looking around the forest landscape, his creation, with something almost like a smile on his face. He was an extractor by trade, but in his heart of hearts... he was an architect. An artist.

"I've marked paths through the trees," he replied, and walked to the nearest tree to lay a hand on the reddish-brown bark. He pointed up to the lowest branch. "See the small pinecones on the end of that branch there, and how it's slanted? That will point your way. All paths lead to the river, our staging area."
Eames nodded to himself, taking up the conversation. "Right, so Mr... Fellmen, is it?" He waited for Arthur's nod to continue, "gets himself lost in the woods. We let him wander around for a bit and become desperate." He started walking as if to emphasize his point, and ducked behind the trunk of an obscenely large tree. A woman walked out from the other side. She was young, in her mid-twenties, with an athletic build, reddish-brown hair pulled into a braid, and a dusting of freckles across her nose. She wore hiking boots, khaki shorts and a tank-top which was perhaps a little too tight to be truly effective for a day of hiking. She smiled at Arthur and Dom, showing slightly overlarge teeth and continued, "And then he runs into Cindy, here. His old college girlfriend."

"Arthur will be running interference to make sure no projection gets in the way," Dom said. "And I'll be taking the role of the—"

He was stopped as a strong gust of wind suddenly whipped up from nowhere and everywhere at once, kicking up dust and pine-needles and silencing all animal life. The forest had been set in mild summer's day, but this wind was cold – freezing cold. And in the space of a few heartbeats the dreamscape around them morphed from summer to crystalline frozen winter.

Arthur took a step back. His shoes crunched on frost-rimmed pine needles.

Dom's head snapped around, looking for the source of the disturbance. "Are either of you doing this?" he called, loudly over the gale.

"Not me, mate." Eames replied, back again in his own body. He cast Arthur a look. "What about you, Darling?"

Arthur didn't answer him. He had his gun out – more of an automatic reaction than anything else – and head held cocked. "Do you hear that?"

There was a sound on the wind, too faint to be heard clearly. But the moment he called attention to it, the noise spiked sharply in volume; a scream – a woman's scream split the air, causing startled birds to take flight and shaking frozen needles from the trees.

"What the hell could be doing this?" Dom demanded. "Something up above?" He said more, but the unearthly scream increased in pitch and Arthur couldn't hear him anymore.

Arthur's gun slipped from his fingers as he clapped his hands over his ears, but the sound only still increased, louder, and louder... nearly vibrating the air around him. He couldn't block it out. He couldn't –

Searing pain exploded on either side of his head, as if someone had twisted an ice-pick in each ear. Arthur fell to his knees, screaming – and he couldn't hear his own voice. Everything had gone silent. Someone wrenched his hands away – his palms were covered with bright red blood – and Arthur stared into Eames' ashen face.

The other man's lips moved, but Arthur couldn't hear his voice.

"I think my eardrums ruptured," Arthur said, numbly, looking around. Dom still stood off a few feet away looking shaken, but not in any pain. Hadn't he heard the noise?

Eames' lips tightened. He mouthed, "Right. Hold on," and bent to pick up Arthur's dropped handgun. Seeing the intent in his eyes, Arthur nodded and closed his eyes.

He felt Eames' steadying hand curl around the back of his neck, his touch feather-light. Almost in a caress, or silent apology. Then cold steel against his temple. Then nothing.
Arthur opened his eyes to see the warehouse in shambles. Every paper he'd carefully filed during three weeks of prep-work now littered the floor. The desk across the room had been upended, the extra chair thrown at least twenty feet away. His whiteboard was knocked over, one of the legs bent up sharply, and all of the carefully drawn architectural specs on the mark's house had been ripped into at least four pieces, strewn across the room.

His ears were ringing, the air was bitingly cold, and little pin-pricks of dread running and down his arms told him everything he needed to know.

"Damnit," Arthur whispered.

The warehouse had been Visited while they dreamed.

How could this have happened? Why now? It was almost noon, a time of day when even the most powerful of spirits had a hard time manifesting – even to him. And Arthur always made sure, doubly sure, that he set up their workplaces at least a mile away from any known hospital, morgue or cemetery.

Dom, reclined in the next lawnchair over, gave a sudden jerk and a snort as he came awake, blinking open his eyes. He took one look around the warehouse and then reached immediately into his pocket to withdraw his totem.

Eames came awake last – presumably he'd wanted to make sure Arthur and Dom were dead, and therefore awake up above, before turning the gun on himself. "Oh Hell," he breathed, after a startled moment of looking around. "Looks like we've had company."

Dom's totem fell over with a quiet clatter and the man gave an audible sigh before straightening. "Arthur?"

"Yeah." The name – the sharp command in Dom's voice was as good as a slap of reality. Arthur removed the needle from his arm and stood to retrieve his laptop. "On it."

Someone had slapped the lid down, but luckily done no other damage than that. And within a few seconds he had pulled up the program linked to the alarm system rigged throughout the warehouse.

Nothing was tripped. He knew it wouldn't be. Whoever, whatever did this wouldn't need to worry about opening doors or windows.

Eames, meanwhile had produced a small handgun from somewhere and was carefully prowling around the warehouse as Arthur worked, glancing cautiously behind bare steel columns and over the overturned desk.

Yet, the warehouse itself was flat, only on one level, and with a completely open floor plan. There was no one there, other than them.

"None of the alarms went off," Arthur said anyway, just for propriety's sake.

He glanced at Dom, and then did a double-take. Eames had set up a mirror upon one of the low shelves to practice his forgery – the glass was now broken into several jagged pieces. Dom stood before the remains of it now, face turned to examine his right cheek: there was a single, reddening, mark across his face, as if someone had scraped a fingernail from a point just under his right eye, down almost to his chin.
"I don't suppose this warehouse was built on an old indian burial ground?" Eames asked lightly, into the gathering silence. He looked at Arthur and added, "But I don't suppose you're the type to believe in ghosts, are you?"

Arthur glanced sharply at him, a retort on his tongue – then froze as he caught sight of pair of dark, angry eyes. Mal peered up at them all from over the edge of up the upturned desk. No, not at them... her attention was focused solely and completely on Dom.

And as Arthur watched, she slinked forwards on all fours in a lithe crawl, keeping to the edge between shadow and light – like a panther stalking its prey.

"Arthur? Darling? Are you alright?"

Arthur couldn't look away. "I—"

"You all heard that scream. Someone was here," Dom growled cutting him off, and stomped to Arthur's side to examine the laptop for himself. It put him within arm's reach of Mal and Arthur quickly stepped between them.

He didn't think Mal would hurt him to get to her husband. At least, the Mal he had known in life wouldn't. She hesitated, eyes snapping to him, and the air temperature plummeted again.

"Leave," she hissed. But she wasn't talking to Arthur. "Now."

Eames started, looking around. "Did anyone hear that?"

Dom still tapped at the laptop, un concerned. "Hear what?"

Eames looked to Arthur for confirmation, but Arthur wasn't paying much attention. Leave now?

Then it hit him. "I think whoever did this meant it as a message." Arthur said facing Cobb, but watching the ghost's reaction out of the corner of his eye. When he spoke her dark eyes snapped to him and he felt the force of it like another gust of cold wind. He swallowed. "It was a warning."

"What, back off or else?" asked Eames. "This isn't anyone else's territory – I checked. No other team was approached for this job. We aren't stepping on any toes."

"I don't know, but think about it. We were all completely venerable when we were under, yet whoever did this just..." Arthur lifted a hand, indicating the thrashed room.

"And the scream?"

He only shrugged. Most likely, only he had heard the scream. Dom and Eames were let in on it because they shared the dream. Certainly, Arthur had gotten the blunt of the impact; evidenced by his burst eardrums, while Dom and Eames had only seemed unsettled.

Dom cursed something under his breath and slammed the lid of the laptop down, evidently giving up on the alarm system.

Arthur forced himself to take a deep breath. Mal hadn't moved, but Dom and Eames were smart men and while he didn't expect them to put everything together, they'd get over their shock soon and start asking questions. Questions, in Arthur's experience, were dangerous. He didn't have time for this now. "What do you want to do, Dom?" he asked.

Dom gazed around the room once more – the light fell over his face causing the mark to stand out
angry and red on his cheek. "Whatever this was meant to mean, the fact is we've been compromised. Let's pack it in – burn the evidence. All the files. Everything."

"Brilliant," Eames muttered.

Dom looked pointedly around the room. "You don't think this it's a good idea?"

"No, no," he replied, quickly. "There's no doubt in my mind that there's a bad feeling about this place. It's just..." He sighed and caught Arthur's gaze, just for a moment. "Well you know how it is. I just hate leaving things undone."

****

Arthur sat on the edge of his stiff hotel bed later that night, phone cradled against his ear. "Pick up," he murmured, glancing at his watch. "Pick up... pick up..."

The line clicked and a tired sounding woman's voice asked, "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Nina Campbell?"

"Speaking."

Arthur hesitated for a beat, eyes flicking across the room. "Edith was your grandmother?"

A pause, then, "Yes? Who is this?"

"A friend," he answered, quickly. "Mrs. Campbell, please listen carefully. Those papers you've been looking for – Edith left them for you by the bay window in her old room. The third floorboard from the wall is loose. She wasn't able to tell you, in time."

"Who is this?" the woman demanded.

Arthur hung up, then glanced over to the old woman sitting beside him. Her back was bent from age and her white hair stuck every which way from what had formally been a tight bun.

"She knows," he said. "The rest is up to her, now."

Edith smiled and raised a trembling hand to his cheek. "Bless you, child. Nina's a good girl... She'll do right by the money. I think... I don't have to worry about her no more." Then she was gone, blinked out like a snuffled candlelight.

Arthur let out a long breath and glanced back at the cell phone, still cradled in his hand. The job was dead in the water, meaning he was unexpectedly at loose ends. It didn't happen often – he planned too carefully to be out of work when he didn't want to be.

Apparently, Mal had other plans.

He could take the next flight out. Go stateside for a bit. Dom couldn't follow, of course, but that wouldn't stop Arthur from reconnecting with old contacts, putting out his feelers, hunting for someone who needed a quick and dirty extraction –

Another thought occurred to him right on the heels of that. It was November, wasn't it? What day did Thanksgiving fall on this year, anyway?
Arthur chewed his lower lip, but his fingers seemed to make the decision for him, dialing the number by heart and pressing send.

This time the phone picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?" came a roughened, tired voice.

"Hey Ma," he said warmly. "Did I wake you?"

"Cole!" The surprise in her voice made him inwardly wince. He didn't call back home often – never on a job. "This is a surprise," she said, as if reading his thoughts. "Are... are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just had a job fall through and I was wondering if you and Sam were busy for Thanksgiving."

"Cole, listen to me. You are always welcome to drop by, no matter what the occasion," she said, with the same tone of voice she used to use to assure him he was a normal boy, and not a freak on her eyes.

