Shades of Gray

by OneWhoSitsWithTurtles

Summary

After Inception, the team splits up. Arthur takes on a private job but is betrayed and forced to lock down his subconscious, dropping him into a coma. In the war-torn world of Arthur's mind, will Eames be able to save Arthur before he slips away forever? Arthur/Eames

Notes

Warning: M/M pairing, dark themes (abuse, violence, torture).

Rating: T for now, will eventually develop to M.

Note: The majority of this story is going to be pretty dark. I always associate the ‘M’ rating with sexual themes, rather than violence, so I’m leaving the story at ‘T’ for now. If you feel that what I am writing in terms of violence warrants the ‘M’ rating, please let me know!

Notes: This is entirely post-canon. Yes, this will be a novel. There will be a total of three perspectives used to portray this story. However, this will not be done in the same way as my other stories where I repeat scenes. Lastly, I’m a little nervous about posting this since I have never had to live up to people’s expectations before. There’s definitely a little pressure to live up to my last Inception novel, and this story is definitely going to be quite different. Feedback would be wonderful and I hope you enjoy the story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Part I: Arthur

Part I. Arthur

Arthur flipped through his wallet aimlessly as he rode towards a job in the back of a sleek, black town car. He had pulled the wallet from his inner jacket pocket the moment his back had moulded to the shape of the leather interior, counting out the exact number of bills that would be required for the driver at the end of the thirty minute drive. He had made the voyage from his high-end hotel to the rented floor of office space on the west side of downtown every day this week at precisely eight in the morning. Arthur knew how the traffic would be, and how much of a tip would be expected to keep the driver quiet about his movements.

He folded over the bills and slipped them into his suit pants’ pocket, glancing out of the tinted windows to gauge their progress and ensure nothing was amiss. Today was the day they would be carrying out the job and he would hate to hold up the proceedings. Especially considering how edgy his employer had been about hiring him onto the team for a specialized job in the first place.

Arthur was about to return his wallet to its home pocket when they hit a pothole in the ill-maintained streets – a pothole the driver seemed to forget the existence of every single morning – and the leather flaps of the wallet fell open. The leather was still new, the creases in the leather still stiff, so Arthur had to pry the flaps open again when they threatened to fall closed. As he glanced over the rather simplistic wallet, he wondered privately why he had bought one in such a style.

It was a rather common style, with a centre pocket with a clear, plastic film over it and a set of empty slots generally used for photos of loved ones – friends and family. Arthur had filled up a few of the plastic pockets with credit cards, making his wallet look a little less barren, but there were still four empty pouches remaining. Maybe most normal people could fill it easily but there was hardly a point for Arthur to do so. The more cards you carried, the higher the chance that you would lose something important. Besides, Arthur had two backup wallets locked away in a safety deposit box, ready for a quick change in identity.

Still, Arthur couldn’t help but wonder, idly, what he’d fill the empty slots with. He blamed it on the boredom of watching the same city route twice a day for a full week.

What was he supposed to put in the main slot of the wallet; the one that stood out proudly when he folded back the wings of leather? Something at the centre of his world, he supposed. A photograph of a child, maybe? A miniature version of himself that he was connected to through a reunion of love? Someone to be proud of as Arthur watched them grow and venture bravely into a world that wasn’t ready for them? Unlikely. Arthur had sworn off the idea of having children ever since Diane.
Or a photo of a lover, perhaps. Someone whose face would make him feel content and confident with who and where he was in life. Someone who’s smile and familiarity made him relaxed and smile at the memories the photograph would no doubt recall. Arthur couldn’t remember the last time he had smiled, when he stopped to think about it. Maybe it had been during Inception, months ago, when Ariadne had showed amazing progress on the mazes. Or maybe that one morning Arthur had been particularly sleep deprived and found himself smiling at one of Eames’s witty jokes before he remembered to school his features back into a frown.

No, a photo of a lover simply wouldn’t do; he had no one like that in his life. Except maybe...no! He cut off that line of thought quickly. He never had the time or ability to commit to an idea – an ideal – like that. He rarely felt the desire for it in the first place. The thought of returning to the same bed, the same embrace each night. Of quiet domestic nights in where they’d cook an easy dinner and curl up watching a movie on a familiar and worn couch. No, it wasn’t for Arthur. He didn’t see the point in committing to a relationship like that. Any night he might wake up with the cold, biting metal of a gun’s barrel pressed against his forehead, aimed there by a disgruntled client or a maddened mark.

What was the point of making promises you knew you couldn’t keep?

Arthur shook his head lightly and turned his attention to the four empty pouches, their companions dutifully protecting his credit cards. What photos would merit the privilege of getting lodged into these little plastic protectors promising to maintain and guard his assumed happy memories? It was a stupid notion to even entertain, he knew; he lived a life far too dangerous to take the liberty of totting along photos of people he cared about with him. Nonetheless, he still had another twenty minutes of heavy commuter traffic to deal with, so he indulged his mind’s curiosity.

He supposed that his parents would be the likely choice for the first slot. Most people had a photo of their parents or close family in their wallet, right? Assuming there were no family tensions or conflicting pasts, granted. Arthur couldn’t help but scoff at his own idea of keeping a photo of his parents in his wallet; they had probably accepted that he was dead by this point in time.

Of course, that was mainly his doing. Arthur had been gone for so long now, only surviving another two and a half years under their scrutinizing...disappointed gazes after Diane before he had fled. It hadn’t mattered that he was just about to enter high school; he had been smart enough to figure things out by himself. Besides, if he hadn’t fled, they would have simply sent him off to boarding school – no longer able to look at him without disgust.

He had set up a generous bank account and had forged all of the documents required to legally give his parents the money under the pretense of ‘The Last Will and Testament’. He had dropped off the grid for a few months after putting his true identity on something as dangerous as a paper copy to
ensure everything remained smooth. He had hoped, secretly, shamefully, that giving his parents the money might wipe away his guilt. It hadn’t, but by then he hadn’t really cared enough to be disappointed; he had learned to live with the weight of the guilt.

A photo of his parents was out.

Maybe a photo of Dominic and his children, Phillipa and James, could take one of the slots. Though Arthur would have to deal with the decision of whether it would be a photo with or without Mal. It would seem almost silly to choose a photo without her; she had and always would be the defining person in Cobb’s life. From the moment they had met, Dom had been bewitched; almost enchanted. The Extractor had worshipped Mallorie during life, and still mourned her in death.

Arthur knew, one way or another, that he shouldn’t mind a photo of the Cobbs in his wallet; tucked away to recall all of his forcefully buried memories. There had been a time when he had considered Dom to be a brother of sorts – a best friend he could rely on no matter how bad things spiralled out of control. That had changed though, after Inception. As soon as the Extractor – Arthur’s leader, friend, brother – had stepped onto American soil, it had been as though Dom became a new person.

Arthur had been cast aside like the crutches he had always known he was to the man, no longer needed as he raced away to his home and children. He couldn’t find fault in Dom for it; Arthur understood and had always known he was the support that would someday become obsolete. Dom had certainly called a few times after that, like someone recently recovered checking over the state of the crutches in a fleeting moment of fear that they might need them again; the supports needed to be in good condition to be leaned upon. But that had tapered off as Dom had adjusted and become wrapped up in the reunion with his children.

There was no blame to be placed, no bitterness to choke down. He knew the Extractor wasn’t going to return to the PASIV, the chemicals, the dreams. That was fine; Arthur simply didn’t want to bother the man and drag up old memories Dom was clearly better off without. And honestly, he didn’t think that was the type of person you kept a photo of in your wallet. The person you were unwilling to contact because you knew, one day, that they would be forced to tell you that you were no longer necessary.

Arthur flicked the second slot aside to consider the third one tiredly, taking a moment to take in his surroundings. They were pacing through the central district of the downtown area; not long now until the job would begin. He wondered if the mark would already be there, prepared, or if the team member snatching the man would be caught in a similarly embarrassing rut of morning traffic.

He angled his gaze downward once again.
Who did you keep a photo of, after children, lovers, family and best friends? Other friends, he supposed; team members, coworkers. Ariadne, his mind supplied easily – still on the memories of Inception. But that thought immediately sent Arthur’s stomach twisting unpleasantly. The girl was a brilliant Architect, there was no question about it; she would someday be the best, Arthur was sure. He had tracked her loosely after the job, mildly protective despite himself and wanting to make sure she was alright after her first dream job.

Of course, it hadn’t been all that hard to keep track of her; she had texted Arthur near-daily. She had returned to Paris to finish up her degree while under the careful tutelage of Miles during private sessions. Arthur had almost been forced to change phone numbers and not give her his new contact details with how frequently she texted him. However, he had been saved from that decision when her texts had slowly wilted away; she had become engrossed in the life of a student, as she should.

It would be odd keeping a photo of her in his wallet, he decided quite quickly. She was incredibly intelligent and witty and Arthur would certainly not turn down another job with her – something he knew would be inevitable someday with how addicted she had clearly become to dreaming. But he would feel uncomfortable keeping a photo of her when he knew she had a boyfriend at university, especially after the crush the girl seemed to have harboured towards Arthur until she realized her vast connections with Dom. He had kept her at a distance during her obvious advances, lacking the desire to attempt an effort.

That relationship certainly didn’t warrant an awkward photo in his wallet.

One plastic slot was left remaining and Arthur wondered who might be able to fill it. He was quickly losing choices that remained above the ‘job contact’ level. Yusuf was programmed into his phone – no dream chemicals more reliable than the Chemist’s – but that didn’t mean he needed to be in Arthur’s wallet. He didn’t think normal people kept photos of coworkers in their wallets. Saito was also a clear negative. People definitely didn’t keep photos of their bosses in their wallets – unless there was something else going on behind closed doors, anyway.

Eames, Arthur mused carelessly before he could stop the thought. It seemed like a silly thought at first, but with another seven blocks of crammed traffic to go, he considered it. Would Eames merit a photo in Arthur’s imaginary wallet? The man was a genius at his art – though Arthur would never tell him so – and a handy man to have on his contacts list in case of emergencies. Though, when he thought about it, Arthur had never taken Eames’s offer to call him for a job after Inception. He couldn’t bring himself to admit he needed the Forger; the man’s ego was large enough as it was. Arthur also hated the temptation of always having someone to rely on; it left you too vulnerable.

Eames didn’t seem to fall into any category, even ‘co-worker’ and ‘friend’. Arthur had barely
tolerated working with the man for longer than ten minute intervals for their meetings; obviously they had never progressed towards friendship. And yet Eames knew Arthur better than any other human being currently alive on earth with him. It was what the man did, naturally; he had the incredible ability to know everything about a person—facial expressions, movements, voice, morals, thoughts—that he could effortlessly recreate them in the dream.

So, through sheer stubbornness and determination, despite Arthur’s attempts at scaring the Forger off, Eames had come to know most of what there was to know about the Point Man. Arthur still had his secrets—he wouldn’t be a professional if he hadn’t managed that—but it was still discomforting to know Eames had gotten so close. Closer than his parents, than Dom, than Ariadne, the girl driven by infatuation to learn everything about the object of her affection. Though it hadn’t meant much, obviously, since Eames had disappeared after Inception. It had all been for the job. Arthur wasn’t entirely sure why, but he almost found it...rude. That Eames would have the gall to dig under his skin and pry away Arthur’s secrets without his consent all for a job and then simply trot along when all was over. Nonetheless, Eames had taken on his own string of jobs, similar to Arthur, and then eventually wound up lounging in Mombasa to squander away his hard-earned millions.

You didn’t keep a photo in your wallet of someone who only got close to you for a job and then forgot about your existence the moment it was over. So: no Eames.

The town car pulled up to the familiar curb then and Arthur handed over the previously selected bills, noting his accuracy with the paused meter on the dashboard. He clasped his wallet closed and slipped it back into his jacket pocket easily, stepping out onto the busy sidewalk. Arthur was a fan of travelling light with the type of work he was in; the idea of a wallet, heavy with memories, was unappealing to say the least.

As he wove his way through the pedestrian traffic and pushed his way through the main doors of the office building in front of him, Arthur decided that his wallet was better off left empty.

He caught the elevator up to their rented floor of office space, thankful that for once he wasn’t stepping into a dank, damp warehouse to work. Arthur had been taking job after job once Inception had been completed and it had been safe to return to the field; he had been taking jobs long after Eames had given up and gone home. The Point Man liked being busy though, liked researching and organizing and leaving the dull world of reality behind.

The elevator dinged its arrival to the sixth floor and he was immediately greeted by Amelina, the Extractor leading this close-knit team. In many ways her work in the dream world reminded Arthur of Mallorie, which set him on a cautious edge; her intelligence was sharp and she was skilled, determined and worst of all, impatient. However, she acted worse than Ariadne after two cups of
Arthur merely nodded in return, seeing no reason to outright lie just to return a greeting. He wasn’t very fond of his teammates – their histories reeked of alterations. Arthur could understand that; you were a fool to step into an illegal profession without editing and hiding some of your past. But his team members were too clean and innocent. It was smart to leave some negative information floating around out there.

The more perfect your record made you look, the more you were clearly trying to hide. The more spotless, often times the more ruthless. And the more professional and clean the alterations, the more skilled you were – through practice – at editing information in your favour. Nonetheless, he had needed something to keep himself busy and the number of zeros that would be appearing on his paycheque was satisfying.

Arthur stepped past Amelina, footfalls muffled by the carpeting – the only furnishing on the floor besides some chairs and desks the team had brought in. He scanned a critical eye over their work space, comparing the set up to the day before when he had powered down the lights and disappeared down the elevator the night previous. Nothing was out of place. Well, if you didn’t count the man bleeding from a gash on the forehead, unconscious and tied to a chair. “You already have the mark here,” he stated in mild surprise as he inspected the PASIV device, already cleaned and prepared. Arthur had not held much confidence in the team’s ability to capture the mark and get him here, though he had never voiced the concerns.

“No, Nikolas got Louis here about ten minutes ago.” Arthur raised an eyebrow at the woman calling the mark by name; most were too morally conflicted to do so. “We got him tied up and sedated before preparing the device.” He felt Amelina’s gaze on him as he checked and rechecked the device, the wires, and the needles. It wouldn’t be too late for him to fight his way out and drop off the map if things were about to go sour. “So is everything alright to continue?”

Arthur straightened and took a step away from the PASIV, clasping his hands behind his back as he regarded their Extractor, their leader. She really didn’t act like a leader. She undoubtedly had the expertise to lead, and the skill with weaponry to back herself up. Nikolas, the Architect, certainly followed her around like she was an all-knowing deity, but there was something lacking. Amelina had random flashes of nervousness, suddenly sounding unsure and requiring reassurance. She didn’t seem lost – she knew what she was doing – but she did not seem comfortable in the role.

“Yes,” Arthur nodded, sparing a quick glance to their Architect – a young boy, younger than Arthur to be sure – to see him shifting nervously. “Everything is ready.”
unconscious mark, having no qualms or conflicts of morals as he studied the man. The blood had begun to congeal along the cut and down the man’s face; the gash would heal quickly but not as neatly as Arthur would have liked. Arthur preferred to grab a mark in a way that left no trace when he was finished, but he was more than capable of becoming a ghost whether the mark had a reminding scar or not.

He doubted Louis, the bleeding businessman, would mind the scar either way. From the extensive research that Arthur had pulled up, the man loved to boast and make up stories to impress and entertain anyone within earshot. The man would no doubt proclaim he had fought off a gang from killing a little old lady one night, flashing around his ‘battle scar’. Either way, Arthur felt less than inclined to mention to his team how stupid it was to leave evidence behind as he watched Nikolas fumble with the needle being slid into Louis’s arm.

They had already discussed the plan last night before they had split up for the night; no one needed to ask questions or reconfirm steps. They would be dropping down into Louis’s subconscious and attending a fancy dinner party held in the man’s honour. There would be plenty of alcohol and beautiful women but if that did not loosen the businessman’s tongue, Nikolas would also be constructing a vault in the basement of the hotel. Amelina, feminine beauty and charm personified, would position herself with Arthur at her side for backup while Nikolas remained at a safe distance to ensure the dream’s stability.

Louis’s records had been somewhat sketchy as well, more than a few discrepancies and blanks being drawn up no matter how deeply Arthur probed. But the history was solid and Arthur felt confident in his assumption that no one was as skilled at Eames at forging documents and identities. Few were that gifted. Apparently, Louis was a god when it came to the stock market and had been raking in millions for years. However, that hadn’t seemed to be enough for the man since he had fallen into the habit of selling American secrets to the highest bidder – happily creating a second, lucrative income for himself. Amelina had been hired by a client who had decided that the price of the dream workers was more manageable – or more entertaining – than the price Louis was asking for. They would be retrieving the information at discount price.

It was a simple job, almost embarrassingly so. Four hours in the dream, one hour in reality – Yusuf’s chemicals putting this set to shame – and Arthur would be millions richer. And hopefully his boredom would be satisfied for longer than a week this time around. He was finding that as time wore on he was able to remain in one place – to remain outside of the dreamscape – for shorter and shorter periods of time. It would be nice to someday settle down and actually use some of the money he was hoarding away.

“Alright, it’s in,” Nikolas finally announced as he pulled away from the unconscious mark and took his own chair. Arthur chose not to comment on how embarrassingly slow the Architect had been, thankful to see that he was at least more apt at inserting the needle into his own arm.
“Are you ready?” Amelina met Arthur’s gaze. He simply nodded, tired of providing assurances. He was ready for this job to be over. “Alright, here we go...”

A moment later, Arthur was blinking his eyes open, a glittering chandelier above his head, lush, red carpeting beneath his feet, and a swarm of people chatting around him. Amelina was beside him, hand barely resting on his forearm as she conversed with an elderly projection in an expensive suit. Arthur glanced down and was pleased with the suit he found himself in, pants and jacket tailored to his form, shirt crisp and pressed beneath his knotted tie and waistcoat. The Extractor was decked out in equal fashion, both the emerald green of the dress and her doubled string of pearls gleaming in the light. Nikolas was nowhere to be seen, as was planned.

They chatted amiably with projections to remain hidden and to see what they could draw out of the mark’s subconscious. Amelina masterfully quizzed each projection on information, jobs and ‘business partners’ in a way that would even disarm Arthur’s caution should he meet the woman in a different setting. Arthur allowed her to do what she did best for a long time while watching for Louis, who was taking longer to appear than he had planned. However, his attention was drawn back to the conversation at hand when he noticed the projections being grilled for information. They kept glancing at him, as if silently asking for support.

Perturbed, Arthur kept a more attentive ear on Amelina’s questions as he continued to watch for Louis. As the time continued slipping away and they kept mingling in search of their mark, Arthur couldn’t help but begin to notice the architecture with a queasy feeling deep in his stomach. He had seen Nikolas’s drawings and had the Architect teach him every aspect of the maze that would be created in the intricate hotel. All of the elements he had seen in reality were still present, but there was more detail filling the atmosphere than Arthur was willing to give Nikolas credit for.

He began recognizing some of the tastes he himself favoured. Sprawling, marble staircases, detailed, painted ceilings, a warm but efficient lighting; yet no matter how lavish the architecture, the environment was still dominated by rigid, controlled lines. Even the projections, now that he was looking, were dressed in the styles and cuts Arthur preferred. There were far too many similarities for him to pass this off as coincidence. They were in his mind, rather than Louis’s. Arthur was building the world Nikolas had created, picturing every detail and yet adding his own to the creation.

It was just then that the projection Amelina was talking to fell silent, looking resolute, defiant, and a little affronted that someone would dare attempt to pry information from him. Of course, Arthur’s projections were well trained; that was why they had been successfully skirting the Extractor’s attempts. It was clear that Amelina was growing frustrated but just then Nikolas appeared by their side, Louis – the ‘mark’ – in tow.

“I have been informed that you were searching for me,” Louis greeted warmly. The man was dressed like a businessman, missing only a briefcase glued to one hand and a mobile phone glued
to his ear. However, Arthur was now picking up a distinct aura of military in the man now, in the way he stood and demanded attention; no wonder Amelina had seemed somewhat unsure of taking the leader position.

“Yes,” Arthur spoke quickly before anyone else could realize what the Point Man had just realized. He extended his hand and shook Louis’s hand warmly, forcing a pleasant smile. “We were hoping to speak with you in person. Congratulations, by the way,” he kept to the script as if nothing was wrong – as if his brain wasn’t scrambling as he planned his next move, as if he wasn’t realizing how utterly screwed he was.

Arthur was granted one small miracle when he was able to introduce Amelina without a hitch, no one yet sensing that the true mark had become aware of the web woven around him, binding him tight. “Shall we retire to my suite?” Louis offered generously, watching Arthur carefully. “We can be alone there.”

Arthur knew he was being watched for the right responses to ensure nothing was amiss; Arthur should be thrilled for the opportunity to have the ‘mark’ alone to wear down. So he portrayed mild accomplishment, moderate smugness, and nodded his consent. “Please, lead the way.”

As he trailed down the maze of hallways behind Louis and Nikolas, Amelina comfortably on his arm, he tried to figure out what he was going to do to get out of this. He wanted to chide himself on his foolishness, for allowing his boredom to win over his sense, but there was no time for that now. He was tempted to materialize a gun and shoot himself in the head before they even made it to this private suite. He would have a fifteen second head start on the others as the dream world collapsed around them. Arthur would be able to get away and disappear until they stopped looking.