Arthur had long ago come to accept the fact that he was a freak, but her words still made him smile. Something seemed to loosen in his throat, the last bit of chill from Mal's earlier haunting finally easing away.

And when someone knocked on the door to his hotel room, he ignored it. "I know," he said, softly. "Thanks."

"As it happens, your step-sister is flying in on Tuesday," his mother went on briskly. "She's getting over a breakup – you met the man, I think. Keith, with the long hair? Well, it'll be a full house but we will make everyone fit."

"That sounds good. I—"

The hotel room door swung open and Arthur had his handgun out and aimed before the intruder took one step into the room. It was Eames – hotel card in one hand and an electronic reader of some sort he'd obviously used to break in the other.

He saw the gun and stopped, a small smile curving his lips. "Are you going to shoot me, luv?"

Still keeping the weapon trained, Arthur muffled the speaker-end of the cell against his shoulder and said, quite calmly, "Get out."

"No, I don't think I will." Despite his glib tone, Eames made his movements slow and obvious as he reached behind him and shut the door. "I know you, Arthur and you'll be out of this room and on a plane to who-knows-where in less than an hour. We need to talk."

Arthur considered firing – just a wingshot, nothing fatal – but thought that explaining the sound of the gunshot to his mother would be more trouble than it was worth. She was wise enough not to ask any questions about his job, and he never volunteered information. It worked for the both of him.

"Fine," he said, tightly, and lifted the phone back to his ear. Amazingly enough, his mother was still talking. She had not noticed the silence on the other end and was apparently trying to catch him up on the last several months of family news.

"Ma, I have to go," he said, as soon as she had paused for breath. "I'm going to be late for a meeting. I'll catch a flight out and be there on Wednesday."
Eames stayed quiet and kept his hands in plain view while Arthur said his goodbyes and gently hung up. Arthur lowered his gun only reluctantly – but kept it well within reach. Just in case.

With the gun down, Eames relaxed. "Headed back home I take it?" he said lightly, too lightly. "Going to visit Mrs. Arthur?"

He snorted. "You know Arthur is not my last name."

"Ah, but it's not your first name either."

Arthur's lips twitched, despite himself. Jamie, he thought, and felt momentarily fond. He cleared his throat. "What did you want to talk about Mr. Eames?"

"Hm. Down to business then I take it?" Eames let out a long breath. "What else? A man just doesn't wake up to see the room he was just in torn to pieces without any evidence to the how or why without questions."

"And what makes you think I have answers?"

Eames looked at him for a long moment as if considering the weight of his words. "I think you know something you weren't quite willing to share with the rest of the class."

Arthur's breath caught, just for a moment, although he was careful to keep his face as blank and neutral as possible. "Do you."

"I'm sure of it." Eames shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Don't take it personally: it's my job to read people. You have your tells, just like everyone else."

Briefly, Arthur wondered how much digging Eames had actually been able to do into his past. He had never told anyone about his abilities, aside from his mother. And Mal... but she didn't count: she had figured everything out all on her own.

He didn't tell. Never had the compulsion to tell – he'd had enough people saw him as a freak all through his childhood. So much so that he took time and care into crafting strong, organized, dependable Arthur-- a man who was a far cry from Cole Sear who talked to the dead..

"Why does it matter?" Arthur asked. "You heard Dom. The job is over."

Eames shrugged again. "For him, most certainly. But some of us have a reputation to keep up."

Ah. So that was what this was about. Arthur strongly considered reaching for his gun again. "You're saying you want me to finish the extraction with you, behind Dom's back?"

"Arthur darling, you say that like it's a bad thing."

"No."

Eames grinned, as if charmed by his refusal. "That loyalty of yours is admirable, but it's going to get you into trouble one day."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "Get out," he said.

But he wasn't talking to Eames. He caught a hint of movement from behind the forger – a uneven, limped walk and a dark pair of eyes. Mal stepped out from behind Eames, hands locked into claws by her sides and radiating cold fury into the room.
"What are you doing here, Arthur?" she hissed. "You aren't supposed to be here."

Eames, meanwhile had continued speaking, completely unaware. "We were all but done with the planning. You can build the forest again by memory and I can go on with the extraction." He smiled, easy and smooth. "We'd make a good team."

"Eames..." Arthur started.

But he got no further as Mal suddenly struck – her clawed hand slashed at the window and struck at the blind, catching the tassel and whipping the whole thing up to let light spill briefly in, before it crashed down again.

Eames jumped at least three feet to the left, completely startled. Had it been under any other circumstance, Arthur might have found it funny.

"Bloody hell!" Eames swore, and stared, unseeing, through Mal to the window. He tentatively reached towards it as if to check for wires, then stopped. Gooseflesh stood visibly on his arm. "What is going on around here?"

And in the background, Arthur could hear the sound of a little girl's quiet weeping.

It was too much. All of this was too much. Arthur stood, fingers smoothing down his rumpled vest out of nervous habit – it was better than itching for the handgun. "If you want my advice— leave," he told Eames, flatly.

Eames just stared. "Look at you," he murmured, with a glance back towards the now settled blinds. He could not see Mal pacing back and forth – nor hear her low, cursed French. "You're not even alarmed... What the hell is going on?" And for the first time Arthur could hear a note of genuine fear in his voice – fear of him. "Did you do that?"

Arthur's jaw clenched as he sharply shook his head. Embarrassment and a very old anger burned hot in his veins. "I didn't—don't look at me like that," he snapped, fighting down the urge to deck the other man. He'd rather have Eames angry than afraid of him... or look at him that way.

"Like what, Darling?" Eames reached for his wrist, but Arthur pulled back, turning his head aside to look away.

"It doesn't matter. Just—just get out."

The other man was silent for a moment. Then, "Come with me, Arthur."

His voice was soft, like a man trying to gentle a feral animal. It slid neatly under Arthur's iron control, and something clenched deep inside Arthur's heart. "Why?" he asked, and was ashamed when his voice broke on the word. "So you can watch the sideshow?"

He felt more than heard Eames step closer. The other man touched his jaw, turning his Arthur's head back to him and he could easily see the worried concern in his eyes – and beyond that, Mal looming, nearly over his shoulder.

"Because you're alone," Eames said simply. "I don't think you know how so very alone you are."

He was wrong. Arthur was never alone. That was the problem.

Somehow, he made his voice come out steady. "You need to go."
Eames just looked at him for a long, endless moment. His gentle touch felt hot in the chilled room and when he let his hand fall, it seemed all the colder for it. "Alright, luv. If that's what you want."

He turned to go, but Arthur blurted, "Eames."

Eames looked back, eyebrows raised.

"Don't continue this job," Arthur said. "I have a bad feeling about it."

It wasn't the type of thing he'd normally would have said – the man he'd crafted as Arthur didn't work off of 'feelings'. He worked off of evidence. But Eames nodded, once, his expression sober. As he left, he closed the door quietly behind him.

"Will he be coming back?" piped a voice from the other side of the room. The little girl in the yellow dress had stopped crying some minutes ago and now sat cross legged towards the head of the bed, idly playing with Arthur's totem, rolling the die back and forth on the mattress between her hands.

"No," Arthur said quietly. His hands smoothed his vest again. "I don't think he is."

The girl nodded and got up, completely unconcerned at his mood. She skipped away – vanishing through the door easily as if it weren't there.

Arthur closed his eyes for a moment, gathering himself, then turned towards Mal. "Why?" he asked, curtly.

Mal limped a step closer, intent and focused and so close he could have reached out to touch her. A new drip of blood tracked down her cracked face as she smiled, and Arthur briefly wished he could see her as Dom's projection: still terrible, but physically whole and undamaged. Her voice sounded like the rasp of leaves against concrete. "Because you aren't ready to take this leap. Not yet." Mal looked over her shoulder, back to the window. "Make sure Dom gets out safe, would you Arthur?"

And she was gone.

Arthur waited a moment, breath held, but the room was silent – he was alone in a way that he hardly ever was.

Very, very alone.

To be continued...
Chapter 3

Arthur was helping his stepfather carve the thanksgiving turkey when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket. He quickly excused himself and took the call in his old room, shutting the door on the sounds of happy chatter and warmth of cooking food.

"Wait, what did you say?" he asked.

"They're dead." Dom's voice sounded tinny and his replies came after a delayed second – either a bad or a cheap overseas connection. "Sander's team took the Fellmen job after we pulled out. Word is that someone tipped off the mark and the whole team got shot while they were under."

Everything seemed to freeze at once and fall away – the sounds of his family's conversation coming through the walls, the smell of turkey... it all shrunk, reduced to nothing but a strange kind of roaring in his ears.

"What about Eames?" Arthur rasped.

"Eames?"

"I thought—he mentioned maybe continuing the job after we left."

"No," Dom said, and Arthur exhaled, leaning his forehead against the wall. "The last I heard he was working some kind of con in Kenya."

The relief was so intense that he wasn't sure at first he could make himself speak. He hadn't known – hadn't realized until just then how concerned he had been. But Eames had taken his advice after all. Arthur swallowed.

"We got lucky."

"We did," Dom agreed. Then there was a pause, longer than the delay in the lines could account for. "I know you're with your family, but I think I have another job lined up. When is the earliest you can get to Madrid?"

Faintly, Arthur heard his stepsister's voice echo from down the hall. "Cole! Food's ready!"

"I can catch a plane out tomorrow," he said.

Sorry about the delay. This was one of those irritating transitioning chapters I hate to write (but which are so necessary). Also, there's been a little discussion on my journal on whether we ever see Arthur's projections in the movie. It's still up for debate, but for the purposes of this fic: his projections aren't shown during the Saito/Inception jobs.
He and Dom managed to finish the job this time, but only by the skin of their teeth. It was Mal's doing again – the projection, this time, not the ghost. And later, after it was all done and evidence erased, Arthur shared a flight with Dom from Madrid to Rio. His friend looked at him with red, bloodshot eyes and said, "I don't think I can be an architect anymore."

Arthur glanced sharply at him, but he couldn't find it in himself to protest. His chest still throbbed with phantom pain from at least six different points – something or someone had warned the mark's projections. As a result, Arthur had taken a spray of bullets while covering Dom so he could finish breaking into the safe of their mark's mind.

But Dom knew Arthur had seen Mal's projection creeping around in their dreamscape during the final practice run. It wasn't hard to put two and two together. She'd put them at risk. Again.

"What will you do?" asked Arthur, even though he already knew and was mentally tallying which architects he knew were free and what their specific skill-sets were.

Dom squinted at his drink. "We can hire out for an architect. I know people. I... uh, I think it'll be easier if I don't know the layout of the dream ahead of time."

A woman in a flight attendant's mini-skirt uniform stopped by their seats and stared at the two of them intently. Dom sipped his drink again, not paying her the slightest bit of attention.

"The more I limit myself as the dreamer, the better I can suppress my subconscious projections," Dom went on.

Arthur looked at him, up at the quietly watching attendant for a long moment, and back to Dom again. "Do you think you can suppress Mal?"

He winced. "I have it under control, Arthur."

Arthur said nothing. He didn't need to. Dom's projection of Mal tried to sabotage him at every step while her ghost quietly haunted his footsteps like a dark guardian angel.

And Arthur didn't know how to help him. He was capable of organizing all the details needed for an extraction along with a dozen contingency plans all the while entrenched in a completely foreign country, could shoot the eye out of a crow from a hundred feet away... Hell, he helped the dead find peace on a regular basis.

But he didn't know how to help Dom. He could feel the gulf between them widening more every day, saw how Dom was slowly losing touch with reality – it seemed he had his totem in his hand all the time now as if he were no longer certain what was real.

When it came down to the living, Arthur felt out of his depth.

So he only nodded, and, with a final glance towards still waiting flight attendant, rose and excused himself to the bathroom. She turned to follow – half of the skin on the other side of her face had been scrapped away to show clean white bone underneath.

Arthur led the way to the back of the half-empty plane – the better to hold a conversation with her in private.
Arthur had many reservations about the Fischer job, but only a few days into training their green architect (Their previous, Nash, had not only been a failure, but a turncoat as well) Arthur had to admit that Dom was right about one thing: Ariadne took to dreamsharing like a fish to water.

Dom had already explained the basics to her, so Arthur thought he would introduce the concept of illusionary dimensions within dreams. This resulted in a pleasant hour dreaming with her of penrose steps. After they woke, he showed her an example of a Penrose triangle – first sketching it in neat, efficient lines on draft paper.

"In reality these lines aren't able to match up," he said, circling one side of the triangle where the marks ran into one another. "But in a dream you won't be constrained by those bounds. The illusion becomes the reality."

Ariadne tilted her head, idly pulling her hair from her neck as she gazed down at the drawing. Then she nodded. "I think I understand."

If this were anyone else, he would have a hard time believing it. But just a few minutes ago she had somehow wrestled the dream from his control and built for him a dreamscape consisting entirely of penrose staircases. They had then spent a very enjoyable hour walking steps which never ended, each turn taking them to a brand new, wholly original landscapes; everything from sweeping deserts to busy cities.

Arthur was starting to think that when it came to Ariadne, anything was possible.

Even better, there were no ghosts which haunted her steps. The last day or so without Dom – and Mal – had been surprisingly… peaceful.

He gestured to the waiting PASIV device. "Shall we?"

She started to nod then hesitated, looking at him curiously. "Whenever we go under, I'm always the dreamer. We only see my projections."

Arthur paused, surprised. "Ah." She had picked up on that little fact rather quickly, too. "Well, you've already met Cobb's subconscious projections."

"... Yes?"

He smiled, but could not quite meet her gaze. "It's important to learn how to manage your own subconscious. You're still a new dreamer and it's easier if you get used to this in your own mind, first, so parts of your subconscious never accidentally break through when you're in others dreams."

Again, she started to nod, but then her eyes narrowed. "But... we will go into your mind later, right?"

"Probably not," he admitted with a small, forced smile.

She looked at him oddly, head slightly cocked as if he were a puzzle she was trying to solve. Maybe she was weighing the possibility that he was as crazy as Cobb. But he much preferred that to weariness or outright fear – those, he'd seen as well, the first time he had dream-shared with Mal: his subconscious, his secrets, had been thrown into vivid clarity.

Since then, he had learned to take precautions.
He handed Ariadne the PASIV’s IV line. The one set for the dreamer. "For now we need to focus on your training. Cobb will be returning with our team's forger in a few days and you need to be ready."

Ariadne took the lead from him reluctantly. "Fine, but when this is all over I want to see what's in that head of yours."

He smiled again and this time it came easier. "We'll see."

*****

Arthur was busying himself with revising schedule – neat lines detailing dreaming schedules and combat training exercises for Ariadne (if there was time) into his favorite moleskin notebook. A soft sound made him glance up.

The girl in the yellow dress sat on the floor a few feet in front of him. Seeing her, Arthur carefully set down his pen and closed the notebook. If she was here, Eames wouldn't be far behind. It seemed Dom had been successful in securing a forger after all.

The girl looked up curiously. "Are you waiting, too?"

Arthur started to shake his head, then thought better of it, glancing over his shoulder to make sure he would be unheard. But Ariadne was bent over a drafting board on the other side of the warehouse.

"No, this is where I come to work." A pause. "Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

He wasn't sure she would be in a speaking mood, but it seemed today was a good day. The girl gave him an irritated look. "Daddy says we must be quiet when there's company over."

"Why?"

Ariadne's voice drifted from the other side of the warehouse. "Arthur? Did you say something?"

"No," he called back.

The girl shushed him with a finger to her lips, looking scandalized. "If I'm not quiet I won't get any ice-cream," she said. Her head abruptly twisted around – too far, nearly double on her back to look over her shoulder. She hissed, "Do you hear that?"

There was nothing audible except for the distant whoosh of traffic and Ariadne muttering to herself as she drew mazes.

The girl's eyes went wide. "That's daddy!" she said. "He's hurt... they're hurting him!" She rose to her feet, turned as if to run, and was gone.

Arthur stared at after her, unsure if she was only reliving the moment of her death, or... something even worse. He only weighed his options for a moment before deciding that caution had better take precedence. With a small sigh, Arthur pulled his cell from his pocket.

He and Dom had agreed on radio-silence because, while the phones were temporary and hard to trace, Cobol Engineering was no doubt gunning for their heads. They were only supposed to be used in case of emergency.

Please just let it be that she was only just remembering, Arthur thought as he punched in the number.

Dom's voice came over the line, rough with exhaustion. "Yeah?" Then, a little sharper as he realized
who was calling, "Is everything alright?"

"We're fine," Arthur said, tersely. "You?"

"We just landed about forty-five minutes ago. We're stuck in traffic and should be there in an hour." Dom didn't mention any names over the phone – that would have been far too risky, but the 'we' confirmed he had at least picked up Eames.

The tension eased suddenly from Arthur's shoulders and he braced his weight against the desk with his free hand. "I... uh, one of my contacts said there might be trouble," he said, into the silence. "Stay on guard."

"I don't think we have to worry too much about that." Dom's voice was a mix of wry amusement and carefully veiled frustration. "I picked up a few more guests on the way."

"A chemist?"

"Mmm. And a tourist."

Arthur frowned, but there was only so much he could say on these lines. "Be careful," he said again and hung up.

Eames was coming.

Letting out a long breath, Arthur straightened the rolled cuffs along his sleeves out of reflex, checking to make sure they were even. He didn't want Eames to come, had tried to talk Dom out of it.

Like trying to talk Dom out of anything had ever worked.

But Dom had been right. They needed a good forger to have any chance at making this work. It was only that Eames represented an unknown quantity – he had seen a glimpse of Arthur's secret.

"I don't think you know how so very alone you are," Eames had said, and he listened to Arthur's advice, not recoiled from it.

He was coming. He would be here soon.

The air around him felt chill and Arthur automatically looked around for signs of a Presence, but found nothing. The cold, he realized, was all his own.

*****

Eames was watching him again.

Even if Arthur didn't have a sixth sense he couldn't ignore the prickles on the back of his neck whenever the other man looked at him when he thought Arthur wouldn't notice. Especially when Eames set up his workstation with his back to Arthur's desk – photos of Browning and mirrors set up to all angles to allow Eames to practice. And if it happened to allow the forger to watch Arthur as he worked on his laptop... well. That was only coincidence, wasn't it?

Arthur was aware of a heavy tension in the air: thick and cloying, and for once having nothing to do with the spiritual presences in the room.

Certainly, Eames acted normally around him – he joked and flirted shamelessly with Arthur, but now
there was something else hidden behind his eyes. A new wariness, maybe. A sense of waiting.

Arthur stared at his laptop, looking but not seeing. Distantly, he could hear Cobb going over dream-theory with Ariadne and beyond that, the echo of a little girl's laughter.

He was so tired.

The hair on his neck prickled and on impulse Arthur twisted in his chair. He locked gazes with Eames for a long moment, in the reflection of the mirror. The other man paused then, quite deliberately went through the motions of adjusting a phantom tie, smoothing a vest that wasn't there – one of Arthur's own tells.

Poking at him.

He'd had enough. In one smooth, tight movement, Arthur stood and strode over to the other desk. Eames didn't turn to him, didn't even flinch when Arthur reached around and slammed his hand over a picture of Browning, leaning over to hiss in Eames' ear. "What do you think you're doing?"

To his credit, Eames didn't flinch. "Practicing, darling." Their gazes met again in the mirror. "Is something the matter?"

"You're watching me," Arthur said, flatly.

Eames didn't even try to deny it. "Can't fault a man for that. You are rather easy on the eyes."

The mirrors made it impossible for Arthur to miss the slight flush of red staining his throat. He was aware, suddenly, how close he was to Eames – nearly pressing the forger against the desk, breathing down the other man's neck.

"Knock it off," Arthur said, shortly. "You were hired to forge Browning. Not to –" he almost said 'flirt with me,' but instead said, "You need to focus on your job."

He was about to pull away, maybe plug himself in with Ariadne and see how her mazes were progressing, but Eames's next, quiet words stopped him. "Maybe I'm just looking for something extraordinary to happen." He turned forcing Arthur to take a step back. "Or am I going to have to irritate you into throwing another window blind at me?"

Arthur's jaw worked for a moment, several answers on the tip of his tongue, but the only thing that came out was, "That wasn't my doing." Which was mostly true.

Eames's eyebrows lifted, but when Arthur didn't provide further explanation he said, "Taking your advice saved my life, you know."

"You were going to go in with Sander's team."

"Not after you told me not too."

There was that look in Eames's eyes again and Arthur realized he had mistaken it – maybe seeing only what he wanted to see. There was wariness there, yes, but also… Eames was looking at him almost fondly.

Arthur abruptly felt warm all over and he shook his head, taking another step back to put more comfortable distance between them. The urge to flee, to find some sort of sanctuary and hide himself away was surprisingly strong. Arthur forced it back, his expression a neutral blank. He was not a child anymore. He could no longer afford to run away from what frightened him.
"It was just common sense," he said, adding, "You should try it some time Mr. Eames."

Eames grinned. "Maybe you're just my good luck charm, dove."

He was a professional and professionals did not roll their eyes, even if they very much wanted to. Instead, Arthur went to his desk and returned with a thick file. "Here's the latest intel I was able to dig up last night on Fischer-Morrow." He didn't wait for Eames' answer, placing the folder on the desk and starting to turn away, but then paused. Eames had almost gone in with Sander's team. It had been close. Any closer and he might be speaking to Eames's ghost right now.

"I'm glad you listened to me," Arthur said, quietly, not meeting his eyes.

Eames's answer was both obnoxious and completely true to form. "Darling, I'll always listen to you. Just say the word."


Arthur awoke, his body languid and heavy from Yusuf's sedatives, his mind still buzzing from a week of dreamtime in Fischer's head. He shifted, feeling a sharp kink in his neck from sleeping at an angle and his eyes fell automatically to Dom.