He didn’t though, because he needed to know why this was happening. Who had hired this team of three, or were they acting on their own accord? What, exactly, were they after? It was important to know what information they were after since that would give him a better idea of how long they would attempt to hunt him down before surrendering. And maybe, if he was lucky, he’d extract enough information in return to tear this team apart in reality.

So Arthur bided his time silently, calm as he was led into a suite and the heavy wooden doors fell closed behind him. Arthur was offered a seat on one of the patterned couches but he politely refused. Everyone else remained standing as well. The air immediately grew thick and tense. The Point Man had to admit that he was embarrassed to allow this to happen. However skilled this team was to hoodwink him and get him this far, it was upsetting that his competition had taken this long to realize he was no longer an oblivious mark.

“So, Arthur,” Louis drawled, stepping closer to him while Amelina and Nikolas slowly fell into the background, “What was it you wished to talk to me about?”
“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Arthur replied calmly, too stubborn to acknowledge any fear that his confidence might not be a strong enough bluff to get him out of this alive.

Louis stopped and stood still with a short distance between them, probably acting under the rumours floating around in reality about Arthur’s expertise at hand-to-hand combat. Smart man. The dream worker smiled at him, looking equally entertained and condescending. “Oh yes, I knew you would be a fun mark, Arthur. Many speak of you as a challenge – like Everest – to someday conquer.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Arthur responded, sharp with his sarcasm.

“Do,” Louis nodded as he slowly drew a concealed handgun from beneath his jacket. “Do. Now, since the pleasantries seem somewhat unnecessary, shall we just move onto the main event?”

Arthur calculated mentally how quickly he would be able to materialize and raise his own preferred handgun; his chances of getting an effective shot off and escaping into the hallway before he took a wound serious enough to hinder his getaway. The odds were against him. He couldn’t act yet though, no matter how much his trigger finger was twitching for revenge; he needed to know what they were after. Arthur smirked, forcefully keeping himself from shifting his weight. “Please. I was growing bored.”

“You know, I don’t think I like you,” Louis gave a little disapproving noise as he cocked his gun. “You’re a smartass.”

“That’s alright; I wasn’t planning on asking you out on a date after this was over,” the Point Man drawled in return, hoping that his enemy would make a mistake if he got too angry. He desperately wanted to clench his hands into fists at his sides to release some of his nervous energy but remained still and waited.

The silence dominated for a long moment as Louis seemed to consider him. Then, finally, “Tell me about Inception.” Arthur’s eyebrows rose before he thought to control his expression. No one should know that Arthur was involved with Inception. No one should know about Inception at all. He remained silent for a moment as he schooled his features back into neutrality, trying to discern what the best response should be. “Specifically,” Louis continued into the tense silence, “I would like for you to tell me about your teammates. What were their names again?”

“Dominic, with his two little children. Wife, Mallorie, sadly beyond our reach,” Amelina supplied
helpfully, like an eager student.

“Ariadne, Eames, Yusuf,” Nikolas added easily. Arthur noticed that the youth’s stance was much more confident down here in dream space, and that Nikolas’s voice was much harsher.

“Yes,” Louis glanced back at his team members, pleased. “That was their names.” The man’s gaze refocused on Arthur almost lazily.

Arthur felt his blood run cold in his veins, his heart beginning to race at a quicker pace than what had been adopted with a gun pointed at his face. If they had been after some information about Arthur, or about one of his marks or clients, he could have gone into hiding and not given this encounter a second thought. But now the team – his team – was at risk. Dom, finally moving on and happy. The baby Cobbs. Ariadne, blossoming and just beginning a long and successful career. Eames, somehow making Arthur feel more secure in his jobs just with the knowledge that the Forger was alive out there, somewhere. Yusuf, brilliant enough to cure cancer some day, if the goal ever popped into the Chemist’s mind.

He swallowed thickly, suddenly realizing what he would have to do. He could not simply hold out on the information until he eventually found an opportunity to kill himself; nor wait for his enemies to get frustrated enough to make a mistake. He could not run away and hide in reality and assume that things would blow over. They knew his teammates’ names and who knew how much else; that was enough to endanger them all if Arthur didn’t do something.

And no matter how much he wanted to return to reality and finish the three dream workers off there, that might sent out some signal to someone else connected to this extraction. Arthur had no way of knowing if there was anyone else vying for this information. That was even more dangerous; having no face to associate with the threat. No, he needed to handle things down here.

“By the way, Arthur,” Louis interrupted his thought process, looking somewhat bored now. “I should probably let you know now, before we get too deep in conversation, that I am very impatient.”

Arthur knew he had to act now, before things escalated further. He kept his gaze firmly on Louis as he mentally directed his attention to the chandelier bolted to the sculpted ceiling. The only warning any of them received was a small jingle of crystal shards touching before the ceiling opened up and released the heavy framework of metal and crystal. The chandelier hadn’t been overtop of Amelina and Nikolas, much to Arthur’s disappointment, but their startled shrieks were just enough, mixed with the clattering of the impact, to drag Louis’s gaze back for a split second.
The Point Man didn’t wait to consider the effectiveness of his damage, instead turning and dashing for the hallway the moment Louis had turned his head enough for Arthur to be in his periphery. The intricate brass door handle was slick under his palms with nervous sweat, slowing him down for half a second as he wrenched the door open. Amelina let out an enraged scream at his escape as the door handle slammed into the wallpaper, denting it beyond repair, and Arthur heard a shot ring out in the air as he skidded into the hallway.

He felt a searing pressure pierce his left bicep before a burning pain shot through his entire body, the bullet lodging against bone. He didn’t take the time to consider it though, already halfway down the hallway and stumbling into the stairwell as he heard the other three dream workers crash out of the private suite in hot pursuit.

As Arthur continued down toward the main floor of the hotel, the only building in existence in this particular dreamscape, he focused on shifting the landscape to his favour as much as he could manage. Each layer of stairs he covered looped in on itself behind him but he quickly realized that Nikolas was much more skilled at his profession than he had let on. The staircases did slow them down, Arthur easily able to dodge the haphazard bullets with the distance between them, but his enemies were by no means stranded.

He considered abandoning the stairs in favour of finding or creating a suitable place to hide but he quickly realized that they would find him before he was able to accomplish what needed to be done. Their angry shouts and curses were echoing off the walls of concrete, chasing his heels as he burst through the door onto the main floor. Arthur needed a maze so complex that even Nikolas would be stalled and focused all of his attention on building up a dreamscape outside of the hotel, blatantly ignoring the small headache that flared up with the added exertion.

When he made it into the main lobby, formerly a peaceful, relaxed congregation of people, he saw that an all out riot had broken out. There were streaks of blood marring the white marble of the staircases, more blood no doubt soaked into the red carpet. Arthur was forced to jump over a few dead corpses strewn across the floor, having neither the time nor inclination to determine if they were his projections or the projections of his pursuers. He dodged a toppling chandelier, crystal shards skidding across the floor, and rushed through the doors into a newly built city.

Arthur heard a chorus of furious shouts from his projections as Louis, Nikolas and Amelina stumbled into the violence of the entrance hall. Not considering it further, he ducked into the nearest alleyway and ran as fast as he could, doing his best to keep his heart and breathing steady. This was far from over. He continued to shift the world around behind him until he finally stumbled and came to a stop, panting and supporting his weight against a worn brick wall.

He blinked a few times, trying to dispel the little black spots swimming in his vision. Arthur spared an annoyed glance at his arm, realizing that it had been blood, not sweat, wetting the left side of his body as he ran; the adrenaline and his racing heart kept the blood flowing more than he could
afford. He used his hand to put pressure on the wound, cursing with the little breath he had at the sensation of pushing the bullet harder against the bone.

He forced himself into silence though when he heard Amelina scream in rage only a block or so away. The sound sent a shiver up Arthur’s spine; she sounded like some feral hell hound that had lost sight of her prey. It was Nikolas he heard yell next, accompanied by the sound of a metal trash can being kicked over. “How the hell did he create an entire city that quickly? You said you shot him! He should be bleeding out by now!”

There was a pregnant moment of silence in which Arthur could imagine the no doubt angry look Louis would shoot at his Architect. However, it was Amelina who yelled next. It was hard to hear her though, over the sound of the riot spilling out onto the streets. “Who cares? Why hasn’t he just killed himself already? And why the fuck are we just standing here?”

Arthur was thankful when Louis spoke then; allowing the Point Man to ensure the dream worker was the same distance away from him as the others. It was clear that the man was yelling just to make sure Arthur heard him. “He is making a stand to protect his friends. Noble, but stupid.” There was a moment’s pause and Arthur quieted his breathing, hearing that the warring projections were coming closer. “Very well, Arthur; we accept! Let it be war between us!”

And then it was only the sound of the projections and buildings quickly falling to ruin assaulting his ears. Arthur remained completely still for another few minutes, breathing as quietly as he could. He couldn’t believe his enemies would simply give up, suspicious that they were silently surrounding him. But eventually he was forcing himself to keep his eyes open, shaking away the lightheaded sensation from blood loss; he couldn’t afford to be cautious anymore. He needed to get the barriers up before he passed out and the dream workers realized they could escape unscathed.

So he pushed himself away from the brick wall with a small grunt, eyeing the smudge of drying blood on the bricks with distaste. He took off through the maze of alleyways again, distrustful of the wide main roads. Finally he found a semi-underground alleyway built through a hill that had a road overtop. He dashed into the long echoing tunnel, knowing that he would be able to hear anyone approaching from a long distance away. Arthur was forced to assume that his enemies really had split up and disappeared into other sections of his city to regroup.

He took a steadying breath and slumped against the arched concrete wall that was smooth and free of graffiti. He couldn’t even believe he was considering this, but there really didn’t seem to be any other viable option. When he had begun getting into dream work – when it was still a form of addictive escapism rather than a profession for him – he had quickly grown bored of what he had been taught and begun experimenting. Arthur had done some reading on meditation in the past, when he was trying to learn how to ‘let go’ and ‘dispel guilt’. It hadn’t been helpful for him in reality, but he wondered if it might be more effective in the dream world.
He just wanted to forget.

Arthur had gone under with some random boy two years ahead of him in school, holding little concern for his wellbeing at that point in his life. He had explained his thought process and the other boy had encouraged him, insisting that ‘everything would be fine’ – ‘it would be totally Zen’. Arthur had closed his eyes and taken careful note of his breathing, slowing it down far past the point that the meditation books had recommended. He had felt his whole body begin to feel weighed down with his heart and breathing remaining slow; then he had opened his eyes.

They had only created a park, still simplistic in their endeavours, but Arthur could see a shimmering, nearly invisible dome surrounding the boundaries of their dreamscape. It had been an interesting experiment and Tyson had been thrilled, but Arthur had been silently disappointed; this did not help him forget at all. They had traveled the short distance to examine the boundaries further, the barriers made of a glass-like texture, and then moved on to other things until the chemicals ran out.

They had been far too young – far too squeamish – to consider experimenting with different methods of waking up from the dream. However, as they talked and waited and grew bored, they had quickly come to realize that whatever Arthur had done had stopped the clock. There would be no ‘waking up’ from this, at least not pleasantly. They had discussed it for a while, both of them with their string of issues but neither of them entirely keen on killing or being killed. Finally though, they agreed to do it themselves, rather than burden the other with a death – even if it would only be temporary.

Arthur had watched the older boy go first, flicking back his shaggy blond hair and sending him a courageous wink before shakily pulling the trigger. Arthur had winced at the sound, swallowed at the sight of blood, and watched morbidly as the other boy crumbled in on himself and fell to the perfect grass in a puddle of blood. He had to admit it to himself, when he was finally alone with his thoughts, that he wasn’t ready to do that to himself. It was too close to what his mind occasionally suggested when thoughts of Diane plagued him from sunset to sunrise.

Instead, Arthur had focused his attention on the barriers again, which he noticed, with growing fear, had shrunk closer to him. He could see a swirling, darkening fog looming beyond the boundaries, as if eagerly waiting to claim him. He had focused his attention again and had felt his heartbeat picking up again, his breath quickening, and the barriers fading away. Once that was finished and he was left alone again in a quiet park, no fog on the horizon, he had simply had to wait for a few minutes until the timer had run down.

It was when he woke up that things had gone wrong. He had been confused at seeing the ceiling and walls painted a blinding white. It didn’t take him long after that to realize that he was in a
hospital bed, Tyson in the bed beside him. “Hey, Tyson, what’s going on?” he had whispered, terrified. Tyson had glanced over him at the sound of his voice, but Arthur saw that the teen’s bright green eyes were glassy and void of recognition. “Tyson, what’s wrong with you?” Arthur hissed, praying silently that he was still dreaming.

Tyson opened his mouth slightly, Arthur desperate for some sort of explanation, but instead all he received was a nonsensical string of babbling noises before the teen fell silent again. And with that, the teen had rolled onto his back again and smiled blandly at the ceiling. Tyson didn’t look angry or even a little upset. He didn’t know – didn’t remember that Arthur was the one to blame for this. In fact, he was acting and sounding like an infant who had not yet grasped the complexities of language.

Arthur had swallowed thickly, feeling tears sting the corners of his eyes. What had he done? He had just wanted to forget. Forget everything. He hadn’t meant to hurt Tyson, to make him forget. Arthur could barely comprehend how it had happened, knowing only that it had to be something to do with the glass barriers he had created. It didn’t matter how it had happened. All that mattered was that this was all his fault.

He was wound up and about to bolt out of the bed when a doctor came in to peer down at Arthur from the bedside, checking over his vitals. Then the doctor, apparently satisfied, turned his attention fully towards Arthur. “Hello, can you tell me your name?” Arthur had raised a confused eyebrow, barely managing to choke down tears of sheer panic, but answered with his full name. That had spurred a long list of questions about Arthur’s birth date, school, principal’s name, and so on.

Finally, when the questions seemed to cease and the doctor returned his attention to a clipboard, Arthur found the courage to speak. “What’s wrong with Tyson?”

The doctor didn’t answer for a moment, busy scribbling down notes. Then he gave a tired, defeated sigh, and met Arthur’s gaze. “We don’t know. Your landlady found the two of you hooked up to a crude dream device--” here Arthur received a disapproving scowl, “and called an ambulance. You were both under for a day and when Tyson woke up, he had no indication of possessing any memories. He seems to have reverted back to a state of infancy in terms of knowledge.”

“Oh,” was all Arthur could whisper, throat tight as he struggled to keep from crying.

“Furthermore, despite you waking up with your memories seemingly intact, you were far from unaffected. You showed all the signs of being in a deep coma and you were fading fast.” The doctor stared down at him, seeming to realize that Arthur wasn’t grasping what that meant. “That means that you probably would have died if you had stayed in the same state for another day.”

Arthur had merely blinked, barely able to comprehend the notion of nearly dying at fifteen. “Rest
for now. We’d like to observe you for another few days and then a psychologist will be coming in to question you about what happened while you were both asleep.”

After that, the doctor had turned on his heel and disappeared out into the hallway. Tyson kept glancing over at him and babbling, curious as a newborn baby, but Arthur feigned sleep. His heart was racing, his body was trembling, and he wasn’t entirely sure he’d survive the night. The way the doctor had said that someone would be coming in to talk about the dream made it sound like this would be turned into a legal issue; Arthur would be surprised if it didn’t. He couldn’t stick around for that. Nor could he wait to see if someone had managed to dig through his past to find the contact information for his parents. What would he do – what would he say – if he woke up tomorrow morning with his parents looking down at him from his bedside – disappointed again?

Arthur had been out of bed and dressed as soon as the nurses had left that evening to continue on their rounds. Tyson had called out to him wordlessly when Arthur was in the doorframe, but Arthur hadn’t turned around; he had no idea how he would manage this new guilt. He had forced himself to walk slowly and calmly as he joined the foot traffic in the hallway. He had bluffed his way through the halls, doing his best to act as though he belonged there, and eventually found the main entrance.

He had waited until he was a block away from the hospital before he began running. It didn’t take long after that for the tears to finally overwhelm him and spill down his face as he ran. He wasn’t running towards anywhere; he had nowhere to go. All he could do was run away and promise himself that he would never use this new technique again. He would just have to learn to live with the guilt; learn to live with the memories.

But now...now he had no choice. But that didn’t bother him as much as it had for years after his last view of Tyson’s glassy eyes. These dream workers – Louis, Amelina, Nikolas – were the enemy, and not just his enemy. They were the enemies of his entire team and that made it quite easy for Arthur to forgo any conflicting morals. It helped that the idea of dying wasn’t as scary for him to consider now as it had been when he was fifteen.

Arthur was surprised by his resolution; he had never thought he would choose to die for someone else. But he thought back to his empty wallet, void of any real connection to life. The rest of his team members had something – or someone – to live for. If Arthur faded away into death, no one would notice. No one would cry. No one would suffer from his permanent absence. It was only fair.

And with that thought in mind, Arthur closed his eyes and began locking his subconscious down. He felt a small weight tug on his mind – a weight that would grow and consume with time – as his body in reality shut down with his mind. His breathing and heart slowed, body calming as he fell into what he knew would be a coma he would never wake from.
When he was finished and the barriers around the city were fully erected, he peeled himself away from the wall and made his way out into open air again. The sun had hit the horizon by this point, time no longer dependent upon the chemicals in the PASIV. He took a calming breath of fresh air and scanned his view of the city. Arthur could see the fog that would soon consume him and drag him down into darkness roiling behind the translucent dome that surrounded the outer boundaries of the city.

With a small sigh, Arthur scanned his surroundings and dashed into the darkness once again. The sound of violent rioting and ruin was his companion as he searched for a place suitable for staging a war.
Cobb was leaning against the stuccoed side of the back of his house, feeling the material catch the fabric of his shirt and cause his back to prickle every time he shifted his weight. He was watching a group of squealing children dash around his spacious backyard; he knew they were perfectly safe in the enclosed fencing, but that didn’t stop him from tracking his children’s movements with a sharp, cautious eye.

Old habits die hard.

There were brightly-coloured balloons tugging at the confining ribbons keeping them attached to the porch railing as the breeze brushed by, streamers and table clothes rustling softly. The paper plates and cups were safe from blowing away, weighed down by cake and juice forgotten at the mention of games. Cobb would clean the table later but had little energy to consider the task at that moment.

It was James’s birthday, the first birthday of one of his children that Cobb had been able to plan, let alone attend in three years; he had wanted everything to be perfect. They had invited a few of James’s friends over from school, as well as a few of Phillipa’s friends so that she didn’t feel left out. He shouldn’t have been worried though; his children had taken care of one another while their father was away and were in the healthy habit of keeping one another company. It made Cobb feel equally proud and guilty.

The children’s parents were there as well, some of them racing around with the group of children on the grass while others chatted amiably on the large porch. They knew he was a single father, though they didn’t know the full story – and never would – and had probably taken pity on him at the thought of him attempting to manage fifteen screaming children for an entire afternoon. Of course, one of the mothers seemed to have other thoughts in mind judging by the rather alarming cut of her shirt and the way she was constantly edging closer to him. Cobb did his best to remain polite and hold back his sigh of frustration, making it clear that he wasn’t interested while silently wishing a different group of adults had joined the festivities.

He had invited Ariadne, knowing that the kids would enjoy seeing her after the Architect’s brief visit during one of her semester’s reading week. But the last Cobb had heard, Ariadne was doing a post-graduate thesis on architecture in Rome; he wasn’t surprised. She had considered visiting while she was still in the States immediately after Inception, but Cobb had turned her down as politely as he could manage. It had been three years since he had been able to see his children, to hold them, and he would be returning without Mallorie. It had seemed disrespectful to invite
Ariadne back him with him for that reunion.

She had understood and been very gracious about the whole situation, which the Extractor had appreciated, but it was clear quite early that Cobb had lost her with the decision. She was still his friend, obviously, and would no doubt be back to visit James and Phillipa when she got the chance. But the connection he had begun to feel between them had faded with time and distance. Ariadne had moved on and found someone who she could be with fully rather than Cobb, who still dreamed of Mal every time he managed to dream naturally.

It was also difficult for them to find a reason to visit between Cobb’s responsibility to his children and Ariadne’s busy schedule; dream working had brought them together and now it was not a commonality between them. Cobb was still desperate to run his fingers over the cool metal of a PASIV again, to feel the needle bite his skin as it slipped in. It was an addiction he hadn’t yet broken and that, more than anything, was the reason why he couldn’t go back.

He was frantic to have his body saturated with chemicals again so that it would inhibit his ability to dream naturally; it was far too painful to wake up every morning with the image of Mal burned on his retinas and the sound of her voice ringing in his ears. It was even harder to pull himself out of bed each morning, futilely attempt to shake memories of his wife from his head, and trudge downstairs with a smile carefully in place for his children. But he knew – knew – that returning to the PASIV and his wife would be so tantalizing, after all this time away, that he would never willingly return to reality.

He couldn’t allow that to happen. He couldn’t abandon his children again.

Cobb had considered inviting Eames and Yusuf, knowing that they would manage to liven the party up if nothing else. But he had discarded the thought quickly, realizing that Mombasa was far too vast of a distance for them to travel for something as simple as a birthday. Besides, since he had fallen out of the profession he had not heard from either dream worker, both of them busy with jobs and rightfully enjoying their wealth.

And then he had considered inviting Arthur. Cobb had debated inviting the Point Man for the better part of a week, scrolling through his mobile’s contact list and hovering over Arthur’s number every few hours; he had never called though. It had become a nervous habit of his since returning back to his home and children, one he had slowly but surely fallen out of. When he had first returned home he had called his Point Man every few days, still caught up in disbelief and habit. For the last three years he had turned to Arthur for everything – information, distractions, support – and Cobb hadn’t been ready to continue on without that help.

Eventually though he had begun to cut back on the number of calls he had made. He had felt pathetic calling Arthur with random requests the Point Man should not be expected to consider.
Cobb had drawn the line when he had dialled Arthur before he gave a second thought about it, all to request a background check on a new school he was thinking of sending James to. He had reminded himself that Arthur had a life outside of supporting Cobb and that he shouldn’t be bothering the Point Man over such trivial problems. That and he knew Arthur had fallen into the habit of jumping from one job to the next; getting random phone calls at all hours would certainly not help maintain the Point Man’s cover.

It was also for selfish reasons though, why Cobb had stopped calling Arthur. A part of him despised the man for still being able to continue dream working as much as he pleased without the thought of commitments and attachments; what Cobb wouldn’t give for that now. He also found himself frequently frustrated at himself and resentful towards Arthur; why could Cobb not manage on his own? Why had the Point Man made Cobb so reliant on him? And then the guilt set in for blaming Arthur, the only man he had been able to count on after Mal, and his anger started its vicious cycle.

By the time James’s party had rolled around, it had been too long since their last conversation for Cobb to casually call Arthur and invite him to the birthday party. He doubted Arthur would be interested anyway; the man was an expert at intelligence gathering and more methods of combat than would ever be necessary, and yet failed miserably when it came to children. Nonetheless, Cobb continued fidgeting with the mobile in his pocket while dodging the overly-friendly single mother beside him, guilt eating away inside him.

He had almost wished he had called Arthur just to help with the party anyway, awkwardness and shame be damned. Cobb was still adjusting to all of the responsibilities that came with being a single parent to two active, curious, growing children who still couldn’t quite understand why mommy wasn’t coming home. He dressed them, fed them, got them to school, cleaned while they were gone to keep himself from going insane, picked them up, fed them again, entertained them, read them their bedtime stories and tucked them into bed. Even then at the end of the day Cobb couldn’t relax; sitting on the couch alone with the television or a book just reminded him of how silent and empty the house was, how truly absent Mallorie was and how alone Cobb felt.

It would have been handy just having the Point Man around to help him plan the party; Cobb hadn’t realized how much he had truly relied on Arthur’s support until it was gone. He had foolishly assumed that a birthday party for his children would not be troublesome; that he was the best Extractor. He could enter anyone’s subconscious and extract any piece of information he chose; surely it would be easy to understand a child’s mind and plan around it.

Cobb snorted to himself as he remembered his own stupidity at the thought. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on the viewpoint), he had accidentally timed the snort with a comment the single mother had shared when he wasn’t listening, effectively offending her and achieving some breathing room. Of course, that just left him alone to his own thoughts again, which seemed to be growing less healthy by the day.
He was interrupted from his thoughts by the sensation of his mobile vibrating in his pants pocket against his thigh. Cobb excused himself from the group of parents politely, trusting they would watch over the children in his brief absence, and stepped inside the house to block out the noise of the festivities. He withdrew his phone and checked the call display, raising an eyebrow when an unknown number was scrawled across the screen.

Tentative, cautious, Cobb pressed the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

“Hello, is this Mister Dominic Cobb?” a sterile, bland voice crackled through the speaker of his phone, already setting Cobb on edge.

“Yes, who’s calling?” he questioned quickly, narrowing his eyes in suspicion as he watched the party continue through the sliding glass door.

“This is Dr. Maxwell from the New York Presbyterian Hospital.” Dom felt his heart rate pick up and his palms grow slick with nervous sweat. “I’m calling about Arthur Tilmont.”

He felt his eyebrows rise into his hairline with his own surprise; Arthur rarely used a surname for his identities, and never before had Cobb heard this one. A sense of dread was curling up, cold and heavy in his stomach. He transferred his mobile to his other hand and wiped the sweat from his palm onto his shirt. “Why, what happened?”

“Well...” the doctor hesitated for just a moment, spiking the Extractor’s impatience. He was suddenly angry with all of the suburban-grown people enjoying themselves on his porch in the warm, afternoon sun. Why did they get life so easy? “I think it would be better if we discussed this in person, and after you see him.”

Dom swallowed down the lump of fear and guilt that was lodged in his throat. “Is he okay?” He immediately chided himself on his panicked stupidity. Arthur was in a hospital; of course he wasn’t alright. “I mean, how bad is it?”

“Well...” Dr. Maxwell paused again and Cobb could hear the man rustling some papers. He was about to yell into the phone – if he didn’t crush it first – but the crackly voice picked up again. “He’s alive and doesn’t seem to have sustained any life-threatening injuries. However...”

“Oh, get on with it!” Dom snapped, transferring the phone back to his first hand to wipe his left hand free of sweat. Thoughts kept swirling around in his mind each moment the doctor’s
authoritative, expert voice broke off. Why had Cobb let Arthur go off on his own? Why had he not called the Point Man sooner? What could he possibly do to make amends now?

Dr. Maxwell cleared his throat, sounding understanding but irritated nonetheless. “Mr. Tilmont is in a coma.”

Cobb first noticed that a few of the neighbourhood parents were glancing into the house at him, no doubt curious as to why he was being antisocial at his own child’s birthday. He couldn’t help himself when he sent them a dark glare and turned his back to the sliding door, stepping further into the kitchen. Then he realized that everything sounded like it was muffled by white noise; every detail he focused on was both sharpened and muted. His brain wanted anything – anything – to focus on so that it wouldn’t have to comprehend that sentence.

Finally though, he stuttered out his response. “Wh-what?” And then, once he found his voice again and remembered how to speak, it was like he couldn’t stop. “What happened? How? What’s his condition? What’s being done?”

“Mr. Cobb, please,” Dr. Maxwell eventually had to cut him off, his aggravation melted away at Dom’s obvious panic. “There is much regarding the situation that I cannot relay to you over the phone. I promise that we will discuss everything when you arrive.”

The Extractor paused again at those words, leaning against the edge of his marble countertops; sweaty handprints quickly marred the reflective surface. He stared back out at his backyard and his children, James and Phillipa still running around barefoot on the impossibly green grass. “I...I can’t leave.” It would be a four hour plane ride for him to get to New York. This wasn’t like when he was dream working; he couldn’t just up and leave anymore when the need arose. He couldn’t take his children all the way to New York to see Uncle Arthur in a coma while they missed school. Nor did he have anyone he trusted to leave them with; he didn’t even know how long he’d be gone.

There was a surprised pause of silence on the opposite end of the phone before Dr. Maxwell cleared his throat. “Pardon?”

“I have two young children; I can’t just leave. Maybe if I had a few days to get something arranged...” Cobb threaded his fingers through his hair, pushing stray strands out of his face as he tried to think. He was barely managing to be a proper father; he couldn’t handle this happening now.

“I don’t think you understand,” the doctor spoke over him, sounding mildly disgusted. “Your friend is dying and you are the only person on his emergency contact list.”
“I’m going to come!” Dom snarled, guilt and frustration entwining in a dangerous cocktail. How dare this man – this stranger – judge him? He had no idea what Dom had been through, what he had to do just to fly across the country. “I just need a few days!”

There was another heavy silence for just a breath of a moment. “Mr. Tilmont doesn’t have a few days.” Dom’s brain, sluggish with tired thoughts and overwhelming emotions, did its best to process that sentence. “When you arrive, go to the front desk and get them to page me. Goodbye, Mr. Cobb.”

Dom didn’t return the farewell as he disconnected his phone. He was barely paying attention when he went to set the phone down, sending it clattering against the marble when he dropped it by accident. He stepped back to the sliding door, watching as the neighbouring parents slowly coaxed the children back up onto the porch for drinks before they got dehydrated; not an easy task. He leaned his forehead against the cool glass surface of the door, uncaring of who saw him in that moment. Why had this happened now? Dom hadn’t left his children for longer than the length of a school day since his return; what if it was too soon? Would there ever be a time when it was okay to leave them again?

He knew he had to go to the hospital, and he hated himself for thinking for just a second that he shouldn’t go. But Cobb still bit his lip in distress, trying to shake thoughts from his head when they shot him with a new wave of guilt. He knew it wasn’t Arthur’s fault, and that the Point Man had gone above and beyond what was required to help the Extractor for years. But there was still a small part of Dom’s mind that couldn’t help but think that if Arthur had just slowed down, taken fewer jobs, this wouldn’t have happened and Dom wouldn’t be in this dilemma.

He was shaken from his thoughts when there was a knock at the sliding glass he was leaning against, jarring the conflicting thoughts from his head. Dom blinked and leaned back, noticing his next door neighbour smiling at him through the glass. He stepped aside and pulled the door open for her, fumbling through an apology as he tried to suppress his thoughts. “Have something on your mind?” Melissa asked him with concern when she saw his face as she passed into the kitchen to refill some water jugs.

Cobb pushed his hair back again, trailing behind her to lean on the counter again. “I just got a call from a hospital in New York. My friend is there and in a coma. The doctor...” he forced a steadying breath into his lungs, though the pressure hurt more than it calmed him. “The doctor said he doesn’t have long.”

“Oh my!” Melissa nearly dropped the ice cube tray to the floor as her eyes flashed to Dom. He was honestly surprised and somewhat bewildered by her show of genuine concern when she didn’t even know Arthur. “What are you still doing here?” was the next thing she asked, effectively stirring up
the Extractor’s guilt all over again.

“I can’t leave James and Phillipa...” Dom muttered weakly. For some reason the statement sounded weaker now, less valid.

“Don’t be idiotic!” the woman, a mother of two herself, immediately snapped. Dom blinked, taken aback by the sudden loudness of her voice; she had been so soft-spoken in every other conversation they had conducted over the hedges on the lawn parting their properties. “I’ll take care of them. Maya and Rosa go to the same school as them and there is plenty of room.”

Melissa and her husband, John, were both wonderfully kind people; though Dom had immediately taken more of a liking for Melissa, caring mother figure, than her husband who enjoyed discussing cars and imported beer most of the time. Nonetheless, he knew his children would be well taken care of at their house; it helped that they were both friends with Melissa’s twin daughters. He knew he wouldn’t be able to get James and Phillipa’s grandparents here to watch over them for a few days, and he would feel better leaving them with Melissa than with an unknown babysitter.

But the thought of leaving his children again, even for something as important as this, made him feel defensive and frantic. What if something happened and he couldn’t come home? He couldn’t break his promise to not leave again. That, and he couldn’t expect Melissa to take responsibility for them; Cobb didn’t even know how long he’d have to be in New York. “I couldn’t...” he hedged slowly, staring at the floor rather than his neighbour.

“Of course you can, and you will!” Melissa spoke sharply, suddenly in front of him and hustling the Extractor purposefully towards the nearby desk and computer. “You’re going to buy the next plane ticket to New York while I fend off the party. Then you’re going to pack for yourself and the kids. We’ll finish things off outside and get everyone sent him before dinner and you’ll explain to James and Phillipa what’s going on.”

“I can’t leave them,” Dom repeated desperately, hoping she would understand.

“It’ll only be for a few days, Dominic,” she reminded him warmly, her authoritative voice falling away quickly. “They’ll understand.”

Cobb lifted his gaze to meet Melissa’s comforting one slowly, silently pleading for her to understand, for him to not have to make this decision. She just kept smiling though, having no idea why James and Phillipa might not believe him when he said he would return in a few days. But there was nothing else for him to do so he nodded tiredly and swivelled his chair towards the powering-up computer. Melissa nodded approvingly, reminding Dom momentarily of Mal, and
headed out to steer off the curious parents.

A little disoriented and yet reassured by Melissa’s commanding words, Dom promptly booked the earliest plane he could catch after James’s party was wrapped up. He paused for just one moment to rub his temples tiredly, aware that he would be arriving in New York near eleven in the evening with the time difference and wouldn’t make it to Arthur’s bedside until at least an hour after that. It was going to be a long night.

Acceptance washed over him after a long sigh and he pushed himself away from the desk after printing off his ticket and turning off the computer. He packed two travel bags, one for himself and the other for James and Phillipa, just as Melissa had demanded. By the time he was finished and ended up back outside, the sun was touching the tops of the trees and the throng of parents were attempting to herd up their respective children.

Soon everyone had filed out, parents thanking him for planning the party and children tackling one another playfully as their way of saying goodbye. Even Melissa disappeared with Maya and Rosa, telling him to bring them over as soon as he was ready. Dom nodded and led James and Phillipa inside the house, deciding that the backyard could do without a cleaning until he returned. He nodded and listened intently to his children’s stories of the day, interested to hear their perspectives even though he had witnessed the same events.

However, all too soon he checked his watch and knew his taxi for the airport would be arriving shortly. He knelt down in front of the couch James and Phillipa had sprawled across, tired from the day’s activities, and tried to decide the best way to state this. “Listen guys...” he began hesitantly, catching their attention and eyes. “How would you feel about staying with Maya and Rosa and their parents for a few days?”

Phillipa, the one more aware of the implications of this statement, sat up on the couch quickly. James remained lounging against his sister, watching Dom with big, confused eyes. “How come?”

“How Uncle Arthur is in the hospital and I need to go help him get better,” Cobb couldn’t think of a reason to lie; he had already spoiled his children’s trust in him enough already.

“Uncle Arthur?” James blinked up at him widely, struggling into a sitting position and imitating his sister’s tense stance. “Take us! We help!”

Dom bit back a sigh as he leaned forward and gathered both children up into his arms. He felt his gut twist painfully at the thought of leaving his children again so soon. Though he was also heartbroken; while he had hesitated to go to his Point Man in need, his children had been ready to
go the moment they knew something was wrong. “I know you guys want to help, and that’s great.” He insisted warmly, clenching his eyes closed painfully to fight back the threatening tears as his children wrapped their arms around him tightly. “But right now I need you to stay with your friends and be good. Can you do that for me?”

They both nodded and allowed him to lead them out of the house, bags in tow as he locked everything up properly. He knocked on Melissa’s door and received a quick response, the door swinging inward to reveal Melissa with her two daughters embracing her legs. Dom handed Melissa his mobile number and got hers in return, promising to call every day. Maya and Rosa were clearly trying to get James and Phillipa’s attention, trying to draw them into the house to continue the party, but Dom heard a sad little sniffle in the still air of summer.

He fell to his knees immediately, uncaring of the hard wood that made up the flooring of the front veranda. “James, what’s wrong?” he questioned softly, gathering the boy up in his arms and stroking his hair softly. Cobb was silently grateful when Melissa quietly ushered her daughters into the house and gave them some time alone.

“You’re leaving forever!” James wailed, no longer silencing his sobs. Dom could feel his shirt getting wet with his son’s tears but didn’t care, only hugging him closer. He looked up to see Phillipa standing on the doorframe, looking close to tears but resolute. Dom motioned her closer but she shook her head and took a tiny step backwards. Cobb swallowed thickly, heart racing in his chest with anxiety.

“I’m not leaving forever, I promise,” he spoke to both of them, continuing to pet James’s hair softly while maintaining steady eye contact with Phillipa. “I’ll talk with you guys every night while I’m gone and I’ll be back as soon as Uncle Arthur is better.” Dom took a deep breath, feeling tears sting his eyes with his own desperation. “This isn’t like before.”

“D’you promise?” James muttered into the Extractor’s shirt before leaning back in his arms. The boy’s cheeks and eyes were puffy and red, bottom lip trembling as tear tracks caught the last few rays of the evening sun.

“I promise,” he assured solidly, brushing away the tears on his son’s face with the pad of his thumb; just the way Mal used to do when the children had had a nightmare. He heard, rather than saw the cab pull up on the street behind him. Dom focused his gaze on Phillipa, terrified that if he left now, when his children had just begun to trust him not to disappear again, he might lose them forever. Specifically Phillipa; she was old enough to remember and understand the significance of broken promises. “Come give me a hug, Phillipa,” he pleaded. He was pretty sure he needed the hug more than she did.

Phillipa crossed her arms across her chest, tears also marring her cheeks even though they were
silent tears. “I’ll hug you when you come back,” she stated with a tremor in her voice. “That way you’ll have to keep your promise.”

Dom wanted to argue the point, or steal a hug anyway. But he knew that doing so would only make things worse and nodded, trying to act like the adult in the situation. He embraced James again before brushing his hair away to kiss the boy on his forehead. Then he stood up and met Phillipa’s wavering gaze. “Take care of your brother for me, alright? And if you ever want to talk to me, Melissa has my number.”

“Oh, Daddy,” she gave him a watery smile, reminding him so much of Mallorie. “Love you.”

“I love both of you, so much,” he gathered them both up into a hug despite the previous conversation. He didn’t think he succeeded in keeping his tears at bay when Phillipa wrapped her arms around him and hugged him back despite her statement. “I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

Removing himself from the embrace, walking away from his children, slipping into the back seat of the cab, and remaining motionless as the car pulled away was the hardest thing the Extractor had ever done. He was silent for the rest of the evening, speaking only when absolutely necessary as he paid the driver, checked in with the airport, moved through security and finally boarded the plane. Dom knew that he should try to sleep on the flight but was too high strung with the mess of emotions storming inside him.

He was grateful and ready to collapse by the time the next cab dropped him off in front of the hospital and he strode up to the information desk tiredly. The secretary motioned for him to wait, finishing up a conversation on the phone. Dom wavered by the edge of the counter uselessly, not knowing what else to do with himself now that he was finally here. He just hoped he would be able to help Arthur somehow.

“How can I help you?” the young brunette woman asked him, sounding bored but very awake; she must have just started her night shift.

“My friend is checked in here,” Cobb explained as he rubbed his eyes, forcing away his tiredness now that he had a task to focus on. “I was told to get you to page Dr. Maxwell.”

“One moment, please,” the woman gave him a polite smile before clicking on her headset and punching in a few numbers on the phone on the surface of the paper-covered desk. Dom drummed his fingers along the plastic-like material of the counter, filled with nervous energy. “Hello, Dr. Maxwell, sorry for calling your office but there is a mister...”
“Dominic Cobb,” he supplied quickly.

“A Mr. Dominic Cobb here for you. Yes? Yes?” the secretary glanced up at the Extractor as she nodded to what the man on the receiver was saying. “Yes, alright.” She switched off the headset and returned her full attention to Dom. “He said he’ll be right down. You can sit right over there,” she pointed to a line of rather uncomfortable looking chairs filled with other people waiting.

He nodded his thanks and took a seat, grimacing as he felt the poorly moulded plastic of the chair bend his spine out of its proper angle. Shouldn’t they have ergonomic chairs in here? It was a hospital after all. Luckily he did not have long to wait before the man connected to the voice Cobb had previously heard on his phone appeared and led him upstairs to his office. “I’m glad you came,” the man admitted once Dom was seated in the office and the door had been sealed shut.

“Of course I came,” Dom couldn’t help but snap, defensive after his moment of hesitation. “Now would you please tell me what’s wrong with Arthur?”

Dr. Maxwell nodded his consent and flipped open a file that had been set on the middle of his desk. The doctor skimmed his eyes over the information there, no doubt refreshing his memory, and then met Cobb’s eyes seriously. “Mr. Tilmont arrived here early this morning, already in a coma. From the incident report of the person who called the ambulance, one of Mr. Tilmont’s associates had rented an office space. The agreement was supposed to be terminated and the keys returned at midnight last night, but they never showed up. Apparently this morning someone was sent to investigate.”

“He was found in a coma with no injuries. The three associates he was found with were in the same state. The reason I couldn’t speak with you about this over the phone, Mr. Cobb,” Dr. Maxwell fidgeted with the flimsy, beige folder absent-mindedly, “Is because they were found hooked up to a very sophisticated PASIV dreaming device.”

Cobb suppressed a groan, taking a deep, quiet breath. “How did you have my contact information?” Dom thought to ask; it wasn’t like Arthur to carry around information like that. He also needed to get the topic off dream devices; the way the doctor was looking at him made him quite sure the man suspected him of knowing more about the situation than he was letting on. Though that was only partially true; Dom knew about dream work, but he certainly didn’t know about Arthur’s current jobs.

“That’s the other puzzling matter,” the doctor spoke slowly as he slid a sheet of paper from the folder, handing it over to the Extractor. “When he was brought in, his wallet was mostly empty. What was in there was under a different name – Arthur Milton. However, once we got him hooked
up and got him in the system, that print-out,” the man pointed at the sheet of paper now in Dom’s grasp, “showed up on our computers.”

Cobb glanced down at the sheet of paper. There was only a small block of text in the centre of the page, beginning with ‘The emergency contact for Arthur Tilmont’ and ending with Cobb’s address. He couldn’t help his tiny scoff of surprise at the Point Man’s never-ending abilities. He was sure that this was just another alias for the man to hide behind, but Dom knew that it was the one he preferred to use when either working with those he trusted or needing the history of his name in the business for some leverage. Of course Arthur had some method of passing out emergency contact information on when he was officially registered into a hospital and requiring it. Why was Dom surprised?

Dr. Maxwell was watching him suspiciously, no doubt waiting for Dom to admit he knew something about the illegal dream work. Instead, Cobb handed the sheet of paper back and stood from his chair. “Can I see him?”

The doctor didn’t protest his request; he simply nodded and stood as well, leading the Extractor out into an echoing, recently waxed hallway. He watched nurse stations, nurses, doctors, cleaning staff and restless patients all scatter around the maze of hallways. He had made a living of manoeuvring through the mazes of the subconscious of other people, and yet Dom was quite certain he would have gotten lost in the hospital if Dr. Maxwell had not been leading.