Mal's ghost stood over her husband, running her fingers through his hair. She bent to whisper something Arthur couldn't quite catch. Then kissed him once on each cheek. She looked at Arthur. For one moment the slanting late afternoon light glinted in her dark hair, almost giving her depth and substance… as if she were alive again.

And Arthur knew, from the sad acceptance in her eyes, that she had been saying goodbye.

"You will watch over him, won't you?" the ghost whispered, sounding so much like herself, sane, and the Mal he used to know that it hurt. "He doesn't need me any more."

"I will," he said.

She turned one last time to gaze at Dom who was starting to move, fighting he way out of sleep… and was gone.

Arthur blinked several times, lifting a hand to his suddenly wet eyes – and caught Eames watching him quietly.

The forger offered a small smile and reached across the aisle to lay a hand on Arthur's knee, briefly.

Eames couldn't have known the truth, of course. He must have thought Arthur was only worried about Dom. But for one shared moment as Dom came back to himself and glanced hurriedly around, clearly confused (but looking sane), Arthur let himself pretend that Eames did.

****

Arthur stuck around LAX long enough to make sure Dom wasn't about to be hauled off in handcuffs before he caught a shuttle to his hotel. Once safely in his room, he set his black leather boarding-bag to the side, carefully removed and hung his coat, and promptly flopped backwards onto the large bed.
They had completed inception – the first time anyone on record had done it.

Lacing his fingers behind his head, Arthur stared up at the ceiling, letting it all wash over him. Everything would be changing after this, both professionally and personally. Dom had said he was out. Inception was now proven possible. Arthur himself would be in demand more than ever, but without a team he—

A rapid knock at the door startled him out of his thoughts. Arthur sat up with a start, reaching automatically for his gun before remembering it was laying in disassembled parts within his bag. It better not be Ariadne. He had been careful to explain the importance of no contact with the rest of the team for at least seventy-two hours following a job.

But before Arthur could rise and look through the peep-hole, a man appeared out of nowhere, walking from the closed door as if he had just come through it. He was about Arthur's age, built thin and sallow with a crop of coppery hair in untidy curls about his head. There was also a single bullet-hole just over his left eye.

Arthur lowered his weapon. Obviously, he wouldn't need it. "Sanders?" he asked, in disbelief. The man had died in Johannesburg. How did he get all the way to California?

The ghost's eyes were vague and confused and he lurching step to the side as if he were having trouble with his balance.

"Arthur," he gasped. "You have to help me, mate. My team is still down there."

Arthur let out a long breath which became visible in the suddenly chill air. "You're not dreaming, Sanders," he muttered, and scrubbed at his face with his free hand. "Can this wait? I've had a long day."

The temperature dropped what felt like ten degrees in seconds. "Two fucking levels... but I missed the kick." Sanders insisted, listing towards the window.

He had the feeling he wasn't going to get any peace until he was satisfied. "What did you want to tell me?" Arthur asked, half-heartedly.

"I went too far down. My point-man's not like you. He couldn't stop them and... they're coming... they're coming! You have to wake me up, goddamnit! It's not us they wanted!"

That got Arthur's attention. He was mentally exhausted – a week of solid dreamtime will do that to a man --, but there was no excuse for not making the connection until now. "You followed the people who killed you," he breathed. Most ghosts stuck to what they knew – where they had lived, where they had died. A minority, like Mal and the girl in the yellow dress, hovered around those who had been close to them. An even smaller percentage followed those who were responsible for their deaths.

Then again, Sander's had been a stubborn son of a bitch.

"Who are they looking for?" Arthur asked, throat dry.

Sander's eyes focused upon him, looking lucid for the first time. "You, mate. They want Cobb's whole team."

"Shit," Arthur said, and threw himself at his briefcase in search of his gun.

He knew Ariadne was also staying at this hotel – Arthur may have a policy of no contact, but he still
made a point of knowing where everyone was at all times. As the closest and most vulnerable, he would go to her first.

Sander reached out to Arthur as he walked by, but Arthur ignored him. Bag in hand, he opened the door and peered down the halls: no one was in sight. Not even a housekeeping cart. There took the stairway down, feeling a distinct sense of déjà-vu.

He firmly kept in mind that there were no paradoxes to save him this time around.

Ariadne's room was on the third floor and Arthur got there just as two men in dour, funeral-style black suits knocked on her door.

"Hey," Arthur said, and threw his boarding-bag at the closest man as he turned. "Catch."

The man did, on instinct, and Arthur punched him in the jaw, putting his entire weight behind the blow. The man's head snapped back and he crumpled, but the other suit was withdrawing his gun. Arthur threw himself at him – sloppy and desperate, but knowing that if that weapon was pulled he'd be dead.

The man caught him with a fist to the stomach. Arthur, though, had been ready for it – expecting worse – and clung on, dragging the other man down to the floor with him. And there, it became a mad, eerily silent, wrestling match.

Dimly, Arthur heard Ariadne's door open and her surprised gasp, but Arthur had gotten behind the assassin, his elbow under his thick neck in a lock. Within a few moments, it was over.

Arthur pushed the other man's weight off him and looked up to see Ariadne patting down the first man, straightening back up with a sleek gun in hand.

That was Ariadne. Always thinking ahead.

Sitting up, Arthur nodded towards the would-be assassins. "Help me get them in your room."

She did, a bit wide-eyed, but thankfully quiet until they had dragged both unconscious men into bathroom closed the door. Arthur searched the second man and found his gun, taking it for his own.

"Are they Fischer's men?" Ariadne breathed, fear in her voice. "Does he know?"

"No. This was something else – another job Cobb and I worked on a few months ago." And she had been pulled in. Guilty by association. Damnit.

Arthur heard a scuffling sound behind him, and whipped around: it was the little girl in the yellow dress. She stood by Ariadne with tears running down her eyes. "Daddy said I have to stay out of sight when there's company over," she said. "We have to be quiet."

"… Arthur?" Ariadne asked, noticing his sudden stillness.

He shook his head and turned away from the ghost. He didn't have time for this now. "Get your things," he told Ariadne. "Whoever hired these two will send reinforcements soon if they don't hear from them, and we need to be gone."

She nodded and stepped to the side of the bed where a simple wheeled luggage-cart lay half-resting against the dresser. "What about Eames?"

"Do you hear that?" the girl asked.
He ignored her in favor of pulling out his phone and thumbing quickly through the contacts. "He and Yusuf are staying in the Hilton down the street. It's our next stop."

"No," said Ariadne. "I just saw him in the lobby – he was getting a room."

Arthur looked sharply at her and jumped when small icy-cold fingers curled about his own. He glanced down, meeting little girl's eyes. She was still crying, but there was something else – her eyes were older than they should have been. Full of a knowing fear. "Help him. Cole… please, you have to help him!"

He looked away. "Did you hear a room number, Ariadne?" he asked, tersely.

She shook her head. "No."

Jaw clenching (and firmly ignoring the way the girl was shaking his hand now – she was attached with a desperate strength wouldn't let go.) he placed a call to Eames' cell. It rang several times before going straight to voice mail.

Eames always picked up, if the call was from him.

"You have to help him! They're hurting him!" the girl wailed.

"So what do we do now?" Ariadne asked, oblivious. Then, "Arthur?"

It was too much. "I'm trying!" he growled. "Give me a minute." And tried to yank his hand away from the ghost, but she was stronger than she looked.

Ariadne stared at him. "Are you all right?"

His jaw clenched. "Yes."

"They're hurting him!" the girl shrieked. "You have to do something!"

It was too much. Just too much. He didn't know where Eames was – didn't know if he was somehow involved in the appearance of the assassins. His options were limited at best. They were running out of time and...

"Damnit," Arthur whispered, and then did something he had never done before – not in the presence of others. He looked down at the ghost and said, "Do you know where he is? Or are you just remembering how you died?"

The girl shook her head, but backed a step, eyes wide and looking stricken. Oddly, Ariadne had much the same expression. "…What are you doing?"

Arthur glanced at her, opened his mouth, but he couldn't really find the words. "One minute," he said instead, then got on his knees to be eye-level with the girl. "Do you know where your daddy is?" he asked, voice quiet and something in his chest clenching. Because it was true – a secret he had not allowed himself to see.

Chin trembling, the girl nodded.

He swallowed. "Can you show me?"

"Arthur?" Ariadne said again, voice higher as Arthur reached his hand out, palm up. The girl put her fingers in his. It felt like trying to hold a breath of wind – the hair on his arm stood instantly on-end.
He stood to face Ariadne, knowing how he must look, what she must think of him. "I'm sorry," he said, watching her eyes flick to him and to what must look like empty space at his side and back again. "I don't have time to explain this now, but I will. Ariadne," he said, a little sharper when she took a breath to interrupt or ask dangerous questions. "I'm going after Eames, but the rest of the team is still in trouble." He tossed her his cell phone. "Yusuf's at the Hilton, room five-two-six. Call him ahead and warn him. Cobb, too."

She shook her head, but more out of shock, it seemed, than anything else. With her free hand she reached into her jacket pocket and withdrew her totem, staring at it intently. It must have matched up to what she knew because when she looked at him again, there was a measure of consideration in her eyes. "You... never allowed me to see your subconscious." It wasn't a question.

"I promise you I'm not crazy," Arthur said, intently. "I just... see things differently than most people. But we don't have time – I don't think Eames has time."

Ariadne drew in a shaky breath. "Okay," she said, and pocketed both totem the phone. "But when this is all over...."

"I'll tell you everything," he promised quickly.

They left the room in opposite directions: she towards the elevator, and he to the stairs with the little girl in tow.

****

The girl in the yellow dress stopped him once they had reached the third floor with a breathy, "Here," and Arthur straightened the best he could while keeping her hand in his.

There was something different about her now -- aware and looking about the hotel decor with curiosity, just like a regular little girl. Almost alive in the way Mal's ghost had sometimes seemed almost alive. It started when Arthur held her hand, and a clinical part of him wondered if there was some sort of connection there. And if it would leave if when he let go.

He'd always resisted touching them before, because they could and had hurt him. He didn't even remember if he had ever held Dr. Crowe's hand.

Most of Arthur's attention, however, was on Eames -- his heart alternately in his throat or feeling like it was sinking to his shoes. If Arthur had paused to think about it, he'd would have realized that he was closer to panic here than he ever had been during the Fischer job, with the threat of limbo hanging over his head.

No, all he could think of as he power-walked down the empty hotel hallways, gun in one hand and trailing a ghost on the other, was that he couldn't wind up talking Eames's ghost, too. He just couldn't. It would break him.

And if Eames was somehow involved with the men who were coming after the team... Arthur would strangle him, himself.

The girl tugged at the hem of his vest. "In there," she whispered, pointing to a room directly to the side. "In there," she repeated, and then she was simply gone, leaving Arthur's fingers cold and empty.

Carefully, stalked forward to put his ear against the door. He heard low voices -- two of them and male. There was a pause, and a third voice: Arthur couldn't make out the words, but identified the
cadence as Eames. Then a solid thump of something heavy hitting the floor.