It didn’t take long for them to stop in front of a non-descript door, though the door was solid while most of the other doors they had passed had had some glass window in them. Dom supposed that they couldn’t have everyone knowing about unregistered PASIV devices in the hospital. He followed the other man into the room, taking note of the heavy silence filling the room once the door closed behind them. The only noise breaking the silence was the sound of machines recording vitals and soft, terribly slow breathing.

His gaze skimmed over the entire room quickly, taking in the other three unconscious dream workers before racing to Arthur’s side. The Point Man was on his back, eyes closed and skin unblemished as if he were merely sleeping. But Dom could see Arthur’s eyebrows furrowed slightly and the twitch in those thin lips; Arthur was either concentrating or in pain. He placed one hand hesitantly on his friend’s arm, hoping that maybe the weight would transfer down to Arthur so that the man would know he wasn’t alone anymore. “I’m sorry I took so long,” he whispered by Arthur’s ear before straightening and returning his attention to the doctor.

“Mr. Tilmont’s vitals are stable for now, but they have been slowly and steadily declining since he arrived this morning. He is showing high levels of brain activity but will not respond, which is highly uncommon and concerning. At this rate...” Dr. Maxwell took a breath, jotting down some new vitals to a chart at the end of the hospital bed. “We’d say he has about three days left.”
“And why is he still hooked up to the PASIV?” Dom asked, uncaring of discussing something illegal right now; he needed to do whatever he could to help Arthur. “The timer seems frozen at two minutes remaining,” he rechecked the clock, reassuring himself of his assumption. “That shouldn’t happen. And why is he still hooked up to the people he was found with?”

“Is there a reason why he should not be hooked up to them?” the man raised an eyebrow. He was asking a dangerous question, but Cobb hoped that he was asking as a medical professional, rather than being concerned with the legality of the situation.

“Yes, they’re dangerous,” Dom stated seriously. Legality be damned.

Dr. Maxwell sighed and glanced out through the small window at another bland section of the hospital before turning his gaze back to Cobb and then Arthur. “We don’t know why the timer is frozen. We didn’t disconnect them because we couldn’t discern what is going on down in their subconscious to know if that action would be safe. It might kill them, rather than wake them up.”

Cobb was aware that he was pacing but he couldn’t bring himself to stop. He clenched his hands into fists before releasing them and starting over as he walked back and forth, trying to ease the tension in his body. Finally he stopped at the end of Arthur’s bed and met the doctor’s gaze. “What do you suggest we do? What can I do?”

As silence hung between them for a long minute, Dr. Maxwell looked truly uncomfortable for the first time since Dom had laid eyes on him. “We’ve done all of the tests we can; there’s nothing else we can do but monitor and hope he starts improving.” The man fell silent again for a long moment, checking over the machines helping Arthur breathe and stay hydrated. Dom wanted to question him again, knowing that there was something being left unsaid, but tried to remain patient. “I am not legally allowed to suggest this, Mr. Cobb,” Dr. Maxwell met his gaze before staring down at the unconscious Point Man. “Because I don’t know the consequences. But the only other option I see is someone going down with the PASIV and finding out what’s wrong.”

“You want me to go down there and try to wake him up?” Dom asked in disbelief. He had never thought he’d hear those words come from a doctor. He had never met a doctor outside of the military that was entirely fond of dream devices; they were still new and met with suspicion. Cobb couldn’t blame them; they were a complete mystery if you had not had any experience with one, and they were terribly addicting once you did indulge.

“I don’t want you to do anything other than help Mr. Tilmont if you can,” Dr. Maxwell corrected his statement, if only to be politically correct. “I will be in my office. If you need anything just press that call button behind the bed.”
Cobb nodded, still surprised, and watched the doctor check over the other three dream workers
before exiting the room, pulling the door closed behind him. Left alone, Dom snatched an empty
chair from against the wall and pulled it to Arthur’s bedside, clapping his friend’s hand with his
own again. The PASIV was sitting innocently on the bedside table, the wires spider-webbing out to
Arthur’s arm and to the other three occupied beds. Dom stared at it for a long moment, moonlight
reflecting off the shiny surface at this hour, before forcing his gaze away.

“Arthur, I don’t know if I can do this,” he admitted to the silence around him. This time, he hoped
the Point Man couldn’t hear him. How terrible was he, to hesitate and then come all this way just
to balk again? What would Arthur think if he knew Cobb was sitting up here in reality right now
with a means of possibly saving him, but was too terrified of himself to indulge in those addicting
chemicals?

He didn’t know what was in Arthur’s subconscious; what was happening down there that had
managed to freeze the timer on the device and lock four people down in the dreamscape. He
wasn’t particularly concerned by it. What did terrify Dom was the thought that if he went down, if
he experienced that raw creation again and saw Mallorie again, he might never return to reality and
his kids. But Cobb took a deep, steadying breath, remembering Phillipa’s words. She would hug
him when he got back; she believed him when he promised he would return.

The Extractor realized that there was nothing else to be done and reached over for the final lead of
the PASIV slowly. He sterilized the needle and returned to his chair by Arthur’s bed, watching the
Point Man’s chest rise and fall rhythmically under the expanse of crisp white sheets. He touched
the end of the needle idly for a moment with the pad of his finger, testing its sharpness as he
steeled his courage. Then, with one final glance at his friend, Dom slid the needle in place under
his skin. He didn’t know what to expect. All he could do was hope.

He didn’t feel the common tingling that the chemicals caused when entering his veins; apparently
the dream workers were being held under by something other than the chemicals. But that didn’t
stop the PASIV from doing its job, the device only allowing him a few weary blinks before he felt
his eyes fall closed heavily. A moment later he found himself in the middle of a wide downtown
street, pavement cracked and crumbling here and there. Even though he hadn’t known what to
expect, Dom was still taken by surprise by what his senses were attacked with as he studied the
dreamscape quickly.

There was a rumbling in the ground under his feet and Dom just knew that it was a building
collapsing some distance away. The tremors travelled up his legs and into his entire body as he
dashed for cover. He could see as he looked around that the dreamscape was a vast, complex
downtown city centre, but it looked as if war had recently struck. The sky was gray with clouds of
dust and ash; the buildings were crumbling and lacking windows – long since shattered. Trees,
benches, garbage and just about everything else flammable was set ablaze, or had already turned
into smouldering ashes that the wind picked up.
It was hard to breath, smoke filling his lungs thickly as he ducked out of view in the nearest alleyway he saw. He could hear screaming and shouting all around him and Dom kept spinning in place, trying to discern which direction the rioting was coming from. The Extractor’s heart was racing, breath coming short with anxiety as he dashed further into the alley; he felt trapped, like nowhere was safe.

He hadn’t realized how unaccustomed he had grown to being in a dreamscape, being in true harm’s way, until he had shown up in the middle of a rioting war. Now he didn’t know what he should do to survive, let alone how to find Arthur. Dom was just considering shooting himself in the head and planning in reality before braving this war-torn world again when he tripped and toppled to the hard concrete ground.

The atmosphere around him wasn’t silent, still filled with cries of what he thought might be projections. But he felt trapped and oppressed in the alleyway as he scrambled to his feet. Nonetheless, no matter how quickly he managed to pull himself back up – some instincts and skills never fading completely – he already had the barrel of a gun to his head. He clenched his eyes shut, ready to meet his end and try again, when he heard a shocked intake of air. “Cobb?”

His eyes flew open and landed on the Point Man, who was dropping his gun but not putting it away. “Arthur!” he breathed his relief, thanking every deity he had ever heard of for his luck.

“What are you doing here?” Arthur hissed angrily, using the hand not holding the gun to propel the Extractor further away from the mouth of the alleyway as an explosion sounded nearby.

“I’m here to help you!” Dom shot back, infuriated at Arthur’s lack of gratitude. Cobb had left his children, flown to New York, and given up on his attempt to stay away from PASIVs just to help the Point Man. And this was his thanks?

“Well you can’t help me, Dom,” Arthur finally stopped moving and stood still. Cobb watched as Arthur plastered his back against the alley wall, scanning both directions of the alley like a well-programmed machine. “You need to leave.”


Arthur gave an aggravated huff, fidgeting with his gun as he muttered about time. Then the Point Man’s eyes, darker than usual with the blotted out sun, met his. “The three dream workers turned on me and are trying to extract information. I locked down my subconscious so that they can’t
escape with anything. I’m trying to fight them off but I can’t do it alone.”

Arthur was shaking his head and Dom placed a steadying hand on the man’s shoulder. “Let me help you.”

The Point Man shook his head more vigorously at Dom’s request and shrugged his hand away, looking worn-out and desperate. “No, you have your own responsibilities back in reality. Besides, you can’t help me. I…” Arthur suddenly hesitated, biting his lower lip and looking conflicted. “I need Eames.”

“Eames?” Dom yelled, earning a vicious glare for being so loud. “What the hell can he do?” he questioned more quietly, affronted that Arthur was casting aside his help so quickly.

Before Arthur could respond, let alone explain, they heard a crash and another explosion by the alleyway entrance they had entered through. Without a word they both dashed down the alley in the opposite direction in a sprint, shoulders brushing one another and the brick walls as they ran together. They turned a corner and came into view of the opposite alleyway mouth, hearing the echoing howl of projections behind them, and skidded to a stop when they saw another riot of people in the street surrounding the entrance.

The Point Man grabbed Cobb’s arm and pulled him down another alley, clearly having the whole maze created and memorized to his advantage. Soon the sound of furious projections fell behind them again, momentarily lost. Arthur pulled Cobb into a small niche and out of immediate view of anyone who might be quietly scouting ahead of the group. “If anyone dies down here while my barriers are up, their memories get wiped. I’m going to drop them just long enough for you to get out.”

“And what about you?” Dom whispered harshly. “The sound of the gunshot will draw all of their attention right at you!”

“I’ll be fine,” Arthur brushed his concerns away quickly, eyes already closed and body suddenly relaxing. The Extractor didn’t know what was happening and had never heard of someone being able to lock down their subconscious before. But he could physically feel the dreamscape shift when Arthur’s barriers had fallen, like a ripple passing through every particle of the dream. The Point Man opened his eyes and met Dom’s gaze, looking regretful. “Goodbye, Dom. Find Eames.”

There was a deafening crack from the gunshot and a brief searing of pain before Dom was awake and looking around the hospital frantically. He checked his watch as he pulled out the needle; he had only been in the dream for two minutes. Time was going much faster in the dream space; he
wondered how long it had been for Arthur down there. The Extractor took a few deep breaths, trying to slow his heart. It didn’t work. Now he was just buzzing with adrenaline he couldn’t use effectively.

He had to do *something*, but there was apparently only one thing Arthur thought could help. Eames. The Forger. Dom didn’t know why Arthur thought Eames of all people could help, but he didn’t care. He made sure that he was still alone in the private hospital room before he pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts.

He selected the Forger’s number and pressed the phone to his ear.
Eames stared dully at the clock on his bedside table, red letters flashing eight in the morning. The Forger sent a withering glare at the clock before turning his back to the mocking numbers and determinedly closing his eyes again. He was so sick of this, of not being able to sleep. There were five ways Eames knew how to escape from reality: alcohol, drugs, forging, PASIV dreaming, and normal sleep. However nothing seemed to work.

He had certainly relied on his fair share of drugs and alcohol shortly after he arrived to stay in Mombasa after Inception, drinking and blurring his sorrows away. At first it had done wonders, making everything seem less important, less worthy of pain and heartbreak. It was even better that he didn’t remember most days; when he wandered over to the calendar on his fridge he would be surprised, each time, with how much time had passed.

This had taken a turn for the worse though, one evening after a night of gambling and hard liquor that burned the back of his throat. He had brought some random young man home to his bed, his senses hazy with chemicals. Eames had torn the man’s clothing away and pushed him down into the mattress; facedown when he noticed the man’s hair was too light a shade to be black and the eyes were more green than brown. He had fucked the man senseless, the coupling driven by need rather than passion, and then yelled the wrong name when he came. The stranger seemed offended, but not badly enough to leave before Eames returned the favour of orgasm.

That had left the Forger alone in his flat soon after, the taste of Arthur’s name still lingering on his lips. He had stripped the bed bare and put on new sheets before stumbling into the shower to wash away the feelings of disgust welling up inside him. He had never had an issue with one night stands before, but now he felt guilty, unclean and disloyal even though the one he felt loyal towards couldn’t care less about who he slept with. That, more than anything, was what hurt.

When Eames had crawled into his bed sometime later, the final lingering effects of the drugs and alcohol sluggishly draining from his system, he had been overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness. The alcohol had only magnified the feeling and he had spent half of the night staring at the ceiling before he finally fell into a restless sleep. He had avoided checking his totem because he hadn’t wanted the reminder that this was real.

He had abandoned drugs and alcohol the morning after when he woke up with a dizzying mix of hangover and depression. Eames had felt a longing for something far more domestic than he had ever considered before in his life and had promptly sworn off substance abuse.
The Forger had hoped that once he flushed his system he would start improving again, but he had never risen from that dull, lonely depression that sapped his motivation to do just about anything. He had not taken anyone else home, partially due to misplaced loyalty and partially out of fear that he might drop further. Instead he had thrown himself into work and taken any job he came across.

It was stupidity and desperation for normalcy driving him, but his attempts fell flat. As soon as he joined a new team of dream workers, Eames would be reminded of how unprofessional and unskilled they were in comparison to their Inception team. He had put up with it though, deciding that he needed the opportunity to forge out of his own skin more than social interaction. It had worked for a while. It had worked really well; right up until Arthur began haunting him in the dreamscape.

Eames had never thought he could ever fall as far as Cobb had; Arthur was alive and well in the world somewhere, after all. However, the projection that tugged him into a vacant hotel room was near-perfect and Eames had been willing to ignore the slight hollowness in those sharp brown eyes. He had allowed Arthur to press him against the wall, the Point Man glaring at him while meticulously undoing the buttons of Eames’s shirt. “Why are you working with these fools?” the projection had asked angrily. “You know they’re planning on killing you after you give them the information. Why, Eames?”

“Because it’s the only way to catch your attention, darling,” Eames had responded honestly before pulling Arthur against him, claiming his lips harshly.

The projection had remained tense in his arms, unyielding muscle against Eames, but he did return the kiss almost desperately. After a moment though, he felt Arthur pull away quickly; breathes entwining between them. The Forger could hear his other team members outside the room, searching for him to kill him just as Arthur – just as his subconscious – had reminded him. “There are better ways to catch my attention,” Arthur had whispered against his lips before drawing a gun and shooting Eames between the eyes.

It had woken Eames up with enough time to escape before the rest of his traitorous team had come to consciousness. But just because he had escaped a near death didn’t mean he was about to stop dream working now. The sight of Arthur was burned on his retina now; the sound of the Point Man’s soft, precise voice and the feel of those normally uncompromising lips against his own were ingrained. Eames was addicted and, despite what the projection had said, he could think of no better way to get Arthur’s attention.

After Inception was over, Eames had handed the Point Man his number in the airport. He had pulled Arthur aside, despite the man’s protests and their agreement to act like strangers after the job. After passing over the slip of paper with his mobile number on it, Eames had met Arthur’s eyes strongly, silencing the other man’s protests. “Call me when you start working again, darling,” he had demanded, wincing when it came out sounding more like a plea.
Arthur had taken the slip of paper, pushed it into his coat pocket and stepped around the Forger to walk away without a word. Eames had allowed him to walk away, swallowing down all the words he wanted to yell after the man. He hadn’t known if Arthur taking his number was agreement or not, but he had reassured himself every time his phone buzzed and the message wasn’t from the Point Man that the man was probably still lying low.

That was, of course, until Eames had gotten Yusuf drunk one night and the Chemist admitted he had just shipped off a crate of chemicals to Arthur. It had been a few months since Inception by that point and it was easy for the Forger to pull more information from his friend and Chemist. Arthur had asked for another shipment about three weeks after Inception; this was the second shipment. So Arthur had not only begun working again – the Point Man had been working near constantly to work through that amount of chemicals so quickly.

Eames had been tempted to call Cobb to see if the Extractor knew Arthur’s location or any details on the jobs being done. But he had felt guilty at the thought. He didn’t want to remind the man of past exploits so soon after returning safely to the United States. Nor did he want to feign interest in the man’s reunion with his children just to get the Point Man’s location. He was happy for Cobb, certainly, but they weren’t exactly friends.

The Forger had also thought briefly of contacting Ariadne to see what the Architect was up to. But the thought that Arthur might have called her for a job and not Eames sent an immediate wave of nauseating jealousy through him; he had hung up his phone before he had even finished dialling the girl’s number. Instead, he had pried the shipment address from Yusuf and booked the next plane ticket to Belgium.

He wasn’t entirely sure what he had been thinking when he landed in Brussels and taken a taxi to the shipment address. Maybe he would demand to know why Arthur had never called him, however pathetic that sounded in his head. Maybe he would demand Arthur bring him in on the next job and never again let the Point Man out of his sight. Maybe he would press Arthur into the nearest flat surface and kiss the breath from his lips, until Arthur realized just what he had been missing.

The address had led to a non-descript P.O. box in the middle of downtown Brussels. It was clear that Arthur had already arrived, taken the parcel and disappeared again. It was also doubtful that the Point Man would ever return to the address again for safety reasons. Feeling heavy with a sense of failure and annoyance, Eames had flown back to Mombasa the next day.

He had continued taking jobs, hoping that the Point Man might be keeping tabs on him when he was so active in the field. But he never received a phone call, or any new indication of where the man might be working. The haunting grew worse. His projection of Arthur would be there the
moment Eames found himself alone in the dreamscape, the job quickly forgotten. The meeting usually ended in some level of undress and arousal, but there was never enough time for Eames to enjoy himself before his team members realized he was botching the job and he had to run.

It had been over half a year since Inception when Eames finally stopped taking jobs. He had gone down into the dream with a team that was more than dangerous. He knew it was beyond stupid and that there was a good chance he would not escape alive. But he was desperate enough – knowing that if Arthur was ever going to intervene in reality, this would be the time. The Point Man never did. At that point, when he was slipping the needle under his skin with no contact from Arthur, Eames couldn’t quite find the motivation to care if he didn’t make it out of the situation alive.

Arthur was there waiting for him in the dream though, projection as diligent as always. But this time Arthur snatched his hand and rushed Eames through the dreamscape, altering architecture into mazes in their wake. When they finally slowed to a stop, they found themselves in the abandoned shipping warehouse’s main office. The Point Man had barred the door and pulled Eames to the concrete floor behind the desk when bullets began firing. “I can’t keep saving you like this, Eames!”

“I don’t need you to save me, Arthur!” he had snapped in return, defensive and angry as adrenaline flew through his veins. “It doesn’t matter anymore.” He hated how drained he felt now, how much his depression was wearing him down. He hated that his happiness had become so dependent on Arthur, and that he had no way of claiming the Point Man as his own.

“Of course it matters!” Arthur had yelled over the deafening sound of gunfire. “I can’t focus on jobs if I know you’re not safe!” The Point Man had pushed Eames flat on his back, straddling his stomach and glaring down at him harshly.

“I’m not just going to sit at home and twiddle my thumbs while you gallivant around the world getting yourself in danger!” Eames yelled, flipping their positions and pressing Arthur down into the concrete. He was angry – so angry – and forgot that it was a projection below him. “You can’t do that to me; it’s not fair!”

Arthur opened his mouth to respond when the dream workers outside the office suddenly fell silent. They both glanced towards the door nervously before meeting one another’s gaze again. Arthur was staring up at him, looking stubborn but distressed. “I need to know you’re safe,” Arthur whispered, “I love you.”

Eames reeled back with a snarl. “How dare you?” he hissed, pulling a gun out and aiming it towards the projection’s head. “You don’t have the right to say that to me!” It wasn’t fair how the Forger’s heart was fluttering as he stared down at Arthur – no! A projection! – with those words still floating in the air. He pulled the trigger before he could do something worse, like lean down

Eames threw up under the desk before shooting himself in the head and running. And despite how useless and pathetic he felt, he didn’t take on anymore jobs. He couldn’t bear to have his imperfect projection say things like that again; it just made everything hurt more once Eames was back in reality and time continued dragging on without any contact from the real Point Man. Of course Arthur didn’t love him; the man didn’t even care enough to make sure he stayed alive.

But time continued to struggle by at a pace so slow Eames could barely comprehend it. His sleeping habits became erratic and he would often find himself waking up with no knowledge of what day it was. But then he would check his calendar and realize that he had only been asleep for a few hours, rather than a few days. He wondered idly in those moments, forehead pressed against the paper of his calendar and cold mug of coffee in his hand, if time might just slow to a stop someday soon.

It hadn’t been long before Eames had ended up on Yusuf’s doorstep, buying some new chemicals under the pretence of taking another job. He thought the Chemist might realize that Eames was lying with the way the man glanced over him critically, but Yusuf had conceded. Maybe he realized Eames needed this, maybe he realized there was no hope of recovery; Eames didn’t care either way.

When he went down into his dreams with the PASIV in the safety of his own flat, things were terribly, wonderfully different. There was no rush and no dangerous dream workers scouring his subconscious anymore. It was just Eames and Arthur, not the Forger and Point Man, wherever they wanted to be. Sometimes they would fuck each other into the nearest flat surface until neither of them could move. It didn’t take much time before Eames had memorized every inch of Arthur’s skin, the feeling of the man’s lips around his cock and the bliss from Arthur’s ass clenching around him.

Other times the dream ended up being horrifyingly domestic. They would end up in a flat or house filled with sunlight and warmth, indications of both of their styles in the decorations and design. Sometimes they would explore the dreamscape lazily, hands entwined and smiles on both of their faces. Eames would make Arthur his famous breakfast and Arthur would treat him to a pasta dish he had picked up when completing a job in Italy. Eames didn’t know if Arthur really knew how to cook the dish, but it didn’t matter; he didn’t care. All that mattered was that he could do whatever he pleased with Arthur curled up in his embrace.

Both types of PASIV dreams passed the time quickly, but they were also dangerously addicting. When Eames would blink his eyes open when the chemicals ran out of the device, he would find a dark, silent and empty flat. His food would be bland and uninteresting, no one he spoke with in the market would catch his attention the way Arthur did when telling him a story, and Eames’s bed
It was Arthur who ended things.

They were actually in his flat in Mombasa, near the coast, when it happened. He had taken a liking to imagining his flat with Arthur living there with him now that he was spending more time in the dream than in reality. They were sprawled in bed on newly ruined sheets, naked skin slick and pressed together as they kissed lazily. Arthur was running his fingers down Eames’s body curiously, neither of them growing tired of exploring one another, when the man paused and pulled his lips away.

“What’s wrong, love?” Eames had asked, blinking his eyes open lazily, noticing the disapproving look on Arthur’s face. The sun was spilling in through the windows, increasing the shadows Arthur’s frown created.

“You’re fading away,” Arthur stated sadly, fingers still trailing along the Forger’s body.

Eames glanced down at himself in confusion before meeting his lover’s gaze. “No I’m not.”

“No, not here you’re not,” Arthur agreed, leaning forward to plant a trembling kiss to Eames’s lips. “But you’re fading away in reality. When was the last time you ate up there?”

“Who cares?” he tried to shrug the questions and Arthur’s concerns aside. He didn’t want to admit that he didn’t know what day it was up there, let alone not knowing the last time he had eaten. “This is where I belong. With you.”

He tried to pull Arthur down again, to reassure him that everything would be alright, but the Point Man was shaking his head. For the first time since Eames had begun this, Arthur truly looked like himself in reality again; hard lines and sharp angles in his face and body. “If you die up there, you’ll never be able to come down here with me again.”
“And if I go back up there, I won’t be here with you either,” Eames pointed out, beginning to get irritated. “I would die to stay here with you.”

“Don’t say that,” Arthur whispered harshly. Eames felt one warm tear land on his stomach where it had fallen from Arthur’s cheek. He raised a hand to brush the shimmering tear tracks away but his hand was batted aside angrily. “Please stop this. I need you safe in reality. I--”

“Don’t say it,” Eames cut him off, causing Arthur to close his mouth with an audible snap. He felt betrayed and lost. He felt sick and heavy. He felt unmotivated, unwanted and unloved.

“I really do, Eames. Even if you can’t see it,” Arthur pleaded, tears washing away the evidence of the Point Man’s previous orgasm on Eames’s stomach. “But I can’t hold you here forever. I’ll see you again in your natural dreams.”

This was where Eames felt welcome, felt as though he truly belonged, and he was being sent away. It hurt, much deeper than Eames had ever thought possible. He reminded himself that this was just a projection above him, turning him away, but it didn’t help. He had been down here with Arthur for what felt like months now; it didn’t matter anymore that it wasn’t the real Arthur. But he was choking down his tears now, feeling sickness churning in his stomach, and he materialized a gun in his hand. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Arthur,” was all he said as way of farewell before pulling the trigger.

He woke to a cold apartment, waking in the middle of the night. Eames had pulled himself out of bed, noting with frustration how difficult it was for him to get his body and muscles to work the way they were supposed to. He wandered over to his calendar to check when he had last drawn an “X” through a day. Friday. He then snatched his watch off the coffee table wearily and checked the date. Monday. Shit.

Eames had dragged himself into the shower to attempt to rejuvenate himself. It worked, but only enough to remind his body how hungry it was. So he traveled to the kitchen without turning on any lights, body stiff and weak from disuse and neglect. He ate dry cereal, his milk gone bad, and downed a few glasses of water before heading back to bed. The Forger had a migraine and was terribly dizzy, the room seeming to spin around him as he collapsed into bed. The PASIV device, carefully cleaned and put back into the sturdy case, was gleaming in the moonlight on one of his bedside tables – mocking him. Eames kicked the table over in anger, sending the silver briefcase clattering to the floor, and then spent the rest of the night unsuccessfully attempting to sleep.

It was still lonely waking up every morning after that, Eames so accustomed to waking up with Arthur beside him every time he went down into a dream. But his heartbreak and anger was fuelling him now, getting him out of his flat. He could barely manage to return home each night after spending so much time forging dreams there with Arthur, but he didn’t mind the anger as
much as he should. He needed it for motivation.

The Forger had locked the PASIV away and returned the small amount of his unused chemicals to Yusuf; he was incredibly grateful to the man for not commenting on it. Then he had begun a new routine to keep himself busy and to rebuild his body back to its previous strength and stamina. It took time and it didn’t wipe his false memories of the Point Man from his mind, but it made the days pass at a more tolerable pace.

He even managed to see Arthur on rare occasions when he managed to sleep through an entire night without waking up, restless. The dreams were relieving, like the first taste of nicotine on your tongue after going months without a cigarette, or the first burn of alcohol in your stomach after pouring your stash down the drain. They were fuzzy and difficult to remember the next morning, the Forger’s ability to dream still hindered by the amount of PASIV dreaming he had indulged in. But they were just enough to keep him sane while not driving him back to Yusuf for more chemicals.

Eames sighed in frustration and glanced back at his clock, noting that only ten minutes had passed since he last checked. 8:10. The mornings were still the hardest, when he was desperate to return to the dream world and forgo reality. He knew he should force himself out of bed but ended up curled under his sheets again, unable to think of any particular goal to aim for that day. He had already built his body back up to its prime form, maybe even better off than he was during Inception. The Forger buried his head under his pillows, willing the sun and the day to pass, when he heard his phone vibrate on his bedside table where the PASIV used to rest.

He groaned his disapproval and stubbornly remained where he was, uninterested in moving to answer the phone. Who could possibly be calling anyway? No one Eames wanted to talk to, he was sure. It was probably a wrong number. He sighed in relief when the irritating sound of metal vibrating on wood ceased and the flat was filled with silence again. But then, before he could even appreciate the quiet, the phone began buzzing again.

Eames threw his pillows aside and sat up in bed, snatching the phone from the table. He knew it was dangerous to keep a phone number for so long in his profession, but he had never disposed of this one; there was still a small spark of hope in him that Arthur might call one day. Instead, he had gotten new phones for each job before he quit dream work, chucking them in the nearest body of water when he was done.

As annoying as it was, Eames still felt a small clench of anticipation and plummet of disappointment in his stomach when he checked the incoming number and saw that it was not Arthur. But the name on his display did perk his interest and he flipped the phone open. “Cobb.”

“Eames,” the Extractor breathed, as if he had just run a marathon. “You need to come to New
Eames blinked and glanced at his clock again. It must only be a little after midnight in New York at this time. Why would Cobb be calling him now? And didn’t the Extractor live in one of the western states? “Look, Cobb, I’m not really taking any jobs right now—” He was surprised that the man had even gotten back into dream work now that he had been reunited with his children.

“No, no Eames, you don’t understand,” Cobb cut him off, sounding frantic. “This isn’t about a job. You need to get the next available flight to New York; I don’t care where you are.”

The Forger raised an eyebrow even though he knew the other man couldn’t see. He was equally confused, curious and angry. Cobb hadn’t made any effort to keep contact after returning to the States – not that Eames could blame him – and now he was suddenly calling Eames up and demanding he leave his flat immediately? The man didn’t know what Eames had gone through. “Why?” he heard himself asking, rather than simply hanging up the phone. There was something heavy in the pit of his stomach that kept him on the line.

Cobb took a deep breath, sighing into the phone. “Arthur needs you.”

Eames felt his whole body tense and he quickly threw the bed sheets aside to stand up. “What happened?” he asked, knowing something had to be wrong. If Arthur wanted to talk to him, the Point Man would have called Eames himself if he could.

“I can’t say over the phone. Just get here now,” the Extractor demanded, voice quiet but firm as it passed through the speaker of Eames’s phone.

Eames was already pulling out a small travel bag, something that would last him for a few weeks if absolutely necessary. His laptop was powering up on the desk by the window. “Where?” he asked quickly, stuffing clothes unceremoniously into the bag from his closet.

“New York Presbyterian Hospital.” The words, coupled with Cobb’s strained voice, said it all. “Ask for Dr. Maxwell.”

The Forger swallowed down the nausea that was crawling up his throat. “I’m on my way.” Both dream workers hung up and Eames immediately dialled for a cab while rushing over to the laptop to book the next plane ticket available. If he hurried, he could catch a flight that would have him in New York by noon, States time. He printed off his confirmation and packed it with his clothing in a
flurry, ordering a cab and dropping his phone on the bed.

He dressed quickly and swept the flat for anything that could be used to track him. He pulled his small safety deposit box from his safe, removing the passport he needed before sealing the rest away again; he barely gave the PASIV a second glance. By the time he had turned off his water and heat and gotten himself on the street corner, the cab was pulling up. They took a quick stop by Yusuf’s place so that he could hand the man his safety deposit box for safe keeping, having no time to go to a bank. Then they were off to the airport.

Eames was never the best traveller, always growing a little fidgety and anxious when it came to getting through security and on board the plane. That day he was probably the worst flyer in the entire airport. He was impatient, snippy, and uncooperative with everyone he came into contact with until he remembered that cooperating would make things run faster. Nonetheless, it still seemed to take forever for him to get through security. Time seemed to drag even more slowly as the plane slowly filled up with passengers and the plane slowly taxied towards the runway before finally pulling into the air.

He tried to relax himself once they were in the air, reminding himself that he was in for two long flights and a layover in Heathrow, London. But he couldn’t stop from fidgeting with the magazine in the pouch on the back of the chair in front of him, or the little telly screen. There was no way for the Forger to tell himself that nothing was wrong and that he was overreacting. There was clearly something seriously wrong.

At one point a flight attendant shuffled up to him and asked if he was alright. It was only then that Eames realized he had been sitting with his head between his knees, hyperventilating. He had asked for some water but quickly forgot about it when the glass was handed to him. Instead he ended up staring out through the small plane window, eyes glazed as his mind ran quickly with distressing thoughts.

A part of Eames didn’t know what he would do when he saw Arthur, healthy or not. Eames had been seeing the Point Man for almost a year now in various states of dreaming, fantasizing and obsession. And even though none of those encounters had ended well, Eames was still irresponsibly addicted to Arthur. He had been ever since Inception, of course, but his year of seeing all of the possibilities and knowing what they felt like only increased that desire. But what would Eames do if Arthur rejected him just as the projections had? Which, Eames had to admit, was very likely. The Forger would never force himself upon Arthur, but he was desperate for another chance to prove to the Point Man that he was worth taking a chance on.

Soon Eames’s head was swirling with thoughts again and he downed his room temperature water in one gulp. He reminded himself that now was not the time to think about such things, lest he wanted to drive himself mad. He would have no answers for himself until he saw the Point Man in reality – for the first time in a year. And more important, Eames needed to focus on helping Arthur however
he could. His feelings could wait until he was sure that Arthur would be alright.

“Nervous flyer?” his neighbour finally asked, probably irritated beyond belief with Eames.

“Something like that,” Eames hedged, not really in the mindset or mood to talk with a stranger about his issues.

“Don’t worry,” the older looking business man sent him a comforting smile, lips only slightly tense with annoyance. “Everything will be fine.”

Eames gave a huff of laughter and did his best to forge a polite smile before returning his attention to the plane’s window. “That’s all I can hope for.”
Arthur was running before Cobb’s limp body hit the pavement. Just as the Extractor had warned, a tense silence had swept across the surrounding area as projections paused their fighting to consider the gunshot. Arthur was already a good few blocks away from the throng of projections when he heard them howl and begin their chase; he could also hear his own projections fighting back more viciously, giving him time to escape.

He made his way back towards the centre of the city, only forced to stop twice en route by projections that preferred to wander alone. The Point Man dispatched them with ruthless efficiency, barely pausing; he made sure to never remain still for longer than necessary. He was dashing into another maze of alleys without confirming that the projections twitching on and staining the pavement were truly dead; it didn’t really matter if they were or not, he just needed time to get away.

There was no victory or success in taking the time to kill every enemy projection he encountered. He was outnumbered three to one – the projections maintaining that ratio – and it required little effort to manifest new ones to replace the fallen projections. It was true that killing someone’s projections on a mass scale and forcing them to regenerate constantly would wear the dream worker down – you were attacking their subconscious, after all - but Arthur had no time or energy to spare on such a plan.

His own projections had been taking a hard hit themselves, bogged down by the sheer number of opponents. It didn’t matter how skilled Arthur – and through association, his projections – were at combat, defence and strategy; three to one odds were never good. As much as he hated hiding, Arthur had been forced to find some central location away from the barriers of the dreamscape and allow his projections to fight on his behalf. He had ventured out into the destroyed dreamscape occasionally, but only to map out the streets and position his militarized projections strategically.

Arthur knew he was nearing his base of operation when the sounds of pursuit and combat fell into the background. He had organized a perimeter around the downtown core, ensuring that only Arthur and his projections gained access without a bullet hole between the eyes. It hadn’t seemed entirely necessary considering the fact that his enemies had retreated to the fringes of the city to regroup and strategize, not yet attempting any siege, but Arthur was nothing if not precautious.

Nonetheless, even though Arthur himself had set up the perimeter, it was still disconcerting to enter a section of city that was, in all senses of the word, abandoned. No damage or disaster had befallen these few blocks of the city, windows intact rather than shattered or scratched beyond repair, cars
parked silently against the curb rather than overturned and smouldering warningly. Arthur had managed to preserve the area before the combat trailing behind him destroyed it, but now as he jogged through the empty streets he felt as though he was exploring a post-apocalyptic city.

Windows looked in on darkened rooms, buildings unpopulated, and there was not even the sound of nature – birds, trees rustling in the breeze, stray cats and dogs – to keep him company. Instead he was alone as he peeked out from an alley, skirting the area with a careful eye, and then dashed across an empty intersection to slip into the sky scraper that served as the centre of the dreamscape. Even though he knew it was only his projections this far into the centre of the city, he still felt wary whenever he found himself in open, vulnerable locations. He did his best to avoid them at whatever cost.

He slipped in through the heavy metal doors and found himself in pitch blackness; the lights had been cut and all of the windows in the main lobby had been covered up. There were only a few slivers of light that escaped the heavy fabric or furniture pressed against the large windows, reflecting off the shiny marble floors. Arthur squinted as he attempted to force his eyes to adjust to the dark as quickly as possible, the light making the task difficult. Which was, obviously, the point. His breath was harsh and loud in the brief silence.

The sound of a multitude of guns having their safety being flicked off echoed around the room and Arthur could tease out at least ten different locations that the ominous sound was coming from. He knew that those in the room were probably well adjusted to the near-impregnable darkness; it was unlikely that any one shot would miss their mark. “What is your biggest regret?” came a voice from the darkness and Arthur tensed despite himself.

It was a challenge not to whip out his own gun, forcing down habit. “Diane,” he answered simply, straining his eyes to make out the firing squad focused on him. He didn’t manage to lay eyes on anyone as the solitary name bounced off the marble in the room, echoing back in Arthur’s ears painfully no matter how quietly he had spoken.

He was acutely aware of the sound of safeties being put back on guns and could hear a few telltale sounds of guns being relaxed slightly in trained grips – he didn’t make the mistake of assuming it would take the snipers long enough to return to shooting position for him to dash across the shrouded lobby. He tensed further when there was suddenly a hand on his elbow, leading him firmly across the wide expanse of the lobby and around obstacles that no stranger would be able to prepare for.

Arthur was led through the lobby and two sets of heavy double doors before he found himself in a very large room with the beginning of a staircase winding up along the four walls of the room – spiralling upwards. He clenched his eyes closed when the lights were suddenly turned on, and then he spent a few moments blinking his eyes to adjust back to the light. The large square room was hollow in the centre as the stairs wound upwards, all the way up towards the top of the building.
He glanced over to the man who had led him in here, taking tired note of the annoyed expression on the man’s face. He was dressed as though he was en route to a court case in the Supreme Court, ready to defend someone that only the best lawyers dared. The man was older, short hair black but peppered with gray in a way that spoke of distinguished, rather than old. “You shouldn’t continue to go out into the city,” the man finally spoke, still sounding irritated.

Arthur narrowed his eyes minutely in agitation before heading for the stairs, the man trailing behind him. He hated when projections began talking back. “You know I had to, and you know why,” he muttered while keeping a careful focus on the staircase. There was a reason he had designed it this way; the room was open and wide enough that his projections could attack from above if necessary, and there was also thirty flights he could manipulate into paradoxical loops. His enemies would be sitting ducks, stuck ten floors above ground with the stairs looping in a circle; Arthur’s projections on the higher levels could easily rain down hell in the form of precisely aimed bullets.

“I could have gone out and organized the military base in the north,” the projection reminded him. “You have been discussing your plans with me since we arrived here, after all,” the man spoke calmly, though Arthur was aware enough of his own speaking habits to pick up on the annoyance still keeping the man tense.

“You seem to be overestimating your value again, George,” Arthur glanced back at the projection snidely, finding it odd to have named a portion of subconscious and yet knowing how difficult it had become to organize his projections when everyone responded to ‘you!’ “You are not me. You are my projection.”

“Exactly!” the man huffed, noticeably less patient than Arthur himself. “I’m able to carry your knowledge temporarily and yet I am disposable.”

Arthur winced to himself at the words, hating how cavalier he and his projections had become over the cost of life down here in the dreamscape. They were at war after all, and it was inevitable that many projections would die to protect the dreamer, but it still felt wrong to speak about death so flippantly. “You forget that I have to see the dreamscape to properly plan where to place the military,” he reminded the projection; there were some things that the dreamer had to do directly.

“Yes, but you have the majority of the city mapped out now, and the rest you can see from your office,” George retaliated strongly. Arthur couldn’t believe that a handful of projections had managed to manifest with more consciousness than the rest. He knew it was necessary in order to survive this encounter – Arthur couldn’t run the whole dreamscape and every projection himself – but it was still frustrating to have your subconscious disagree with you. Of course, it happened in reality as well, that little voice in the back of your head reminding you to consider other options or
harping on you about making a stupid decision, but it was a much more bizarre experience to have that voice manifested into an independent body.

There had been five of these projections in total and Arthur had sent four of them out, unable to handle the aggravation of more than one projection speaking its mind. That had put one of these higher ranked projections at each corner of the city, bordering the north, south, east and west. Arthur had just finished positioning the last one in the north – the last barrier between Arthur’s base of operation and the enemy dream workers. Only George had remained, left in charge of the projections in the building and the surrounding area.

“You think I should just stay up in my office, hidden away and being generally useless towards my own survival,” he didn’t bother glancing back to meet George’s gaze as he stated his question, already knowing the answer. Instead he focused his attention on evaluating the row of militarized projections that surrounded the top balcony of the room; they were all keeping a sharp eye on the floors below, guns at rest position but a mere second away from being prepared.

“I don’t think,” the projection argued predictably, “I know.” George held back as Arthur, satisfied with his projections, turned and began punching in the code to open up one of the many identical doors strewn around the top floor. The more mazes, the better. “It has nothing to do with you hiding away,” George continued as the door slid open and they stepped into a long, narrow hallway – bottlenecking the enemy into one entrance was an easy way to control an attack. “You have to stay safe to get out of here; that’s the priority. Not to mention you’ll be busy maintaining the dream. You’re already struggling--”

“Be quiet!” Arthur snapped, furiously glancing back at his projection. The other man, for his credit, only looked mildly terrified as he fell silent. Once Arthur was sure George would remain quiet, he pushed through the next set of doors to find himself in what a Victorian era might call the guard room. There was a throng of armed, trained projections at ease, dressed for battle but guns cleaned and hung up carefully. They would have more than enough forewarning to prepare if one of the enemy dream workers was stupid enough to storm the building.

Arthur met the gaze of every soldier he passed, feeling a sickening mix of pride and guilt swirling inside him. A few of the projections nodded his way or gave a tiny determined smile, ready for die for him. That made Arthur’s pace pick up a little faster, nausea clawing up his throat. He knew it was necessary to militarize his projections and place them at strategic points as a barrier between himself and his enemy. But at the same time, even though they were not strictly real, the thought of their lives weighing on him was difficult to bear. He wondered if this was what generals in an army felt like, knowing they had to order their men into the line of fire and near-certain death for a cause that was bigger than all of them.

He found it easier to push the thoughts aside than to consider them further, forcing cool detachment to regain dominance over his mind. He had to do what was necessary to survive. With that, Arthur
met the gazes of the last few projections and passed through the last doors barricading him into a safety stained with sacrifice. The doors were sealed and locked behind him and George, only a few projections standing at ease against the walls of the large room; they kept watch in case an attack came from the air. There were only a few windows on the whole top floor, and all of them were on the wall to the left of the door.

The room was vast and open, some utilitarian blend of an apartment and an office building floor vacated of everything but the essentials. There was barren emptiness by the door, nothing but a scratchy carpeting to keep it from looking completely abandoned. Across the large room from the door was a small washroom; showering was the only luxury Arthur had allowed himself since he arrived. Beside that on the far wall was a kitchenette, which had grown smaller and smaller as its value decreased in the Point Man’s mind. Arthur spared a moment’s glance at the cupboards and refrigerator, unable to remember using it since he arrived.