Arthur checked his gun, noted the rounds left, and, after stepping to the side to avoid being seen by the peep-hole, he knocked twice.

There was a lengthy pause before the door opened.

Arthur caught the first dourly-suited man square in the nose with the heel of his palm. There was a sickening crunch, and the men fell back with a shout.

He shot the second in the face from six feet away.

Everything after that seemed to happen so fast Arthur only caught bits of it in snatches, like a strobe-light blinking on and off in his head.

There were two men in black suits in the room: one elbow deep in Eames's duffel-bag, the other rising from the cheap hotel-room table.

Eames stared at Arthur from the floor, his bottom lip bloodied and his hands pulled behind his back.

A sudden, half-noticed shadow from the side -- a third man?

A flash of white cloth too close to Arthur's face to dodge... and there was the noxious, sharp scent of chemicals.

And then nothing.

****
Another day, another unused, out of the way warehouse to research and plan the next job. After carefully setting up his work space, plugging in his laptop and making sure everything was ergonomically correct, Arthur opened up the dossier to give a cursory read-through on their mark.

Something about the mark's name, however, niggled in his mind. He turned to Eames who was sprawled out on a lawn chair, reading through his own folder. "Haven't you extracted on Ira Rudig before?"

"I don't believe so." But Arthur saw his brows furrow as he glanced around towards other two team members: the extractor, Soong, and a young female architect who hadn't been introduced. "I can't remember."

"Is this a dream?" Arthur asked, and it should have sounded ridiculous to his own ears, but the feeling that something was off was growing by the minute. A seed of an idea, now taking root.

Eames frowned at him, but reached into his pocket and withdrew a worn poker-chip. He brought it up, eyebrows furrowed as he studied it intently. "No..." but there was a question in the tone. "It seems we are awake."

Arthur peered around the warehouse. Everything was in place. Everything was as it should be. But for the life of him, he couldn't remember how he had got there.

"I don't think we are," Arthur said, and before Eames could react he withdrew his gun and shot him once between the eyes before he turned it on himself.

"I told you... remember when I told you how this business can be unforgiving?" Eames gave a chuckle that turned into a wet, racking cough as he curled up in the passenger seat, the life bleeding out of him.

"Don't talk," Arthur said. He pressed down harder on the gas petal, but car's little engine was roaring already. If he pushed the transmission any harder, it could burn out completely and leave them stranded.

Even with Eames bleeding from at least four different gunshot wounds, they couldn't afford to find a doctor. *They* would find them if they did.

"Don't stop," Eames told him, echoing his thoughts. A trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. "It'll be all right, darling. I'll be all right..."
Arthur racked his brains for an answer, a clue. "I know you will. Just... hang on, okay? I'll get you out of here." They were running. They had to run because if they were caught...

The road ahead of them was of bleak red desert. It stretched for miles without in every direction and as Eames' breath became shorter and shallower, all he could think of was that it wasn't right...

Eames gave a sigh at the very last of it, and the world seemed to fracture in a million pieces all at once like a broken mirror. And as Arthur drove his car off of an abyss that had not been there a moment before, he realized that this, too, had been a dream.

Arthur screamed, the sound ripping his throat like ground-glass. He twisted, thrashed, but the pain wouldn't stop. It wouldn't-it wouldn't-it wouldn't-it-

"Stop it!" a voice outside of him yelled. "I'll tell you everything... Oh God... Arthur, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"We could try the Mr. Charles gambit," Soong the extractor suggested, flipping tapping the dossier in front of him. "Arthur has some experience with that. Don't you?"

All eyes in the meeting room turned towards him. Arthur blinked and glanced down at the thick folder of files in front of him. It was a team organization – everyone was here, everyone was waiting.

"I..." his eyes flicked around the room, landing on Eames who was flipping through his own dossier, his brows knit slightly.

"Arthur?" Soong prompted and Arthur started.

"Yes." He cleared his throat and turned his mind to the present. "But it's not my preferred method."

"Doesn't it involve telling the mark that he's dreaming?" Eames asked. He had an odd expression on his face and his eyes darted around the room and back to the folder in his lap as if he wasn't sure, exactly, what he was doing there, either.

Soong leaned forward in his chair. "Who did you do it to?" he asked.

Arthur shook his head, not answering, and glanced around. Something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but, something...

"Did it work?" Soong asked, intently.

Arthur started to answer, then hesitated. Through the back window he could see a pair of window washers maneuvering their platform down to their level. They were in a high-rise building – Arthur never conducted business in such a public location. Too risky.

What the hell was going on?

The others turned, following his gaze, and when the washer on the left swung into view, Soong let out a surprised yelp.

The window washer's head was caved in on one side, dark hair matted with blood and his eye socket smashed to a vertical slit. He was clearly not alive. And everyone could see him.
This was a dream

Arthur whipped around. "Eames!"

But the forger was already one step ahead of him and had his gun already out. Arthur saw a flash of the muzzle, and then—

Arthur woke to the sound of a little girl's quiet sobbing.

"What the FUCK was that?"

Soong erupted from his reclined chair, looking ready to snort fire. He stalked over to where Arthur lay, bound hand and foot upon the floor. Fisting a handful of his hair, he tipped his head painfully up.

"Why the hell are you dreaming of zombies? You sick freak. You think this is a game?" He shook Arthur, eliciting a grunt of pain. "Huh? Do you?"

"Maybe... it means... I'm just not afraid of death," Arthur rasped, dredging up his smuggest sneer.

Soong punched him hard in the stomach and dropped him, leaving Arthur wheezing.

Across dirty, dark shed Eames was in a similar position: bound and hooked up to a PASIV line. Unlike Arthur, though, he had been gagged. Soong and his gang of piss-poor extractors had quickly gotten tired of his running mouth.

The girl in the yellow dress sat by Eames, knees pulled up to her chest and crying, "Let him go. Let him go..."

Eames didn't react, only stared at Arthur and not in his daughter's direction at all. That was all the confirmation Arthur needed that they were truly, without a doubt, awake. Soong had taken their totems – those could not longer be trusted.

Arthur still had his ace up his sleeve, though. With the knowledge that only he knew – no one else could see ghosts, they had yet to break into his mind.

Not like they finally had with Eames.

"This isn't working," one of Soong's people, the woman architect, said. "He's still able to tell when he's dreaming. Those freaky projections must be reflecting that."

"It's time to stop playing nice," Soong growled and marched over to a desktop, grabbing something shiny and metallic. It was a syringe filled with amber liquid. "You see this?" he said, waiving it in Eames' face. "This is a sedative. If you try to shoot your little boyfriend out of the dream again, it'll drop his ass straight into limbo. Got it?"

Eames glared death up at him, but Soong snorted, uncaring, and walked over to Arthur.

Shit, Arthur thought. He tried to struggle, but whoever had tied the ropes did a good job. He couldn't even feel his feet. "Hey," he said, as Soong grabbed his arm. "Hey, aren't you even going to sanitize that?"

Soong only smirked as he jabbed the needle viciously into the muscle of Arthur's arm.
He felt the effects almost immediately – a hazy, disconnected lethargy which ran through his veins. Arthur felt himself start to slump to one side and couldn't find the energy to pick himself back up again.

The girl's crying suddenly seemed loud in his ears along with Soong's voice as he said, "I don't care if you come back more insane than Dom Cobb. I'll drop you down to limbo again – as many times as I need before I get what I want. Do you understand?"

*You get what you want from me and there's no reason to keep us alive,* Arthur thought, or might have said... everything was fuzzy and indistinct. He was asleep before Soong engaged the PASIV again.

Arthur became aware of his surroundings slowly: his body heavy and comfortably warm. He could hear soft breathing right beside him, the weight of a body against his own, and realized that he was laying with another – close and slotted together like lovers.

"All right Arthur?" Eames' voice asked.

Arthur nodded. He didn't have the energy to move or untuck his head from where he knew he rested, right at the juncture of Eames' shoulder. It had to be the sedative, he realized, but couldn't find it in himself to care.

Eames' fingers trailed through his hair. "What do you remember?"

Arthur sighed. "Everything." Too many dreams to count. Useless totems... The pain when Eames had not given them what they wanted.

Sighing again, Arthur forced his body into action. It was like trying to wade through hip-deep mud. He opened his eyes and was irritated to find he had been nosing against Eames' salmon pink and green shirt.

Eames smiled down at him, fond and sad. "And you remember why you mustn't die down here?"

"Yes. I'm not a child," he grumbled, and Eames' warm chuckle seemed to reverberate through his body.

Arthur wanted this moment to last. He wanted to lay there warm and safe until the PASIV’s timer ran out. But they weren't safe, and he had to get up – had to get moving because right now, when extractors were in his head, all of his carefully hidden secrets were laid out, waiting to be picked through.

First things first.

Arthur shifted himself up and fistilled Eames' god-awful shirt. He didn't have to look around to know where he was – the figure of the Virgin Mary sitting by their nest of blankets had a heavy base. He could probably bludgeon the other man to death with it. Probably.

His lips brushed against Eames' ear as he breathed, "Prove yourself to me."

He felt, more than saw the other man's lips curl slightly, and then it was Eames who moved, erasing the small distance between their bodies so that they were pressed chest to chest, hip to hip, leg to leg. Eames dipped his head and whispered against Arthur's lips. "That night I came to your hotel – all the best intentions, I might add – you threw a window blind at me ... without using your hands."
Arthur jerked back, narrowing his eyes. "I didn't throw it at you."

"It came open by itself, did it?" Eames grinned obnoxiously at him, but there was no more doubt. It was Eames. And he could tell in the amused glint in the other man's eye that Arthur had proven himself to him as well, by simple virtue of arguing back.

"Where are we?" Eames asked, taking in the sheets strung above them in a child's tent-fort. His gaze fell to the stolen religious statues, the candles.

Arthur had to fight the urge to close his eyes again. As a child, he had hidden in his hallway tent-fort when he needed a place to hide. It wasn't a surprise that his subconscious would bring him back here.

"My sanctuary," he said.

From what sounded like a few rooms away Arthur heard his mother call out. "Time to wake up! Breakfast is in ten minutes."

"Alright, Ma. I'm up," Arthur called back, then groaned when Eames grinned at him.

"We're in your childhood home? How utterly charming," he said, reaching over to pick up a statue of the Suffering Christ. "I didn't know you're Catholic."

"I'm not. The priest in the church near was too blind to catch me stealing," he muttered, lying back against the nest of pillows to stare up at the tent ceiling. "I can't remember what Soong and his team want." Too many dreams, too many scenarios where he thought what was real, wasn't, and he was so, so tired.

Eames sobered. Replacing the statue, he laid back down next to him. "I don't honestly know their endgame," he said. "Soong wanted a client list from me." He grimaced slightly, "However, when I finally gave them the information, they weren't satisfied."

The memories were fuzzy at best – that, Arthur knew, was a blessing – but it was enough to put two and two together. "They tortured me," he said. "That's when you told them."

"Yes."

Arthur rolled onto his side to face him. "You shouldn't have done that – you knew it was a dream. It wasn't real."

Eames' eyes flashed. "Yes, well since it worked so well the first time, I expect they'll try the same thing again when they catch up to us. So do try to remember that when it's me they're dripping acid onto, yeah?"

"This isn't a joke," Arthur snapped. "We're in my childhood home, my subconscious. They're probably somewhere in town, reading me like a book. They won't need to find us."

"Surely, you're militarized..."

Arthur looked away. "You need at least two people to militarize a mind. I don't allow people into my subconscious."

"But, those zombie projections—" Eames broke off when he saw the grim truth in Arthur's face.

"It doesn't matter," Arthur said sitting up and raising the corner of sheet that served a doorway to the
fort. "We need to get out of here and find my head of security." He paused to glance back over his shoulder. "Whatever you see, just… stay calm, okay?"

Eames looked uneasy. "Darling, you're starting to frighten me a bit."

"They used to frighten me, too," Arthur admitted, and held the sheet open wide enough to let them both out.

The hallway was smaller than Arthur remembered, or, more likely, he was taller. He and his mother had moved out of this town house when he was fourteen, when she had married his stepfather. It felt odd to walk there again and glance at framed photos that were set impossibly high up towards the ceiling – as if the proportions of his subconscious couldn't quite gel actual memory with his adult-sized body.

Eames stuck close behind him, his expression cautious but not overtly concerned. That would change, Arthur feared, and shortly.

Pausing in front of the door to the kitchen, he took a quick calming breath before pushing it open.

He had been half afraid his own projection of Mal would be there waiting for them, or worse, the girl in the yellow dress. But the room was empty of ghosts, save for a balding man in a long over-coat who sat with his hands folded on the table.

"I had a feeling you would want to speak with me," the man said, calmly.

"You're right." Arthur stepped aside to let Eames in and gestured to him. "Eames, this is Doctor Crowe."

"Doctor?" Eames's eyebrows lifted and he looked over the other man carefully as they shook hands. "MD, or…?"

Crowe smiled mildly. "PhD of child psychology."

Eames turned back to Arthur. "You have your old therapist as your subconscious security?"

"You have a problem with that?" Arthur asked.

"It's just a surprise, really." Eames shrugged. "I was expecting someone more along the lines of Arnold Schwarzenegger or the man from Die Hard."

A woman bustled into the kitchen as he spoke, her hair put up in rollers and tugging a ratty pink bathrobe around herself. She crossed the small room and went immediately to the cabinets, opening each one of them in turn. Arthur ignored her and hoped that Eames would follow his example.

"How are you?" Crowe asked, watching him carefully.

Arthur had to resist the urge to rub at his eyes. The sedative made it feel like he was wearing lead weights on each of his limbs. "I've been better," he admitted. "There are other dreamers lurking around in my mind. Can you tell where they are?"

"No," Crowe said. "But you may receive some protection by the very nature of your projections. They are… pricklier than most." He smiled, then fixed Arthur was a direct look. "I think it would be a good idea to tell Eames your secret."

"Tell me what?" Eames began, then jumped as the woman in the bathrobe abruptly slammed down
an unopened box of pop-tarts in front of Arthur.

"No," she growled, her head swiveling at an unnatural angle towards Eames. "Dinner is not ready."

Eames' mouth opened to reply, and then visibly halted as his eyes fell to the sight of long, vertical lines gouged deeply into the woman's wrists. They still bled, sluggishly.

Arthur shook his head at him, making the cut-off gesture. Mrs. Morris was a particularly troubled ghost on her bad days.

"You're a horrible husband, Larry," Mrs. Morris said, and stood with barely a glance towards Arthur. "Eat your pop-tarts, and no complaining. We'd have more food on the table if your father would get his lazy ass up and worked instead of drinking away all of the bill-money." And she threw another venomous glare to Eames before she shuffled out.

Arthur let out a long sigh as he got up from the table, replacing the pop-tarts back in the cupboard and quietly closing each of the open drawers. "I don't see what would be the point," he said, returning back to the conversation as if nothing had happened. "It's only a matter of time that Soong and his team find us here. We need to have a plan."

"I'm thinking more in terms of your long term mental health," Crowe answered. "Aside from your mother, Mal was the only person you could confide in, and her death affected you more than I think you know. You need to have someone close that you trust."

Arthur paused, a hand on the cupboard as to his utter mortification he felt tears start to prick behind his eyes. He shook his head, trying to will them away: it had to be the sedative fucking with his emotions.

"Mal found out on accident," he said. "And I never told her everything."

Eames held up his hand as if he were a student in school. "I'm also concerned with your continued mental health and the team of extractors trying to run us down, but could we back up a bit?" He looked to Crowe. "Was that woman who came in earlier his mother?"

Crowe gave him a politely puzzled look. "Who?"

"Don't bother. They can't see each other," Arthur muttered as he returned to the table.

He rubbed at the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. "They only see what they want to see."

"They?" Eames asked, looking between them.

Arthur didn't reply. He didn't want to have to go through this again, and knew what would happen: the coming denial, the look Eames would certainly give him... Like he was crazy. A freak. Mal had been the only one aside from his mother who had known, but she was dead and now even her ghost most likely was gone as well. Ariadne may have guessed his secret, but Arthur didn't feel the same connection with her as he did with Eames.

"Cole," Crowe said, gently. "If the worst should happen, he doesn't deserve to be blindsided."

Which was a point. If the girl in the yellow dress were to show up...

Arthur raised his eyes to meet Eames' curious gaze. "Those projections you've seen... the people who are injured and who don't act normally? Those aren't zombies."

"Oh?" Eames' face betrayed nothing.

"I see ghosts," he said.

Eames started to smile, then stopped. A flicker of uncertainty in his light eyes. "You're putting me on."

Arthur slowly shook his head.

"You mean you dream of ghosts?" Eames asked. He looked towards Crowe as if seeking assistance. "You're seeing shades in your dreams like how Cobb did with Mal?"

"No, they aren't those kind of projections." Arthur paused, trying to find the best way to explain this, but his throat was suddenly thick. "I've always been able to see them. Every day. These projections," he gestured around to the room, to Crowe and the direction where Mrs. Morris had gone, "are a reflection of that."

"Right now," Crowe said, speaking up when Eames said nothing, "you're probably thinking he's suffering from a mental illness— schizophrenia or hallucinations. I can tell you he's not."

Eames turned to him, an easy target to vent at. "And I'm to take your word for it, seeing you're a psychologist?" he asked, voice clipped. He didn't wait for Crowe to respond Arthur. "Darling… You're the last person I would have ever expected to tell me something like this."

"Don't you think that was the point?" Arthur demanded.

Eames let out another long breath, and nodded to himself, fingers twitching as if he didn't know what to do with him. "Right, so I guess that solves that question. Your mind is not militarized, but in fact occupied by spirits of the dead you commonly see while awake. Is there anything else while we're at it?"

"You see?" Arthur asked Crowe, "We're wasting time with this." And it hurt that Eames didn't believe him, but what did he expect?

"Arthur—" Eames began, then changed track with a glance to Crowe. "He called you Cole, yes?"

"Cole Arthur Sear," Crowe confirmed. He seemed more or less unconcerned with the turn of events, but then again, psychologists usually didn't take sides in couples arguments.

Eames gave a nod. "Cole," he said, voice stronger. "Please understand that I'm concerned. We've been through a lot recently, and you especially."

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Arthur said, clenching his hands under the table. "You think I'm a freak?"

"I think," Eames said, "That the mind can take funny turns to protect itself. You've seen it with Cobb."

"Who is the girl in the yellow dress, Eames?" Arthur asked, coldly. "About five years old. Blonde hair, your eyes. She's your daughter, isn't she?"

Eames' face went ashen. Different emotions flickered across his face at once: confusion, hurt, pain – deep pain. Then something hardened there, under the surface. He stood, and for the first time Arthur wondered if the other man was going to try to hit him. But Eames only said, lowly, "That's low, Arthur. That's very, very low."
"I'm sorry," and Arthur truly was, but Eames had to understand that this wasn't a ruse, that he might very well see things in Arthur's mind – things he didn't want to see.

He saw Eames clench his jaw. "Find out about her in one of your extensive background searches, did you?"

"No," Arthur said. He paused before he spoke again, taking a new track. "Sometimes," he said, "when someone is grieving and can't let the memory of a person go, like with how Cobb grieved over Mal. It can help anchor a restless spirit in this world. It gives them power. That day in the hotel room with that window blind... I told you that wasn't me, Eames. That was Mal."

Eames looked away, but not before Arthur saw a flicker of doubt cross his eyes.

Crowe suddenly stood and strode across the kitchen to the window which looked out to the street.

"What is it?" Arthur asked.

Pulling one of the curtains to the side, Crowe looked out the window. "Trouble."
Chapter 5

Pulling one of the curtains to the side, Crowe looked out the window. "Trouble."

Arthur glanced at Eames, who looked concerned, but resolute. This thing between them – their mutual skeletons in the closet – would have to wait. They joined Crowe at the window and looked out.

Soong the extractor stood across the street, speaking to a slightly pudgy kid in a scarf and a puffy winter coat. It was too far away to hear what he said, but the kid smirked and held out his hand in a classic "this is gonna cost you some money' pose.

"Tommy Tammisimo," Arthur muttered, as Soong stuffed a wad of bills in Tommy's hand and the boy turned to point in their direction. "I've always hated that guy."

"Do you have a back door?" Eames asked.

Arthur started to shake his head, but then stopped. "We had an old storm cellar with a door that led out." He looked to Crowe. "Can you stall him?"

"Sure," Crowe said, easily. "I'm an excellent communicator." He clapped Arthur on the shoulder and gave a rather fatherly nod to Eames. "Good luck."

They ran back down the hall just as Soong started to pound on the front door.

There was a half-size door on the left side of the hallway, back towards the tent-fort. "Down here," Arthur said, jerking it open and gesturing Eames inside. "There's a ground-level window at the end. We—" he ducked inside as he spoke, and stopped, momentarily thrown as he and Eames stepped not into the basement, but to what looked like a stage set in a darkened auditorium.

Eames was looking about curiously, his hands shoved in his pockets. His casualness was an act, Arthur suspected, but it was the best he could probably hope for, right now.

"From your expression, I take it you weren't expecting to see this," Eames said, and when Arthur shook his head, he asked, "Where are we?"

"My old grammar school." And as soon as he said it, he scented the stale taint of smoke in the air. The fire had happened almost fifty years ago, well before he had been a student, but old buildings like this had memories of their own.

Eames nodded. "I suspect their architect memorized a basic layout of your neighborhood trusting that you as the dreamer would populate the details. But she was messy, and it left a few gaps for your mind to fill in."