There was a small bedroom located to the right of the door, a small section carved out of the room even though there were no walls to serve as a boundary for it. It was set up as though any small bedroom would, minus the privacy, with a dresser and full length mirror against the wall and reflecting light from one of the few windows. Arthur would have been more put out by the idea of the lack of privacy, but he saw the dangers of having an unmonitored room while at war. Besides that, he had not yet taken advantage of the luxury of sleeping anyway; his mind had converted the useless bed to a couch, which would most likely vanish soon as well.

Diagonally, the farthest distance from the door, was where Arthur spent the majority of his time. The walls were covered in maps, some overviews while others were of detailed alley systems. His largest map was strewn across his large desk though, covering the majority of the polished surface. It was a map that covered the entire dreamscape, including the barriers holding out the inevitable fog, with excruciating detail. The narrow width of the desk was pressed against the wall, Arthur’s chair on the side that allowed him to maintain a constant view of the only two entrances into the room – the door and the balcony.

The cabinets against the wall were filled with files and books, everything he could scrounge up from his subconscious and memory to use for planning against his enemies. The cupboards built into the wall above that was filled with the Point Man’s preferred selection of weapons – a collection of his favourite makes of knives and handguns.

Arthur crossed the room silently and took his seat behind the desk, George following behind him and taking the chair across the desk – as if they were about to begin an important interview. Arthur removed his two handguns from their holsters and set them delicately on some spare desk surface within easy reach. He didn’t remove the two daggers strapped to his biceps beneath his suit jacket; not even George needed to know about those. As much as he wished to massage his arm – bullet removed and bandaged as well as he could manage – doing so would only show weakness. Then he settled back in his chair as much as his tense body would allow and tiredly searched for a pen.
George watched him silently, knowingly, as Arthur began sketching in the last details of the map on his desk. The details on the periphery of the north, east and west were somewhat vague since that was where the three dream workers had run away to, but the map would be sufficient as it was. The Point Man paused for a moment, well aware of the fact that his projection was growing impatient again, and then picked up a different coloured pen to label in the final details of his military positioning. He knew it was dangerous to write all of this information down, but he also knew that if one of his enemies got far enough to see the map in the first place, Arthur was as good as dead anyway.

Finally satisfied, Arthur set the pen down and turned his attention to George. “I don’t like the idea of other people dying for me while I hide away,” he stated simply, knowing that he had no clear argument to fall back on.

“I am aware of that,” George rolled his eyes, reminding Arthur silently that obviously he knew what Arthur was thinking when he himself was a part of Arthur’s subconscious. The Point Man was still intrigued though, and slightly unnerved, that George was so much more open about his expressions than Arthur himself was. “But you will best serve this fight here now, rather than risking your life out there in the alleys.”

Arthur fiddled with the bottom corner of his map irritably, stubborn enough to not want to give in and yet aware of the truth in his projection’s words. Eventually he nodded, swallowing down his own pride. Mouth twisted in a slight grimace, Arthur sighed and forced himself to stop touching the wrinkled paper. “I suppose I have no choice,” he finally conceded. “Tell me what happened while I was out,” he ordered when the room fell into an uncomfortable silence, wanting to keep his thoughts busy. There was another long pause of silence, which caused the Point Man’s gaze to flash up to George’s dangerously, dreading the news. “Tell me.”

“We have confirmed reports that a few of your civilian projections were captured by projections of the three dream workers and taken to each one respectively,” George finally admitted, face grim.

Arthur’s gaze slid from his projection’s face to the balcony window, which was just a few feet behind George. “How many?” he asked calmly while his stomach was churning. If the dream workers had a hold on some of Arthur’s projections, they would be able to simultaneously wear down his vital energy and also work on extracting information from him. It didn’t matter whether the information was what they had come for or whether it was merely information about Arthur himself; both could be used against him. And even though they would not be able to escape with that information immediately, Arthur’s subconscious still locked down, he would not be able to maintain the dreamscape forever.

“Five confirmed,” George stated, sounding apologetic. Arthur wanted to swear but didn’t. Instead he picked up one of his handguns, confirmed the safety was flicked on, and then began cleaning it fussily. He was somewhat absent-minded in his task though, trying to think of how to prepare for
this new attack. “You’ll need to build your strength up in preparation for this,” George supplied scornfully.

Arthur paused his movements on the gun and watched with grim satisfaction as George shrunk back in his chair slightly. “I’m fine,” he reassured the man, as well as the other projections he knew were listening.

“You may be fine right now,” the argumentative projection agreed, though he still didn’t look like he exactly agreed with the statement. “But you are in no way prepared for this onslaught when they start torturing your projections for information.”

“I have never fallen prey to an extraction before,” the Point Man quoted resolutely, setting his gun down again and beginning to clean the other one thoroughly. And it was true; Arthur had experienced someone digging through his subconscious many times before this occasion. He had never once broken down and lost information to an enemy, be it in a dream or reality.

“True,” George nodded but looked anything but conceding. “However,” the projection continued, “You have never faced three dream workers attempting to extract information from you at the same time. Nor have you fought off extraction in this state with your subconscious already so drained just from remaining locked down. Nor,” George continued, sounding like he hated himself for pointing out Arthur’s weaknesses as much as Arthur hated hearing them spoken aloud, “have you been forced to maintain control over so many projections at once, keep them so organized, or focus your attention on specific projections to help them fend off extraction.”

Arthur shrugged as if he was physically shrugging off the heavy weight George had just piled onto his shoulders. He knew all of this was true and that this would probably be the most challenging fight he had ever encountered. But what could he do other than remain determined? He wasn’t holding much hope towards seeing the real world again, of escaping this dreamscape intact. But he had to make sure that the dream workers didn’t steal the information about his team; he had to keep them safe. That, of course, brought up his simmering guilt over attempting to pull Eames into this, but he forced that aside. “I’ll manage,” he reassured George stubbornly.

The other man looked somewhat sceptical. “You have also been down here for two days already and have not slept or eaten since arriving.”

The Point Man had to glance through the windows quickly, seeing a few red rays of disappearing sunlight lighting up the tops of the surrounding buildings. He had barley realized that he had already been down here fighting a war for two days; he wondered how much time had passed in reality. When he turned his eyes back on George, he knew he was looking tired; he was sick of this argument. “Please explain to me how it would be a safe move to sleep and leave my mind completely vulnerable and unwatched while my enemies are preparing to torture my projections for
George opened his mouth, paused, and closed his mouth again, looking lost. Arthur nodded in an obnoxious, ‘I told you so’ manner. He focused his attention on slipping his two guns back into their holsters now that they had been cleaned; the blunt pressure of the barrels pressed against his hip bones was sickeningly comforting. “You’ll have someone else to help you maintain the dreamscape when Eames arrives,” the other man eventually spoke up, sounding hesitant but hopeful.

Arthur’s eyes flashed dangerously as they landed on George, who literally shrunk in on himself. The Point Man nearly snarled as he stood from his chair, towering over his desk as he pinned his projection in place with his gaze. “We don’t know that the Forger is coming and I told you not to place your hope in him doing so,” Arthur reminded George bitterly before stepping around the desk. The projection flinched, expensive fabric of his suit wrinkling around the arms and shoulders, but the Point Man sidestepped him and headed for the balcony instead.

He sighed as a cool breeze hit his face when Arthur stepped out onto the balcony. He kept his eyes closed for just a moment, breathing in the air that was only somewhat tainted by the smells of smoke and burning flesh at this high altitude. Eventually he blinked his eyes open though, taking in the spoiled, ruined dreamscape with dismay and regret.

He wished he had done more research on his partners before slipping down into this dream. He wished he had not become so addicted to dream work just to keep his brain from straying to thoughts he didn’t know how to manage. He wished he had had the courage to deal with his issues in reality, rather than running away to dreams. His stupidity had placed Cobb in danger and now, if the Extractor had actually attempted to contact the Forger, Eames would soon be in danger as well. Arthur had been selfish for far too long.

The sounds of violence drifted up to his ears; glass shattering, explosions that rocked the foundations of the dream, choked off screams. His balcony gave a clear view of the north end of the city, as well as a good portion of the east and west ends of the dreamscape. The building Arthur had chosen was far enough south that he had a view of the entire area the three enemy dream workers had taken over, but far enough away from the southern barriers that they would not disappear into the fog quickly. He still kept some projections maintaining a sharp view of the southern part of the city, but for the most part it had been abandoned. Now it only held a small street war between stray projections.

There were tendrils of smoke spiralling up from a few sections of the city, buildings aglow with fire now that the sun had set; he knew that his civilian projections were busy staging their own battle and making his enemies’ lives difficult. Arthur had not seen Amelina, Nikolas or Louis since this began, nor received any contact from them. But it had become quite clear that their tactics were those that their profession fledged; indirect and sneaky. The Point Man knew that the projections
warring in the street were as much a ploy to weaken him as to distract him and make it impossible to pass beyond the conflict and into enemy territory. The only benefit was that the other dream workers were similarly barricaded in by the street wars.

Arthur groaned and gripped the balcony railing tightly enough to turn his knuckles white when he felt a pain shoot up his spine and bury itself deep in his brain. His knees nearly buckled with the surprise and pain, but he forced himself to remain standing and ignored the fact that he was leaning somewhat heavily on the metal railing. His breath was coming in quick pants as he blinked his eyes and forced his mind away from the dull throbbing in the base of his skull. He knew it was a good indication that one of the other dream workers had begun their work on his projections and did his best to ignore the insistent pain.

“Projecting Eames might help,” George suddenly spoke behind him, causing Arthur to gasp in surprise and tense as another wave of pain – as hot as lightning – flared in his brain.

He was silent for a long moment as he calmed his body again, detaching his body and mind from the pain. It was unlikely that the pain would disappear now – the dream workers would constantly try to wear him down – so he had to learn to ignore it. Finally he turned to regard George coldly, still gripping the railing for reassurance. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course I know what I’m talking about,” George narrowed his eyes in a very Arthur-esque manner. Arthur, lacking the motivation to begin another argument, merely turned his back on his projection and stared out across his destroyed dreamscape again. This time he didn’t flinch when George came to stand beside him, taking silent note of how tightly Arthur was gripping the metal railing. “There’s nothing wrong with it, you know,” George spoke softly, clearly trying to sound comforting.

“It’s not about right and wrong,” Arthur defended angrily, eyes still trained on the dark smoke rising before getting swept away by the breeze.

“Of course it’s about right and wrong, for you at least,” his projection challenged.

“Okay, it’s not just about that,” the Point Man released his hold on the railing and began rubbing at his temples tiredly, the initial pain from his projection’s torture falling away to a needling headache. “This conversation is pointless,” he stated next, clenching his eyes closed as he willed his headache and projection into non-existence. Unfortunately, when he opened his eyes, both were still present. “We’ve had this argument many times before.”

“Maybe now is the time for you to finally face it then,” George dared him. Arthur sent him an
angry, weary glare and didn’t respond. Clearly noticing that the Point Man was fading, George changed tactics and returned to a softer tone. “You need to do whatever is necessary to survive this. If that means you create a projection of Eames to give you some sense of reassurance and comfort, I don’t understand why you wouldn’t do it.”

Arthur didn’t bother calling the projection on the falsity – the man clearly knew the dilemma tearing apart Arthur’s mind just as effectively as his enemies and projections were destroying his dreamscape. Despite popular belief, dreams were no place for wishful thinking. That was how Cobb had lost himself and Arthur refused to make that same mistake. It was too easy to become content and comfortable in a world and life you built for yourself; too difficult to abandon it even though you knew it was false. On top of that, projecting Eames to comfort himself would only admit that the Forger could provide such benefits.

The Point Man would admit, if only to himself, that knowing Eames was out in the world somewhere, safe, made him feel more stable and less unbalanced. But he could barely comprehend anything beyond that; or was unwilling to admit it, at least. Eames, and Arthur’s feelings towards the man, was confusing and bipolar. It was oddly comforting to know that someone knew him so well, and yet that same knowledge was unnerving. Eames was better able to make Arthur smile than anyone else he knew; but those smiles usually came with a tint of smugness when the Point Man managed to prove the Forger wrong or best him. The sight of the man managed to set Arthur’s heart aflutter each time, but that could just as easily be blamed on competition and adrenaline as on attraction.

Either way, no matter what side of the spectrum Arthur was on, Eames had always been prominent in his thoughts and focus. Arthur had almost gravitated around the man, however embarrassing that notion was. He always knew where the Forger was, even when it was gallivanting around in Russia taking on jobs that sent a quick flash of worry and terror through Arthur. Each time the Point Man had forced himself to remain where he was, to stay focused on his current job and not race across the globe to come to Eames’s aid. The Forger was skilled and independent; surely he would not take kindly to Arthur running in to his ‘rescue’. But he would still remain tense and unfriendly to anyone he came into contact with until he received news that Eames had, once again, survived the job. The eventual news of Eames’s retirement to Mombasa had been met with a relieved sigh from Arthur that the Point Man hadn’t bothered trying to stifle.

He had thought things would be easier then, being able to continue jobs while not having to worry about the safety of the Forger. But it had not taken long for new thoughts to plague Arthur’s mind; he began to desire something more domestic than he had ever considered before in his life. The thought of Eames comfortably settled in Mombasa, and the knowledge of how easy it would be for Arthur to arrive at the Forger’s doorstep sent the Point Man running. He had begun taking jobs near-constantly at that point, trying to remind himself why he was not able to commit to such an idealized life and the thought of a home and a family for himself seemed even less appealing after the shock of Eames making such a decision.

It had proved somewhat challenging to convince his mind that he would be endangering the Forger by choosing such a selfish option; Eames was more skilled with certain firearms than Arthur himself was and could certainly take care of himself when the need arose.
The Point Man had ruined his chance though, ignoring the Forger until it was far too late. The other man had pressed a slip of paper into his hand after Inception - a number scrawled there that Arthur had programmed into his phone the moment he was out of sight – and asked Arthur to call him. But Arthur hadn’t; not for a job and certainly not for anything else. He knew that the Forger had only passed along his number for job related work, not interested in anything more personal. Eames flirted with just about everything that moved and had disappeared unarguably as soon as Arthur had taken the number. It would be embarrassing to say the least if Arthur called him up proposing something far more intimate than a job.

Besides, it was likely that any conversation that ensued with Arthur calling now would be awkward and uncomfortable. Too much time had passed since they had last spoken for the conversation to run smoothly. And more than that, it had been almost a year since their last job together; it was practically guaranteed that the Forger had found someone that caught his heart by now. The man drew gazes, there was no denying that. Eames was beautiful in every sense of the word; the charm and wit merely making him a triple threat. Anyone who caught Eames’s eye didn’t stand a chance.

That thought had his stomach roiling again, accompanying his pounding headache. Part of it was due to jealousy and regret, if Arthur was being honest with himself. He knew that he had not possessed any chance to be with Eames; especially considering the fact that even now, despite all of his conflicting thoughts, he didn’t know what, exactly, he wanted with the Forger. But another part was caused by guilt as he remembered his selfish demand for Dom to contact Eames and bring him here to help Arthur. If Eames had someone – or something – to live for, there was no way he was going to allow the other man to risk his life to save Arthur. Even though he hadn’t yet deciphered his feelings for the other man, he knew he cared enough to ensure the Forger was able to enjoy his life if he had been lucky enough to find something to live for.

Arthur also reminded himself that it was easier to remain independent rather than attach yourself to someone else. Having someone you cared about could just as easily weaken you as it could give you strength. It was so much safer to rely on yourself instead of leaving yourself vulnerable to manipulation and disappointment. At least, that was what the Point Man had told himself for the year following Inception every time he had scrolled through his contacts and hovered over the Forger’s number. Now though, when Arthur knew he would probably be dead in a few days, he found it harder to care. It seemed less vital that he fight his thoughts and feelings when they would be muted permanently soon enough.

George, seeming to realize that Arthur’s thoughts were spiralling out of control into a dangerous mess, posed a question that helped Arthur regain focus. “How will we know when it is Eames who arrives, rather than some projection or enemy?” As much as Arthur wanted to scoff at the idea of putting in such serious measures to ensure Eames – the Forger – was legitimate, he knew it was a fair question. If his enemies managed to extract any information, Arthur had no doubt that Eames would be a prominent figure in his memories – no matter how infuriating that thought was.

Arthur didn’t want to hope for Eames to come down into the dream. He didn’t want to be
disappointed, because he knew that abandonment would simply solidify what he had been telling himself for months – that he had never been anything special to the Forger. Arthur also didn’t want – wouldn’t allow – the other man to die or lose his memory on the Point Man’s behalf. But he knew there was still a chance that the man would arrive to help out of some foolish brothers-in-arms honour. No amount of wishful thinking would change what was occurring in reality and Arthur had no way of contacting Dom to retract his previous plea.

The Point Man shrugged minutely, noticing how straining the movement had become when his body tensed with the constant pain. He turned his gaze to George, who looked sympathetic; this caused Arthur to narrow his eyes with self loathing and glance back out at the city as night fell. “He’ll probably forge himself into my form when he arrives as the best option for getting past my projections. You can use this as an indicator since I’ll be staying in the building from now on.”

“What if the enemies learn of him and create a projection to fool us?” George questioned, stating a valid concern.

The Point Man remained silent for a long moment, considering what he knew about Eames that was unique enough to make him stand out against any projection. Then a thought struck him. “You’re a part of my subconscious,” Arthur glanced back at George seriously, stating the obvious. “You are similar to me in most ways.”

“Yes, I think we’ve covered this concept,” George responded with a sarcastic quip. His eyebrow was raised, clearly curious about where this was going.

Arthur did his best to give a tiny smile but failed. He turned and leaned on the railing again, eyes drawn to the war below him. He could hear the soft sounds of someone sobbing drifting up into the air; the projection must have been close to his perimeter around the building to be heard over the chaos. The sobs sounded pained and wet, the person clearly struggling to breathe. It was only a few seconds later when he heard the person pleading weakly, the sound of a gun firing, and then the eerie, heavy silence that always followed a death. “If he can somehow accomplish the impossible feat of making you smile after you’ve been surrounded by this horror for a few days,” he whispered, as if he were sharing a secret with George, “It’s the real Eames.”
Eames had never felt that getting through airport customs had taken as long as it was at that moment. He was more than accustomed to traveling via plane; the slow shuffling lines, blinding white hallways, waxy reflective floors, and waves of security technology were routine now. But the attendants at customs were being thorough and snippy, not an attitude you normally experienced around midday – that happened more on the flights that arrived before dawn. Eames felt that he had more of an excuse to be angry than the security personnel; he had only managed a few restless hours of sleep on the flight across the Atlantic. His eyes were burning, eyelids heavy, body worn down and headache thrumming pointedly, as if worried Eames had forgotten its presence.

The Forger did his best not to fold the corners of his passport – one of many – between his fingers as he fidgeted, waiting and praying for some sort of progress. His duffel bag was slung over his shoulder, the material pressed against his lower back. He had been sure that he would be allowed to take his bag on the plane as carry-on luggage, unwilling to waste more time at baggage claim. The family in front of him was at the customs desk, apologizing profusely for ‘not knowing they had to have their passports ready’. Eames closed his eyes and willed himself to be patient, biting his tongue before he informed them that the flight attendant had made it abundantly clear that everyone would need their passports. The two sobbing children weren’t making matters much more efficient though, both parents fumbling with their carry-on luggage and children at the same time.

The woman behind him in line looked equally impatient, dressed in a business suit that spoke of importance and pressing schedules. She looked just as sleep deprived as him and seemed to be silently contemplating how many years she would receive in jail for murdering the family. Eames received a similar calculating glare though when he sent her an exaggerated eye roll. He had hoped to dispel some of the frustration in the air with some humour, but she was clearly not in the mood.

Eames gave up and tapped his passport and customs card against his leg impatiently. He couldn’t help but note every passing minute that slid away on the large wall clock above the line of customs desks. Cobb had called Eames around midnight New York time and it was now one in the afternoon according to the Forger’s adjusted watch. It had taken him over half a day to get across the world and he had no way of knowing what condition Arthur was in. He had considered phoning the Extractor up and demanding answers, but knew that it was futile. Cobb would have informed him of the situation if it had been safe to do so over the phone.

Finally – finally – the family passed through and Eames was waved forward. He readjusted his bag to keep it from sliding forward and bouncing against his thigh as he stepped up to the desk and thrust his passport and customs card out to the attendant. “How are you today, sir?” the man
questioned him blandly, flipping open his passport and glancing back and forth between the photo and the Forger.

“Fine,” Eames ground out, doing his absolute best to be polite. It would not do him – or Arthur – any good for him to get detained for poor conduct now.

The man, far younger than Eames would ever expect to see in such a dead-end job, began skimming through his personal details. He cross checked the information with such precision that Eames felt a momentary wave of nostalgia, remembering how Arthur used to look when studying files of information on their marks. “What is your purpose for visiting the United States, Mr. Eames?”

He barely managed to silence himself before he informed the man that his purpose was written on the bloody customs card. “Personal matters,” he answered simply.

“Such as?” the security officer glanced up at him again while his hands were busy scanning the Forger’s pristine passport.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to ask me details,” Eames raised an eyebrow, irritable and officially out of patience while all of this administrative bullshit kept him from Arthur’s side.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Have something to hide?”