"I created a loop." The sedative made Arthur feel slow and stupid and he had to think for a few moments about what exactly that meant. It was a paradox in the basic architecture – a cheat which could only happen in dream space.
He realized with a sinking feeling that for a few moments back there, with Doctor Crowe and trying to explain everything to Eames... he had forgotten he was dreaming at all.

And from the assessing look Eames was giving him, he'd guessed it as well.

It was hard to see in the low light, but Arthur remembered there had been a short staircase leading down off the stage to the left. He found it easily and led Eames through rows of theater seating to the back. "Why would my subconscious bring me back here?" he asked, though he didn't expect an answer. "I hated this place."

"That's odd," Eames said, an echo of his old humor in his voice. "I would have imagined you an excellent student."

Arthur couldn't help it. He laughed. "This place was one of the first court-houses in the state. They used to hang people here a few hundred years back – whole families."

There was a stunned silence from the other man, long enough for Arthur to regret his words.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Arthur shrugged. "Look up," he said, and followed Eames' gaze. The shadows were thick among the rafters, and showed a bare gleam of metal from cables and light-rigging to illuminate the stage. But here and there, an odd shape hung down.

He saw the exact frozen, horrified moment when Eames realized he was looking at rows of shadowed, hanging feet.

"We have to keep going," Arthur said, before Eames could say anything. He didn't want or need his pity. He just wanted him to understand.

It wasn't until he stepped into the light and glanced down at himself that Arthur realized he was wearing an adult-sized version of his old school uniform, complete with clip-on tie. Face burning, he adjusted the tie so that it lay straight and did not look at Eames.

The corridor beyond was thankfully free of ghosts or projections. Arthur peeked around the corner to the stairwell and nodded to Eames to follow. He hoped that Eames would get the hint and keep the silence, lest they be overheard in the echoing halls, but being Eames he probably did take his meaning, but ignored it.

"Help me to understand, darling. I've known grown men in the service who have snapped after seeing horrific things on a mission. You're telling me that you've dealt with... seeing this since you were a child..."

Was he starting to believe him? Arthur glanced quickly to classroom door before he moved on.

"I didn't handle it very well at first," he admitted. "Everyone thought I was a freak, knowing things I shouldn't know and jumping at things no one else could see. My mom never told me, but I think it's a big reason why my father left us. He thought I should have been institutionalized." The next door wasn't what he was looking for, nor the one after. Doggedly, Arthur walked on with Eames close behind. "By the time I turned nine, it was getting... really bad. Then I met Doctor Crowe."

"He's the one who told you that you see spirits?" The disapproval in his voice was carefully covered by curiosity, but there all the same.

Arthur stopped and turned to him. "No, you don't understand. Crowe was dead before I met him."
Eames' eyebrows rose and Arthur went back to his search.

The next door down the hall had a frosted window and the words 'Principal Hampton' painted in primary colors.

"Why are we here?" Eames, it seemed, had taken over the role of the questioner – or extractor. Arthur couldn't tell, and he wasn't sure at this point that he actually cared.

"I need a gun," he said, as he opened the door.

"A gun?" Eames repeated, glancing to the frosted door. "Here?"

"This is a public school," Arthur said.

The office was simply furnished with a wooden desk and two chairs set before it. The last time Arthur had been in there was when he was eight and drew those upsetting pictures of people being murdered and his mother had been called in. Arthur continued, "The last principal before Mr. Hampton died of a heart attack. He spent a whole afternoon one time telling me complaining about his successor. He told me that Hampton drank like a fish and kept a gun in his desk." Arthur walked behind the desk and jerked open the top drawer. An old-style pistol lay amid sharpened pencils.

He picked it up and checked to see that there were six rounds loaded before handing over it over to Eames. "In case the sedative is affecting my reaction time."

Eames took the pistol and jammed it in his waistband without comment, but Arthur caught his expression – the hesitance to meet his gaze.

Recrossing the office, Arthur opened the door a crack and glanced down the hall. It was empty so he turned back to Eames. "You can ask," he said, softly.

"I'm not certain that would be a good idea," Eames said quietly.

Arthur let out a breath. "I'm not delusional. I don't know why I've been able to see them, but I just have."

"Arthur—Cole..."

"Just Arthur," he said, trying to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. "It's how you know me." And he liked the way Eames said his name, although he would never admit it out loud.

The other man looked down at the floor for a long moment before he spoke. "Is she in any pain?"

There was no doubt in his mind who 'she' was. The girl in the yellow dress. "Some are," Arthur said, wanting to be honest, "but not her. She… they don't know they're dead for the most part. Some of them are so caught up in their own death that they relive it over and over, but not her. She plays," he added, as Eames swallowed hard. "And she watches the team work, or gets bored after awhile and leaves. She's not one of the angry ones."

"That's… good to know." Eames ran his hand down his face, his eyes suspiciously red-rimmed. "What has she told you?"

This time the smile came easier. "That her mother called you Jamie."

Eames' face blanked for a moment in shock. Then he huffed, a low, strained thing which was a far cry from his normal laugh, but it was something. "Now you know why I call myself Eames."
He was starting to believe him, Arthur realized, and he was surprised at the warm relief that came with that thought.

"Right," Eames said, after a moment, making a visible effort to change the conversation. Arthur let him, knowing from long experience that people spoke to him about things when they were ready. "We can't give you the usual kick since it will drop you down into limbo. I could shoot myself awake, but I can't see what the point will be since we're both tied up there anyway."

"It would be one less person for them to try to torture information out of again," Arthur said.

"I'd rather not," Eames said, bluntly. "Dreaming of a familiar location like this can disorient anyone. You know that. Should you lose track of what is real and what is the dream…"

Arthur pressed his lips together. He wanted to argue that wouldn't happen, but two years ago he would have said the same thing about the Cobbs. "Ariadne knew we were in trouble. She would have contacted the others by now. We could dig in, try to hold out as long as—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a door slam, and booted feet upon the tile floor outside. The door was still cracked open and Arthur went to look.

It was Soong.

The extractor swung his head right and left, eyes sweeping the building for any signs of them. His face was pinched in fury. Seeing that, Arthur flashed back to a moment in a half-remembered dream – Soong's face, above him and looking like that while Arthur screamed in pain and Eames begged for them to stop.

It was almost enough for him to turn to Eames, ask him to shoot him in the head. He'd rather be hiding out in limbo for the next fifty years than deal with that again, with only the projections of the dead for company.

Then Eames put a hand on his shoulder. It was a light touch, but warm and solid and alive. Enough to push back the momentary spike of fear.

"How do you want to play this?" Eames asked softly.

If this were his own job, Arthur would know the layout like the back of his hand, already have several escape routes planned and maybe a few paradoxical architectural traps to trip up his pursuers. But Arthur was caught in a dream, not fully in control of one. Besides, he was too exhausted, physically and emotionally, for specificity.

"Come out shooting," he said, grimly, "and run like hell."

Eames flashed him a grin just as Soong's sweeping eyes landed upon the door – noticing, perhaps, that it was slightly ajar.

Arthur pushed the door open and shot twice. Soong jerked back in surprise and then cried out, hunching as he clutched his shoulder.

They sprinted down the hall, back towards the stairs. Behind him Arthur heard Soong yell out – probably into some sort of a radio, "They're here! Second level. Second level!"

The rest of Soong's team would be converging on them within moments, Arthur knew, as he and Eames turned the corner and took the stairs. If they could make it downstairs and out of the school, there would be a park nearby with plenty of places to hide. They could—
A small statured woman stood in front of them, on the landing two sets of staircases joined. Her gun was already pointed.

Abruptly, Arthur felt himself being shoved to the side as Eames moved to put himself between them. Arthur’s yell of protest was drowned out by the sound of gunfire. And Eames collapsed where he stood, his body landing heavily and sliding down several steps, the pistol sliding out of his limp, dead grasp.

It didn’t matter that Arthur knew, logically, Eames was still alive – he had not been under additional sedation had been kicked back awake. In that moment, he saw red.

He took the last three steps in a leap. The woman fired at him, but the shot was meant to wing, not kill, and ended up going wide. Grabbing her wrist, he twisted viciously and felt something break. Then, he shoved her hard.

Arthur caught a glimpse of her wide eyes as she took a step backwards at the edge of the next flight of stairs and her foot hit nothing but air. Her arms pin-wheeled and she gave a shout as she fell.

Her body vanished before she hit. Kicked awake.

Kicked awake? Yusuf’s blend of somnacin was mixed to allow a dreamer to wake by way of falling, but he had been working with Cobb’s team – exclusively with their team – for the past few weeks. It shouldn’t be possible.

But Arthur didn’t have time to consider it. He could Soong’s heavy footfalls as he ran up from behind, and the rest of the team couldn’t be far.

Either he was going to wake up, or be knocked right into limbo. Either way, Arthur didn’t want to be around when Soong caught up with him. Turning, he balanced on the edge of the nearest step and let himself fall backwards...

He half expected to wake up on the shores of his own subconscious, lost for what would be years for him but minutes for everyone else.

When Arthur opened his eyes, however, it was to the dirty little shack, his hands and feet aching from being tied, and the sound of a scared little girl’s weeping.

Eames was awake as well, and looked at him from across the room with sad, tired eyes. The kick had worked. They had escaped that dream, but what of the next? And the one after that?

The woman Arthur had pushed off the steps was already up and moving to the PASIV device. Soon, Soong and the other two members of their team would be awake as well.

Arthur felt a cold touch to his arm – icy fingers brushing past the nylon rope that bit into his wrists. The little girl in the yellow dress looked up at him with Eames’ eyes.

"Can you help my daddy?"

"I can’t," Arthur whispered.

The girl drew back, eyes wide. "But you have to!" she wailed, and the temperate around the room seemed to plummet several degrees. "Please, you have to do something!"
Arthur remembered holding the ghost girl's hand as she led him down the hotel hallway towards Eames – how solid she'd felt then. And hope, small and tenuous, flickered to life in his heart. He had never tried what he had had in mind – most ghosts were so lost in their own world that they could only echo back strong memories of how they lived, often their final moments.

But Arthur had a feeling that this girl had seen this type of situation before, back when she had been alive.

"I need you to be brave," Arthur said, ignoring Soong waking up with a curse and Eames' watching him whisper to no one as if he were mad. "Your daddy needs your help. Can you do that? Can you give him something sharp to cut the rope? He needs—"

He was interrupted as Soong seemed to leap out of his chair, nearly ripping the cannula out of his own arm in his fury. "I've had enough of this bullshit!" he growled, grabbing Arthur and hauling him bodily to his feet. "I saw your projections of dead bodies down there, you sick freak. Women and children!" Soong spat in his face, and Arthur felt the press of a cold muzzle against his temple. "You sick fuck. You get off on that shit, yeah?"

Arthur said nothing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash of yellow dart across the room, towards the PASIV and what looked to be a med-kit.