Eames was well aware of the fact that his passport was being held out of his reach, even though he knew that the documentation would pass every test it was pitted against. He sighed, trying to envision the way Arthur would seemingly melt and relax when forcing himself to calm down; just because Eames wasn’t in a dream didn’t mean he couldn’t forge some attributes he had studied well. “My friend is dy--” Eames’s voice choked off, refusing to link that word – that thought – with his Point Man. “Dying,” he eventually forced out, pained. Even as he said the word he hoped that he was wrong – that he was overreacting.

For a moment he thought the attendant would make things difficult just because he could – pull Eames aside, recheck his documentation, rifle through his bag – but the man just nodded and stamped the customs card. “My condolences,” he spoke softly, a genuinely sympathetic look on his face. Eames nodded his thanks and collected the customs card and passport before passing through towards the exit; he couldn’t help but wonder if the man behind the desk had recently lost someone as well with how well he had picked up on Eames’s anguish.
He didn’t have the time or energy to consider the thought though, instead rushing through the airport, shoving his customs card towards one of the security personnel by the exit, and slipping into the first cab he laid eyes on. The cabbie attempted a conversation but Eames did not reciprocate; the drive felt endless with the silence but the Forger was too buried in his thoughts to hold a decent conversation. They pulled up at the main entrance of the New York Presbyterian Hospital some time later, traffic not as horrendous as it would be at morning or evening rush hour. Eames handed over the fare and bolted into the hospital. Even though he knew it had taken him a good portion of time to get there already, now that he was this close it felt as though he only had seconds remaining.

Eames rushed up to the information desk and nearly pranced on the spot, shifting his weight from one foot to the other – antsy. He hated the smell of the cleaners used in hospitals – that disinfectant smell tainted by misery and sickness – but he forced himself to focus on more important matters when the secretary turned to him. “Hi, I need you to page Dr. Maxwell,” he requested, checking his arm where he had scribbled the doctor’s name in pen that had stained the creases of his skin. “I have a friend under his care.”

The woman nodded, sad expression only making Eames fret even more. She picked up a phone and began speaking in hushed tones into the receiver, nodding occasionally. When she hung the phone up and glanced back at him, Eames felt his stomach drop. “I’m afraid he’s busy with another patient at the moment--”

“No. No,” Eames immediately placed his hands on the edge of the desk, keeping himself in check as his entire body tensed in preparation to fight his way to Arthur’s side. There was no way in hell anyone had a chance of stopping him. “I need to see him immediately. You don’t understand; he...he--”

“Sir,” the secretary cut him off, holding up her hands in a calming and yet defensive manner. “Please calm down. Dr. Maxwell is currently occupied but he is sending down one of his nurses to take to you to your friend’s room to see him while you wait.”

“If you’ll follow me?” a meek, soft voice spoke up then and only then did Eames notice the nurse that had seemingly materialized from thin air by the desk. She was tiny, only up to the Forger’s chest and just as small around as well. Eames wondered if she would protest to him picking her up and running to Arthur’s room, following her directions as they went. She probably would.

“Oh...” Eames blinked, trying to regain his bearings. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry,” he glanced back at the secretary, suddenly feeling guilty for his outburst in front of so many other strangers patiently waiting in the waiting room.

“My condolences,” she gave him a tiny – practiced – smile before turning her eyes downward
again, busy with files that needed organizing. Eames’s mouth formed into a grim line at the words but he didn’t bother responding, instead following the nurse further into the maze of the hospital. While he was trying to keep himself distracted, Eames wondered why they had so rarely chosen to create a dreamscape in the form of a hospital; they were certainly monotonous, confusing and complex enough to get lost in the building forever.

They stopped in front of a door a short time later, avoiding the bustling hospital as nurses, families and patients milled around during the afternoon hours. The door they came to stand at was solid white and looked heavier than the others; Eames also noticed that there was no window and the door was left solidly shut. It was almost as though he were entering a high security prison cell. That sparked his paranoia as he glanced over his shoulder to consider every other stranger in the hallway before slipping in through the door the nurse was holding open for him.

“Dr. Maxwell will be with you shortly. My condolences,” she assured before pushing the door closed behind him, sealing him into the room. He felt every nerve in his body flicker to life, never a fan of small enclosed areas – especially when he wasn’t in a dream and was unable to manipulate an exit into existence. But concerns for his personal wellbeing melted away like ice cream on a summer day when his eyes fell on the Point Man.

There were four beds in the room, all of them occupied, and Eames was across the room in a flash. There was a PASIV device with wires spilling from the case like overgrown vines, linked to each sleeping patient; the Forger was careful to not trip on any of these as he came to Arthur’s bedside. Cobb was slumped over on the chair by the window, asleep and in serious danger of falling over. Eames stood as close to the bed as he could without climbing on top of it, frozen for a moment by the first view he had of the Point Man since Inception.

The man was surrounded by fluffy white sheets that reflected the midday sun from the windows onto Arthur – setting his face aglow. Eames could see that the man was deathly pale though, even more so than he was used to seeing, on the side of Arthur’s face closer to the Forger, shadowed. The Point Man’s black hair was fanned out across the pillow, gel dried and fallen loose after Arthur had, no doubt, been subjected to tests in the hospital. Arthur’s skin was smoother than Eames had ever seen it, the man relaxed while he slept, but it made Eames’s stomach churn when he looked closer. The skin was nearly luminescent with how pale it was, and it looked as though Arthur had not been eating properly for some time; his skin seemed to stretch across bone and unyielding, unbalanced muscle. It was also clear that the man settled on the bed had not received a proper night’s sleep in a long time.

That didn’t stop Eames’s heart from jolting into a fluttering pace though, his heart racing like he was a teenager with his first crush again. He gathered Arthur’s right hand up in his own, trying to warm the chilled fingers between his palms before holding that limp hand to his cheek. “I’m here now, darling,” he whispered as he leaned closer to the Point Man, pressing a kiss to Arthur’s palm before he thought to stop himself. “It’s time for you to wake up,” he insisted softly, shaking Arthur as much as he dared. He was so desperate to see those sharp, intelligent eyes focus on him again. He wanted Arthur to tell him that everything would be alright.
It was another voice that startled him though, Arthur remaining still and unresponsive on the bed; even the man’s eyes did not flicker to indicate any awareness. “He’s not going to wake up, Eames,” he heard the familiar voice of Cobb state regretfully. Eames could hear the apology in the man’s tone as he turned his gaze to the Extractor.

Arthur’s hand was still clasped between Eames’s but the Forger couldn’t think of a reason important enough to release the hand. There was no use in trying to hide his feelings or for feeling embarrassed; he was relatively certain that only Arthur was unaware of how Eames felt for the Point Man. “What are you talking about, Cobb?” he questioned, voice dangerously low.

“Mr. Tilmont is in a coma,” a third voice rang out in the tense room as they heard the door slide closed again. Eames mouthed the surname at Cobb, who shrugged in his own bewilderment over the entirely unknown alias for the Point Man. “He arrived early yesterday morning in this state while attached to...” the doctor continued to relay all of the information there was about Arthur’s situation but the man’s voice seemed to fade out as Eames refocused his attention on the Point Man. There was some part of his brain that was still listening and logging away information critically, but he was horrified as his eyes finally took note of all the details he had previously ignored.

The needle of the IV was shoved into one of Arthur’s arms while the PASIV needle was dug deeply into the skin of the other arm. There was a machine by Arthur’s bedside displaying his vital signs and everything looked dangerously low; there were no encouraging blips to indicate wakefulness or awareness. There was also a small tube spreading the corner of the Point Man’s mouth, no doubt shoved down his throat to help him breathe. Eames wished this was just a dream where he could wake them both up and everything would be alright again. He wanted to gather Arthur up in his arms and just make him healthy. But there was nothing that he could do beyond squeeze Arthur’s hand comfortingly, trying to relay his presence to the man.

He whirled on the doctor with his fear of inaction when the man had finished telling Eames everything there was to know – which wasn’t much. “What’s being done?”

Dr. Maxwell took a physical step back with the ferocity in Eames’s gaze before standing his ground again. “I’m afraid there is not much that we can do. We have done all of the tests possible to identity the cause and our only answer is that something must have happened with the PASIV. We have also attempted to revive Mr. Tilmont with every means necessary,” the man continued before Eames could interrupt.

“But?” Eames prompted, voice barely audible over the beeping machines in the room.
“But he is not giving any indications of consciousness,” Dr. Maxwell continued apologetically.

“He was conscious when I went down in the dream though,” Cobb finally spoke up, pushing himself out of his chair and stretching the uncomfortable knots out of his muscles.

Eames, whose heart had been steadily plummeting since he received Cobb’s phone call, felt a momentary jolt of hope. “I can go down there and help him,” he stated it like an offer, but it was clear that ‘no’ was not an answer he would accept.

“I can’t allow you to do that,” Dr. Maxwell shook his head vigorously, taking an imposing step forward. Eames stood his ground. “Please understand,” the man tried to implore him, “Mr. Tilmont has two days left if he’s lucky; he’s fading away quickly. Whatever is going on down there is wearing him down and I will not allow the chance of you going down, getting stuck, and dying with him.”

Before anyone could blink, Eames had taken a few quick steps and curled a fist into Dr. Maxwell’s shirt. He tightened his hold warningly and he could see the doctor’s Adam’s apple bob fearfully. “You say that like you think you can stop me.”

“Eames, that’s enough,” Cobb rushed around the bed and attempted to pry the Forger’s fingers away somewhat frantically. He failed.

“You need to understand, both of you,” Eames sent the Extractor a warning glance before refocusing on the doctor, “that I am going down in that dream and doing everything I can to bring Arthur back. If I die,” he raised his fist slightly, nearly forcing Dr. Maxwell to rise onto the balls of his feet, “You can write it off as dying of a broken heart.”

The doctor’s eyes widened slightly in surprise before he nodded, desperate to be out of Eames’s grasp. Eames nodded with grim satisfaction and let go, immediately returning to Arthur’s bedside and cradling his hand again delicately. “I can’t condone this, but I cannot stop you either,” Dr. Maxwell grumbled gruffly, readjusting the collar of his button up shirt. “My condolences.”

“Everyone needs to stop saying that!” Eames roared, pinning the doctor in place with his furious gaze. “He isn’t dead!”

Yet. The word hung in the air heavily but the Forger was thankful that no one spoke it aloud. Dr. Maxwell, looking a little shaken, took his leave and pulled the door closed behind him.
“That wasn’t very intelligent of you,” Cobb snipped at him while returning to his seat on the far side of Arthur’s bed. Eames snatched the chair away from the nearest dream worker’s bed and settled in by Arthur’s bedside.

“Oh bugger off,” Eames huffed, busy calming himself by focusing on gently brushing away stray strands of hair from Arthur’s forehead. “You would have done the same if it were Mal.” Cobb opened his mouth to protest, paused, and remained silent. Eames didn’t feel satisfied though; heartbreak was an acute form of suffering that he wouldn’t wish upon anyone. But he was still angry with the Extractor, needing someone to blame to make sense of this, and returned to staring at Cobb. “How could you let this happen?”

“Me?” Cobb gaped at him, “You’re the one who’s fucking in love with him!”

Eames’s cheeks flushed red for a moment due to embarrassment and resentment. Even though Arthur was unconscious, Cobb had no right to make a declaration like that before Eames himself did. Even more frustrating was how defensive the Extractor was being, clearly weighed down with a guilty conscience. “If I had pressed him any harder I could have gotten charged with harassment,” he spoke bitterly, “It was clear I wasn’t wanted. But you,” he shook his head, feeling his exhaustion creep up again at his sense of helplessness. “He was closer to you than with anyone else. You should have noticed that something was wrong.”

“You are so far out of line, Mr. Eames,” Cobb ground out harshly, voice low and eyes narrowed.

Eames was silent for a long moment, guiltily relishing in the closeness of the Point Man even under such circumstances. He forced himself to remember that Cobb had been busy taking care of two children who he hadn’t seen in years, at the same time as attempting to pick up the pieces after Mallorie’s death. Besides, Arthur was a grown adult and was too stubborn to listen to anyone’s advice even if they tried. It really wasn’t Cobb’s fault anymore than it was Eames’s for not putting in more effort to watch over Arthur. And it wasn’t their faults anymore than it was Arthur’s for getting addicted to dream working. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Cobb gave an exasperated little huff but nodded. “We have to do something soon, Eames. Arthur’s subconscious is absolutely wrecked down there. The three dream workers turned on him and are attempting to extract information from him.”

“Can’t we just kill them here in reality?” Eames proposed, glancing over his shoulder at the short line of occupied beds. The man closest looked older than the rest, while the woman and other man looked relatively young. How tempting it was to exact his revenge right here, right now.
“No, we can’t,” Cobb disagreed quickly, clearly trying to rein in his murderous thought process. “Arthur has his subconscious completely locked down and we have no idea what that entails. For all we know, the four of them could be equally dependent on one another even as they stage a war; the death of one might mean the death of them all.”

Eames swore under his breath before sighing, brushing mussed hair out of his face with his free hand. His other hand was still entwined with the Point Man’s, resting on the bedcovers softly. “So what do you think we should do?”

“You need to go down there and help Arthur,” Cobb stated blatantly, “While I stay up here to take care of the dream workers in case they wake up.” Eames didn’t meet the Extractor’s gaze for a moment, staring at the white sheets nervously. Arthur had never called Eames after Inception and the Point Man clearly wanted nothing to do with him. How would he take Eames suddenly appearing in his dreams while in the middle of being attacked? “He asked for you, Eames.”

“What?” Eames’s eyes shot up to stare at Cobb, blinking in shock. His heart was suddenly flying, racing with hopeful joy, but he forced it back down again – terrified of disappointment.

“When I went down,” the Extractor clarified. “He told me he needed you. I think you might be the only one who can get past all the projections with your forging abilities.”

“Right, of course,” Eames nodded, hope fading but not disappearing entirely. It simmered just under the surface, giving him new energy and motivation. Even if Arthur had only meant it in terms of survival, he would do everything in his power to help the Point Man. Especially with those words ringing in his ears: He said he needed you. Arthur was relying on Eames, counting on him. “Is there anything else I need to know before I go down?” he asked as he reached for the final needle of the PASIV, cleaning it with an ease that only came from routine.

“You can’t allow yourself to be killed down there,” Cobb explained seriously, drawing Eames’s attention.

Eames paused with the tip of the needle pressed against his skin, ready to be slid under. “What do you mean? Don’t tell me this is more of your Inception bullshit.”

Cobb was shaking his head. “No, this seems to be a side effect of Arthur locking his subconscious down. He told me that anyone who dies with the barriers up loses their memory, rather than falling into Limbo. There are swarms of projections warring in the streets, so try to use the alley system
Arthur seems to have created to avoid them while you search for him.”

The Forger nodded his understanding, watching Arthur breathe slowly for a moment. “Locking up your subconscious...” he spoke softly, as if testing out the idea. He glanced back at the Extractor. “How is that possible?”

Cobb shrugged, looking lost. “It’s Arthur,” the man answered and that seemed to be the only explanation there was. The Point Man was one of a kind – unique. Cobb sighed and ran his fingers through his hair in agitation, no doubt wishing he could go back down to help as well. “Bring him back, Eames.”

“I’m not leaving the dreamscape without him,” he assured with resolve, “no matter the consequences.”

The Extractor nodded his understanding even though he looked upset with his words. “I’ll see you in this life or the next.”

Eames gave a solitary nod and pushed the biting metal of the needle under his skin. There was no rush of chemicals like he was accustomed to and he took advantage of his momentary lull between dream and reality to clasp Arthur’s hand again. He leaned forward and rested his head on the bed beside the Point Man’s chest, not wanting to hinder his breathing. “I’m coming, sweetheart,” he whispered as he felt his eyelids droop and fall shut.

The smell of burning flesh assaulted him a moment later, promptly followed by a wave of heat and the sound of terrified, defeated sobbing. He blinked his eyes open and immediately brought a hand to his mouth, stumbling backwards into the alleyway behind him. He had woken up in the mouth of an alley, looking out at a wide street filled with burning, overturned cars. The flames were eating up the spilled oil on the pavement, hungrily seeking out the twitching bodies scattered about.

Eames had seen a lot in his years, both in reality during his past and present, and in the minds of people far more twisted than you could think possible. But the suddenness of this scene combined with the fear of what this entailed had him gagging back vomit. He knew Arthur’s mind, had traversed through it enough times to know that this was not right. The Point Man’s mind had been ravaged and violated, turning it into something twisted and suffering. Eames could only hope that Arthur himself was still withstanding the attack.

It was clear that the fight had passed through the intersection and moved on, leaving nothing but proof of the carnage. Eames stumbled further into the alleyway and ducked around a corner to be
out of immediate view while he slipped a small pocket mirror from his jacket. He flipped it open and held it aloft in front of him, focusing on the reflective surfaces. At first he just saw his own face, skin pale and eyes widened with residue shock. But then he began pulling up his memories of Arthur – both from reality and his dreams – and began to forge his Point Man.

The eyes came first, blinking back at him indifferently. Eames did not struggle with this part; he had gotten lost in Arthur’s eyes often enough to know the exact shade of brown, the small streaks of darker chestnut, the shape of the eye, those dark eyelashes that dusted pale cheeks. Once the eyes were watching him from the mirror, the rest of the Point Man’s appearance slid into place effortlessly. Thin, pale lips, hair slicked back precisely, tailored suit hugging his wiry form. Eames tugged at the hem of his waistcoat briefly, unimpressed by the tight fit, and then slid his mirror away.

He remembered Cobb telling him that he should use the alley system that Arthur had developed. But when Eames glanced up towards the dismay sky, sun presumably already slipped below the horizon with how dark it was, he realized he had no way of knowing which direction to take. Even though he was not in the habit of praising the Point Man for his work – the man really was stubbornly self-reliant enough as he was – Eames was uneasy with the thought of braving one of Arthur’s mazes without aid. Worse, with the walls so high and narrow on both sides, he would have no light from street lamps to guide him and no method of orienting himself with the surrounding landscape.

For a moment he remained where he was, brushing his fingers through soft black hair comfortingly. He spoke softly, cleared his throat, and then spoke again; his American accent came back quickly. Then he headed back out into the intersection of the street, sidestepping fallen projections after confirming that the street was truly abandoned. He scanned the surrounding area slowly, circling in place as he took in the buildings in various states of ruin. It was with a sinking stomach that he realized he had no notion of where Arthur might be holed up in this mess. Arthur could fade away before Eames reached him if he chose the wrong direction.

Eames tensed when he heard the scuff of a boot on pavement behind him. But before he could react, he suddenly felt the unmistakably cold metal and shape of a gun’s barrel pressed to the base of his skull. He calculated the angle and determined quickly that there was a good chance of him getting shot in the spine if he attempted to spin and disarm his enemy. Fighting physically would not get him out of this alive. The Forger was frustrated beyond belief that he had allowed someone to sneak up on him so easily and quickly, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, a man spoke. “Identify yourself.”

Eames’s thoughts were running frantically, trying to determine the best course of action. If this was one of Arthur’s projections, pretending to be the Point Man probably wouldn’t work; but telling them his true identity might get them to help him find Arthur. However, if this was one of the enemies’ projections, neither course of action would get him more than killed. “Can I turn around?” he asked carefully, hoping he might be able to identify the owner of the projection by the appearance.
“No!” the man pressed the barrel of the gun against his neck harder. Eames knew that he would have a small circular bruise on the back of his neck soon from the barrel opening. “Identify yourself.”

Eames swallowed thickly. He felt sweat trickle down his forehead slowly, tickling him, but he couldn’t move to wipe it away. “My name is Arthur,” he stated confidently, knowing he really only had one option. If this was Arthur’s projection, Eames’s bluff would be called and Eames could admit his true identity. If it was an enemy’s projection, his bluff would not be recognized and he would be taken. It wasn’t ideal – Eames would have liked to see Arthur one more time – but ultimately he was here to save the Point Man and he could certainly do a lot of damage when smuggled right into the enemy’s hiding place.

He held his breath, waiting for a response. There wasn’t one at first and the dreamscape around them was quiet. The sobs had faded away and now there was only a muted crackle of dying flames on the interior fabric of the overturned cars. “You’re lying,” the man finally spoke, sounding sure. “He is safe. Identify yourself.”

The blunt weight of the gun hitting the back of his neck took Eames by surprise and he quickly fell to his knees, which sent a bolt of pain up through his legs and spine. “My name is Eames!” he yelled, furious that he had been hit from behind. He blinked frantically, clearing his vision and praying that his splitting headache would not last long. He allowed Arthur’s form to melt away into his own again, hoping that it would keep him from getting his head smashed in.

There was another silence, longer this time. Eames clenched his eyes closed, doing his best to focus his hearing on what was going on behind him. He was waiting for the projection to hit him again, or shoot him, so when the Forger heard feet shuffle closer he ducked, rolled, and kicked the feet out from under the projection. There was a curse and the distinct sound of guns being cocked. By the time Eames was on his feet, wobbling only slightly, the line of five projections behind the one on the ground had their guns prepared and aimed at Eames’s heart. He couldn’t believe he had never even heard them approach.

“No the smartest move,” the projection he had kicked down drawled as he picked himself off the pavement, brushing away invisible dust – definitely Arthur’s projection. The man was dressed immaculately, looking like a high-class lawyer who stumbled into the middle of a war. The projection glanced at Eames, who was focused on the firing squad line, and then turned to the other projections. He waved their guns down and then refocused on the Forger. “You must come with us.”