"Soong," the woman said. "We can take him down again. I got the layout memorized, now. I'll just re-dose him and take him down alone. You can watch the forger and make sure he doesn't—"

"No." Soong licked his lips. His eyes skittered over Arthur's face, almost manic. "I've had enough of this. He's going to give us his client list right now, or he's going to die." The muzzle pressed harder into Arthur's temple and he struggled not to wince.

All eyes were on him and Soong, though, and none on sharp pair of scissors that must look, to anyone else, like it was free floating across the room.

"We need him alive," the woman insisted. "He's no good to us if he can't testify."

Testify? "Which government are you working for?" Arthur demanded, and was ignored. No wonder they wanted his list of client – he and Eames were only a link in the chain.

"That's what we have the other one for," Soong said. "Seems to me we'll be doing society a favor getting rid of this psychopath." Soong's eyes were locked on his and Arthur read his own death in them. "We already know Saito was your last client. You have three seconds to tell me who you and Dom Cobb were working for before him."

"Cobol Engineering," Arthur blurted, not because he was afraid – he didn't fear death itself, and from his experience fear and regret in the last moments was what helped make a ghost. It was because the girl in the yellow dress had knelt next to her father, bending to whisper something in his ear.

Eames had gone very still, his eyes very wide.

"Good," Soong said, and the woman snatched up a nearby folder to jot a few notes. "And your client before Cobol?"

Arthur forced himself to keep his gaze off of Eames and the ghost, lest he draw attention to them. It was difficult, though. He shook his head, stalling. "Why does she want us to testify? To who?"

Soong's thin lips peeled back into a wolfish grin. "That's none of your concern. Who hired you prior to Cobol?"
"Clifton. Maurin Clifford."

He had dropped that name deliberately, knowing him to be one of the giants in the telecommunication field. He was clean as a preacher's sheets, though, and as far as Arthur knew, had never hired anyone for extraction. He was stalling for time, not truth.

Sure enough, Soong's eyes narrowed. "Maurin Clifford? What did you do for Clifford?"

"I'm not at liberty to say—" Arthur began and Soong struck him across the head with the side of his gun. Stars seemed to explode behind his eyes and his legs buckled. He landed painfully on the floor, the room spinning.

He heard two voices arguing with another, as if from far away, and his vision cleared in time to see the girl in the yellow dress place a kiss to her father's cheek before she faded away.

Just like Mal had.

He couldn't read Eames' expression. The other man sat slumped against the opposite wall, his head bowed as if in despair.

Then Arthur's line of sight was blocked as Soong stood over him, muzzle pointed right in between Arthur's eyes as he yelled, "I don't care, Angela! They'll just have to be happy with one of them. The forger knows enough, and by the time the feds are done with him, they'll have evidence to bring down rings of dream criminals."

"Fine. Whatever. Just make it quick," the woman sighed, and Arthur knew he was about to die.

He shut his eyes, not wanting Soong's triumphant face to be the last thing he saw.

Arthur heard a sharp crash, a choked gasp of surprise and then the gun went off – so loud that he was temporarily deafened. When his hearing came back, a few moments later, it was accompanied by a shrill whine.

He wasn't dead.

Arthur's eyes snapped open in time to see Soong's female associate fall, grasping the handle of a pair of sharp scissors lodged halfway up her calf.

Soong was turning – it was the woman's surprised gasp that had made his hand twitch and the shot go wide. Eames, free of his bonds, was that much quicker. Eames knocked the weapon away as Soong brought it around, and punched him in the mouth, sending the would-be extractor crashing to the ground.

The other two team members – two slow witted, heavy footed men – were rising to their feet, but Eames had gotten a hold of Soong's gun and shot them both in quick precision. He turned to Soong and the woman who were down on the floor, ready to finish them off as well. But Arthur, who had seen a lifetime of violence suddenly couldn't stand to see any more.

"Eames," he croaked, "Stop."

The other man started in surprise and whipped around towards him. "Arthur?" he asked, and, grabbing up a knife from the medkit near the PASIV, bent to cut the ropes from his wrist and ankles. "I thought he'd shot you."

Arthur's head ached. "He missed," he said, shortly, wincing as blood returned to his limbs.
Eames’ eyes were clear as he looked at him – clear and freed of a burden that Arthur never realized he had carried until he had seen him without. Eames reached out and touched the sore, swollen mark on Arthur’s forehead that Soong had left when he hit him – a moment of tenderness before he helped him to stand on his feet.

Soong was out cold. His female associate, Angela, was still alive with the stab wound painful but not life threatening. She said nothing, only glared hatefully as Arthur stood watch over her with the gun in hand. Eames took their cell phones and stepped briefly outside to call backup.

A quick check of the somnacin verified they had indeed come from Yusuf’s lab, but the expiration dates indicated that the mixture had been purchased well before the Fischer job. One less betrayal to worry about, at least.

There were two folders lying on a short table nearby. The first, thicker file, was filled with the information they’d gleaned from Eames’ extraction: a basic dossier complete with a list of all of the clients he’d worked under, along with his important contacts. Arthur’s file was much thinner, but at a glance he saw scribbled notes mentioning his unusual projections.

He thought of Mal and her cryptic warning in the warehouse all those months ago.

"Why?" Arthur asked, feeling the weight of Angela's gaze on him. "I understand that the Fellman job was a trap to lure Cobb's team in, but why did you have to kill off Sander's entire team?"

She lifted her chin almost proudly – a woman who had lost, but was not yet defeated.

"We were being paid for Cobb and his men. Soong felt Sander's would just get in the way, and might warn you if they realized the Fellman job was a setup." Her face was utterly devoid of remorse as she added, "It was Soong's call, not mine. He felt it would be cleaner if they were disposed of."

Arthur felt a sudden, sharp chill in the air, as if the gathering darkness in the room had acquired a coating of frost. He glanced to the other side of the room and noted the pale, angry man with coppery hair and the single bullet hole over his left eye. Sanders watched the exchange with his fists clenched, anger distorting his features.

"You're wrong. You didn't get rid of Sanders at all," he said, hearing Eames return from outside. Eames nodded once to him in a silent signal that backup was on the way.

She said nothing, but Arthur could read doubt and then slow realization flickering across her face.

"Sanders followed you two from Johannesburg. That chill down your spine, the feeling of hair rising up on the back of your neck when you think you're alone? That's him." He said, and saw her go tense in surprise. "He's not the type to find peace and go to rest for a very long time. You have my word on that."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

They'd searched the pockets of the men Eames had shot already. Arthur picked up a spare lighter, flicked the flame to life and set it against the edge of the folders containing his and Eames' information. The fire caught and he placed it on the floor, watching the paper curl before he spoke.

"You saw what was in my subconscious. You what I see, who I interact with. How do you think I found Eames when your team had him in that hotel room?"

She said nothing, but Arthur could read doubt and then slow realization flickering across her face.

"Sanders followed you two from Johannesburg. That chill down your spine, the feeling of hair rising up on the back of your neck when you think you're alone? That's him." He said, and saw her go tense in surprise. "He's not the type to find peace and go to rest for a very long time. You have my word on that."

The woman paled slightly and Arthur turned away from her in disgust. The flames had eaten the folder and the contents within to ash and he watched it die out, exhausted and more than a little sick
to his heart.

He felt Eames' light touch to his elbow. "Saito and his people will be here shortly to take over," he said, lowly. "He seemed very interested in who had hired Soong's team."

It would be in Saito's best interest to keep dream share as it was, with its current criminal rings intact, lest he need it again. Arthur nodded and Eames went on in a lower tone, "It's over, darling."

Was it? Arthur could still feel Sander's angry presence chilling the darkest corner of the shed, but for the first time in a long time there was no Mal stalking the edge of shadows. No girl in a yellow dress following her father like a puppy.

And Arthur had someone he could confide in – someone who wasn't dead, and who could know him as Cole Sear as well as Arthur the point man. Eames knew his secret, and Ariadne would have to be told something, but...

No, it wasn't over, but Arthur thought things were on their way to getting better. Much better.

______________________________________________________________

Thank you for reading, everyone! Look for the epilogue in a few days. :)
Chapter 6

Epilogue

It was a gray late autumn day. Cold fog had rolled in off the water in the early morning and lingered in the afternoon, freezing mist to bare branches and a few stubbornly clinging leaves. In the distance, a lone dog could be heard barking.

Two men stood on a lonely hill in long coats and scarves, looking down onto a small grave marker amid a field of others. One man, slightly shorter and more muscular than his companion, bent to brush a few dead leaves off of the base.

The inscription in the stone read:

Emily Elizabeth Eames
Beloved Daughter

Her dates of birth and of death had her at just over five years when she had died – nearly a decade past.

"She was beautiful," Arthur said.

Eames' fingers brushed the top of the headstone, then curled almost as if he feared to touch. He stood again, looking down on the grave with the weight of long years of guilt lining his face.

"She was the light of my life," he said, quietly.

Arthur said nothing, offering his comfort silently, and after a moment Eames went on.

"Her mother and I were only a fling. I was seventeen and trying to sort myself out with what I wanted, who I was. When she became pregnant..." he shrugged. "I told myself I could fit in. Be a good husband, a father... work a job in the factory like my father, and his father before him."

He smiled, despite himself. "I can't imagine you working a steady nine to five."

Eames shook his head. "No. In the end I couldn't be any of those things." He went silent, lost in his own thoughts, and the air seemed become more chill. Arthur ignored it, and when Eames spoke again his breath was visible in the air. "I started taking small jobs on the side. Petty theft, you know. I fucked around behind her mother's back a bit with my mates, but looking back, I think she was doing the same. Neither of us were happy. We fought all the time." He paused again and although his voice remained level, a tear slipped down his cheek and caught briefly in his stubble before falling. "The only thing good between us was Emily."

"What happened?" Arthur asked.

"A job went cock up, and someone sold me out." Eames stared at the tiny gravestone without seeing. "I sent Em upstairs to hide when I realized they were coming for me, but she must have heard..."

Arthur didn't have to imagine what had happened next – he had seen it replayed in part in front of him. "They're hurting him!" she had said, "Let him go!"
"They wanted to teach me a lesson," Eames said, his voice frozen in bitterness. "I think the idea was to set it up to look like a murder-suicide. My mates showed up to stop them from..." He stopped, swallowing. "But she was already dead."

Arthur said nothing, but placed a hand on his shoulder. Silent in his sympathy.

More tears slid down Eames' cheeks. He didn't brush them away. "What I wouldn't give," he whispered, "for it to have been me instead."

"She's at rest now," Arthur said, pulling him in. Eames' forehead came to rest on his shoulder, his body shaking in silent sobs. "She's done what she stayed here to do – Eames, she's not in any more pain. She's moved on."

And it was true. He hadn't seen the girl in the yellow dress, or felt a hint of her presence since that day, six weeks ago, when she had helped save both of their lives.

Surrounding them both were a small crowd of waiting people: some looking on with anger, some with sadness. Arthur ignored them all, and when Eames was ready they walked out of the small graveyard together, hand in hand. The dead could wait. Today, it was Arthur's job to help the living.

~ Fin ~

Thanks for reading, everyone! :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!