“You haven’t really given me much incentive, have you?” Eames snapped, taking a tentative step backwards. He saw one of the projections’ hands twitch towards the gun now in its holster, but it
relaxed again. “Maybe I don’t feel like trotting along after someone who just clobbered me in the back of the head with a gun; not exactly how I like my first dates to start.”

Eames knew he was joking due to nerves, so he was startled when the projection in front of him smirked and gave a small laugh, rough from disuse. The man stepped forward and thrust a hand out towards Eames, smile and laughter already faded away in the horrors around them. The Forger considered the offered hand warily, maintaining his distance. “It’s good to meet you at last, Mr. Eames – personally, of course.” Eames raised an eyebrow, bewildered. “You can call me George.”

“And who are you, exactly?” Eames took the projection’s hand for the briefest handshake he had ever experienced before retracting his hand again, somewhat less uncomfortable when the projection dropped his hand as well. The Forger felt overwhelmed with confusion; he had never before heard of a self-named projection – that required more independent consciousness than projections normally had.

“I’ll let Arthur answer that,” George whispered, looking grim and serious as he held Eames’s eyes. For just a moment, Eames thought he might have seen a familiar flash of intelligence in those hazel eyes – too light a shade but not terribly far off. “But you must come now. We are not safe out in the open like this.”

The projection took off a second later, dashing into the alleyway. With his stomach twisting with nerves and hope, Eames had little choice but to follow the man into the murky darkness, the other five projections trailing behind him. The alleys truly were a maze and Eames had no qualms about admitting he would have been lost in seconds if he had attempted it alone. It took nearly ten minutes by Eames’s internal clock for them to slow their pace, walking and finally stopping right inside an alleyway mouth.

George sent him a ‘stay put’ expression, spurring a few of Eames’s memories from jobs with Arthur to resurface. He planted his feet silently, five projections at his back to keep him from running as George stepped out into the open. The projection paused on the curb of the sidewalk and waved his hands in an intricate pattern. Shortly after, George was back in the alley and hurrying Eames out into the open. The Forger had no clue about what had just happened, but he was just thankful that he wasn’t riddled with bullet holes yet.

Eames found himself being shoved through the main doors of a skyscraper after that, heavy metal doors slamming closed behind him and George while the other projections apparently remained outside. It was pitch black in the room except for a few bars of light that burned Eames’s vision and forced him to blink furiously. He heard the sound of multiple guns being raised and aimed, but then George gave a simple ‘no’ and Eames was able to pull in another breath. He could hear the guns being set at rest again and allowed George – at least he hoped it was the projection; he couldn’t see a damned thing in the darkness – to drag him across echoing floors. He wondered quickly if projections were able to sense one another to determine if they were allies – from the
Eames felt a little lightheaded as he was led across the room; he worked in an illegal profession and yet he couldn’t remember the last time had been faced with this much stress and mortal danger. He honestly couldn’t discern which was worse: dying and waking up in Limbo, trapped but conscious, or dying and waking up in reality with no memories. He voted for neither as George pulled him into a lit room filled with a staircase that must span up at least thirty floors. The whole room reeked of Arthur’s tastes, easing some of Eames’s fear as he and the projection took to the stairs.

“So who are you?” Eames asked again as they continued to climb the stairs.

“I’m one of Arthur’s projections,” George responded easily, matching his pace as they neared the top floor.

“Bullshit,” he glanced over at the man, “You’re far too aware and conscious to be a regular projection.”

“Ah, I never said I was a regular projection,” the man sent him an arrogant smirk. Eames narrowed his eyes. “And it is amazing to see what unfathomable things will happen when one is truly in need.”

“How is he?” Eames couldn’t help but ask as they reached the top flight of stairs. He scanned the interior balcony with disbelief when he took note of how many snipers were armed and ready. The Forger doubted he would ever be able to prepare his subconscious for war nearly as effectively as the Point Man clearly had.

“Not good,” George grimaced, not meeting Eames’s gaze as they stepped through a hallway and into a room filled with more projections. George waved them down before turning to Eames, looking frustrated and desperate. “He hasn’t eaten or slept at all and he isn’t going to survive another twelve hours if he doesn’t take care of himself.”

“I’ll do my best,” Eames promised. His stomach was in knots and his heart was racing; the realization that he was going to lay eyes on Arthur – the real, conscious, aware Arthur – for the first time since Inception had him jittery.

“Good,” George nodded, seemingly pleased, before motioning Eames towards the only other door
The projections watched him as he crossed the room but didn’t say anything. The Forger paused in front of the door for the briefest of seconds, not knowing how he was going to react to this, or how Arthur would respond to Eames storming into his subconscious. But then he realized that there was only one solid door keeping him from Arthur and he was desperate enough to weather any storm for one glimpse of the man. He glanced back at George, saw him nod, and pushed through the heavy door.

“Arthur,” Eames breathed when he first laid eyes on the Point Man, who was settled neatly behind a large office desk. Before he could really remind himself that this was not the projection he had spent months with, he had raced across the empty floor to Arthur’s side. The man glanced up at him but before he could speak, Eames cupped Arthur’s face between his hands and tilted his face upwards. He watched, delighted, as those eyes flashed with intelligence and surprise; no longer hollow as they used to be. “You’re alright,” he whispered, brushing the pad of one thumb over the man’s accented cheekbone.

The Point Man blinked up at him for a long moment before pulling away, looking confused. “What are you doing?”

Eames leaned back jerkily, as if slapped. “I...” he began uselessly, placing his hands on the desktop so that Arthur couldn’t see them trembling with relief and pain. He couldn’t believe he had just done that to the real Arthur, blatantly showing his feelings when they were clearly unwanted. But he was just so happy to see the man again, firstly to know he was alive and secondly because Eames’s projection paled in comparison. “You said you needed me,” he heard himself speak softly, still a glimmer of hope connected to that spark of joy.

“Yes,” Arthur agreed, speaking slowly. “I needed a Forger.” Eames felt his heart ache painfully as those words dug themselves into his chest. It was painful to swallow even as he bit his lip and nodded. Of course that was what Arthur meant. Professional, unattached Arthur; why had Eames been expecting anything else? But before he could respond, his heart leapt when he felt the warm, soft skin of Arthur’s fingers brush his own for the briefest second. The touch, however short-lived, shot Eames with a wave of electricity that sent his hope flaring again. He met Arthur’s gaze again, feeling suddenly shy. “I need someone I can trust,” Arthur spoke softly, almost sounding apologetic.

“Why not Cobb?” Eames heard himself ask, mainly to distract himself from the desire to reach forward and clasp Arthur’s hand with his own. He didn’t know what the Point Man meant by the touch – whether it was merely to catch his attention or to relay something more – but he was eager to find out.
Arthur sat back in his chair slowly, back ramrod straight against the cushioned backing. The Point Man fidgeted with a large map of the city, which was sprawled out across the majority of the desktop. The edges looked worn and crinkled, as if Arthur toyed with it often as he thought. “Dom has responsibilities tying him to reality. I am not so heartless to ask him to leave James and Phillipa behind, nor do I think he would be able to help effectively while plagued with fear over not returning.”

Eames nodded, only half listening to the Point Man’s logic. He was mesmerized by the chance to watch Arthur again, to watch the Point Man do what he did best. The Forger could practically hear Arthur’s thoughts as they flashed across his face and eyes, meticulously considering and evaluating information. He was startled out of his own thoughts when Arthur fell silent and glanced up at him again, meeting his gaze curiously. “Do you have something tying you to reality? I won’t ask you to risk yourself if you found something worth living for.”

Just you, and you’re worth the risk, were the words on his tongue, which he bit to keep himself silent. “I’m with you until the end, darling,” he stated instead, trying to alleviate the pain he saw in the Point Man’s face. He didn’t know what had happened to Arthur since their Inception job, but he was nervous about how withdrawn and alone the other dream worker suddenly looked. Between the tenseness in Arthur’s face and his choice of words, it made Eames feel like the Point Man had run out of things to live for.

The Forger wondered if that was why Arthur had been taking jobs so frequently, following a similar pattern to the mess Eames had stumbled through after their team had broken apart. But before he could ask or think of some way to comfort the man, Arthur was speaking again. “Are you sure?”

Eames blinked and leaned across the desk, holding Arthur’s eyes strongly. “When have I ever done something I didn’t want to do?” he questioned seriously. He wanted to tell Arthur everything; to explain exactly why he was so determined to help the Point Man no matter what, even if that meant death. But for now he would have to be satisfied with ensuring the man believed Eames would be by his side until the end. There was a war tearing the dreamscape apart outside of this comfortable little bubble; it was not the time for sharing feelings.

He watched as one corner of Arthur’s lips twitched up in the tiniest hint of a smile before the Point Man glanced away, staring out through the window. But Eames could see the relief washing over the other man, relaxing the man’s face and muscles. That alone made him glad that Arthur had asked for him, that Cobb had called, that Eames had jumped on a plane without question; helping Arthur was all he wanted to do.

As he greedily watched Arthur, taking in every simple and complex detail like a gift, something caught his eye on the desk. He couldn’t be sure if it had already been there when he stepped into the room or if it had just materialized, but it had him smiling warmly – new hope blooming. It was
a picture frame tucked against the wall on the corner of the desk with the whole Inception team staring back at him from the photograph. Eames knew that no such picture had been taken in reality, though it was quite telling.

The whole team was grinning out at the viewer – indication of a job well done – but it was himself and Arthur that caught his attention. They were both tucked onto the end of the row of people and Arthur was tucked closer to Eames’s side than was strictly necessary. Eames in the image also had an arm wrapped loosely around the Point Man’s shoulders, just as the Forger had occasionally done as an excuse to get close to Arthur under the pretence of ‘teasing’ during the job. But unlike in reality when Arthur would shove him away and stalk off with a scowl, Arthur in the image had a pleased, shy smile; the Point Man’s eyes were relaxed and bright.

Eames wished dearly that the photograph was real, that it depicted how things in reality truly were. A part of him wanted to press his lips to Arthur’s this very minute and demand an explanation. He didn’t mention the photograph though, knowing it was impossible to control every aspect of your subconscious and not wanting to make the Point Man uncomfortable. If Arthur hadn’t noticed the frame’s presence yet, Eames wasn’t going to be the one to point it out. He knew that they had bigger issues to deal with at that moment. He had to make sure Arthur survived this attack and made it out of the dream intact so that Eames could make that photograph their new reality.

This thought drew his attention back to Arthur, taking exasperated note of the way the Point Man tried to stifle a yawn. Now that Eames’s initial pleasure and relief at seeing Arthur alive had calmed down slightly, he realized how awful the other dream worker really looked. There were dark circles under his eyes, skin deathly pale, and eyelids closed more often than open. Arthur’s hair clearly hadn’t seen a comb since he arrived and Eames could pick up the subtle trembling of the man’s body as it shook with exhaustion.

“Arthur, how long have you been down here?” he questioned worriedly, George’s admittance still at the forefront of his mind.

The Point Man didn’t respond for a moment, eyes closed and back resting against the chair. Then Arthur bolted forward, blinking furiously, and nearly toppled out of his chair. He would have fallen if Eames had not been there, catching Arthur and manoeuvring him back onto the chair. Arthur’s head was lolling slightly, the dream worker clearly dizzy from exhaustion. “Sorry,” the Point Man mumbled against Eames’s shoulder, “What did you say?”

“How long have you been down here?” he asked again. He leaned against the desk beside Arthur, holding him steady with one hand while he massaged the back of his own neck with his other hand. The sudden jolt of movement when he dove to catch Arthur had reminded him of how painful it was to get a gun slammed against the base of your skull.
“’bout four days. What’s wrong?” Arthur slurred, eyes half closed as he struggled to remain focused on the Forger.

“Had a little run in with George during a case of mistaken identities; don’t worry about it,” he admonished lightly, removing his hand from his neck. “Now we’re getting you to bed.”

“There’s no bed,” Arthur argued, sounding a little more aware and awake now that Eames was making some suggestion the Point Man disapproved of.

Eames glanced around the room, which he had barely taken note of when he first arrived. It was true that there was no bed in sight. “The couch will do,” he retaliated as he moved to hoist Arthur out of his chair.

“No!” the Point Man leaned back, stubborn self-reliance shining through for the first time since Eames had laid eyes on him. “I’m fine! I can’t sleep now.”

“Arthur,” Eames whispered the name, loving the way his lips moved around the syllables. “Either you are walking your ass to that couch or I am carrying it there.”

Arthur sent him a murderous glare but began pulling himself out of his chair, purposefully using the edge of the desk rather than Eames’s offered hand. The Forger felt momentarily stung as he trailed along behind Arthur to make sure he didn’t fall. He had assumed that the photo on the desk had indicated that Arthur’s feelings might be more than he let on; but Eames had also assumed that now might be the time Arthur would actually allow himself to indulge. Instead, the Point Man made it over to the couch while shunning Eames’s help even though he was shivering and stumbling the whole way.

Before Arthur could protest, Eames sat down on the end of the couch with his back against the back cushion of the couch and legs out straight. He snatched Arthur’s hand and pulled him down, causing the Point Man to end up sprawled across the cushions. “What are you doing?” Arthur asked him softly as Eames gripped the man’s arms and dragged him over slightly.

“Making sure you’re comfortable,” the Forger hedged, “Don’t fight me on this.”

Arthur did, of course, fight; but only lightly. The man muttered under his breath and struggled against Eames’s physical presence, but then fell silent when Eames finally positioned the Point Man’s head to rest on his thigh. “Eames,” Arthur spoke and then paused, clearing his throat. Eames
felt his stomach churn uneasily, unsure of what he would do if Arthur shot down his hopes and assumptions now. “I can’t sleep now with the way everything is,” Arthur argued instead.

Eames couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow in surprise; the dream worker sounded embarrassed but otherwise unperturbed by their positioning as Arthur stretched his legs out over the rest of the couch. Part of Eames insisted he blame the agreement to physical proximity on the sleep deprivation; he couldn’t afford to get his hopes up too high right now when there was still no guarantee that he and Arthur would both even make it back to reality alive. But there was another part of him that had hatched a flock of butterflies in his stomach; his insides were singing with happiness.

“Give me one good reason,” he spoke in hushed tones, trying to lull Arthur to sleep.

“Because I am consciously in charge of keeping all of my projections in position and in combat, for keeping the security measures up, and for keeping the barriers from consuming the dreamscape,” Arthur stated all-knowingly.

Eames sighed, hearing the wakefulness threaten to regain dominance in the Point Man again. “Do you trust me, darling?” he asked instead of arguing.

There was a moment of silence in which Eames would be surprised if Arthur couldn’t hear the Forger’s racing heart. “Yes,” Arthur finally muttered into Eames’s pant leg, sounding shy and defeated. Eames was able to keep himself from pulling Arthur up into a kiss – barely – but he couldn’t maintain physical distance completely after an admittance like that. Arthur trusted him! There were still a lot of unanswered questions about how the other man felt about him and why Arthur had never called Eames, but they were secondary in that moment.

Eames’s fingers slid into Arthur’s soft hair – showers apparently the only luxury the man had made time for – loving the sight and feel of his fingers working through short, natural curls rather than straight, unnaturally-hard gel. He felt Arthur release an exhausted sigh, body tensing and then relaxing at every point their bodies were in contact. “Trust me to watch over things for you temporarily, love,” he requested, stroking that dark hair constantly and comfortingly.

Arthur didn’t respond verbally, instead showing his answer by shuffling to get comfortable. Eames felt one arm brush his right thigh where Arthur tucked it under his chin, and Arthur’s other hand hook over the Forger’s leg; it was almost like, in this moment where Arthur had finally let himself go, he wanted to hold Eames close and keep him from leaving. Eames felt warm affection wash over him like a calming wave, digging his fingers in deeper to massage the Point Man’s scalp. He couldn’t believe he was lucky enough to get this chance – to comfort and relax Arthur the way he had wanted to since he realized he was more than simply infatuated with the man.
It only took a few strokes through the man’s hair before Arthur let out a contented sigh and promptly fell asleep; Eames watched the dream worker’s sides rise and fall in a slow, rhythmic pattern. Once he was sure Arthur was settled and sleeping properly, Eames took a moment to examine the room around them – making sure nothing changed. When everything remained as it should, he turned his attention to the window in front of the couch, spilling choked-off moonlight that was barely escaping through a few parted clouds in the sky into the room.

Nothing seemed to be changing in the dreamscape, the war quieted with the shadows of night, but never ceasing entirely. He could still hear some distant explosions and see fire in the far distance. But as much as he wanted everything to change – for things to improve so that he could get Arthur out of here as soon as possible – he was also thankful that things did not change and deteriorate. He didn’t know how much longer they would have to stay down in the dreamscape, still mostly unsure of Arthur’s plans on how to handle this, but at least now Arthur wouldn’t have an excuse to forgo sleep.

Eames returned his attention to the man who had held his heart for over a year and yet never known. He was struck with memories of his time of PASIV addiction, remembering all of the domestic moments he would share with his projection of Arthur; sometimes they would end up doing something just like this after watching a movie or the telly. Eames pushed those thoughts away though; refocusing on the Point Man resting against him as he continued to brush the dream worker’s hair. Things were far from ideal – hell, they might die in a few days – but this was the real Arthur and it was the moments with him that Eames wanted to cherish.
Arthur woke up from sleep slowly, feeling more content than he ever remembered being in his life. He didn’t open his eyes; in fact, he clenched them tighter against the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the window. There was one hand buried in his hair, massaging the base of his skull in a way that sent pleasant tingles down his spine. There was another hand on his back, soothing away a tension between the Point Man’s shoulders that he hadn’t even known was there.

He gave a contented sigh and snuggled closer to the warmth that was seeping into his arms and upper back. His mind was still somewhat hazy, unwilling to wake up and remember that he didn’t have time for relaxation like this. The only thought he allowed his mind to contemplate was the question of why he had ever thought domesticity wouldn’t suit him. Arthur knew, even now in this comforting lull, that he would go insane if he stopped dream working entirely to live a ‘normal’ life in a ‘pleasant’ suburban area. But he could certainly grow accustomed to waking up feeling this warm and taken care of, if he could just find someone who would be able to help him find a balance between domesticity and dream work.

His thoughts jolted to a stop when he felt fingers trace up his spine, abandoning his relaxed shoulder blades, and trail over his shoulder. Arthur was acutely aware of the body tensing beside him when those exploring fingers brushed against the hilt of the knife strapped to his right bicep. His eyes flashed open and he bit his lip to keep silent as a thumb and pointer finger rounded over the smooth end of the hilt and traced down the sharp edges of the blade to the tip under his suit jacket.

“Trust issues, darling?” Eames questioned him, voice barely over a whisper as the man’s lips ghosted past Arthur’s ear. The Point Man had been expecting a teasing tone, but the Forger’s voice was serious, contemplative.

The gravity of their situation hit Arthur like a ton of bricks and he physically felt his whole body tense up despite Eames’s previous efforts. Eames was down here in the war-torn world of Arthur’s subconscious, risking everything to save him. Judging by the sun, it was late afternoon on Arthur’s fifth day down here and he knew the barriers would be fading quickly; they were on a time limit. He had three enemy dream workers torturing his projections and wearing the Point Man down by every means necessary, and there was no guarantee that Arthur would make it out of this alive. Though Eames would survive – Arthur was determined; he would drop the barriers and send the man back to reality if things went sour.

But despite this impossible, dangerous situation, Arthur had just spent what seemed like a good
twelve hours sleeping. While he should have been making plans and focusing on strengthening his 
mental awareness to avoid extraction, he had allowed himself to be lulled into uselessness by a few 
skilled fingers. While he should have been briefing the Forger – his one ally – about his plan to get 
out of this alive, Arthur had nestled up against Eames in an embarrassing manner. Arthur’s knees 
were tucked against his chest for added warmth while his head, shoulders and back were plastered 
against Eames’s thigh. One of his arms was still underneath him, lying flat to avoid any accidents 
with the second knife, but his free hand was hooked around Eames’s leg as if the man were a 
lifeline.

Arthur felt his face flush as he pushed himself immediately into a sitting and then standing 
position. He walked over to one of the windows quickly, back turned to the Forger so that the man 
would not see his blushing face as he regained control of his body and thoughts. Eames had 
certainly been affectionate when he first encountered Arthur in the dream, but that could just as 
easily have been due to relief and their long absence apart. The Point Man scoffed softly at his own 
thoughts even as he thought them; he knew he was making up excuses – that it was quite clear 
from Eames’s behaviour that the man cared about Arthur – but he had no way of gauging the 
extent of the Forger’s feelings. What was Arthur to the man? What did he want Arthur to be? He 
didn’t know whether their feelings coincided, and now was certainly not the time to begin such a 
conversation.

He took a steadying breath and turned back to the Forger, body like stone. They had to focus on 
getting Eames out of this alive and, if they were lucky, Arthur as well. It would be unfair to both of 
them to indulge in affection now; it would just make things more painful when – if – Arthur didn’t 
make it back to reality. Instead, he pushed the thoughts – the memories, the wishes, the fluttering 
of his heart – aside and refocused his attention on his plans. “Surprised?” he asked Eames coldly in 
response to the man’s previous question.

“Concerned,” Eames amended softly, watching him closely and with a sadness in those eyes that 
reflected the sunlight.

Arthur’s breath caught momentarily, having thought it would be impossible to see something so 
beautiful in his subconscious that had been so torn and tainted. But Eames’s eyes were like 
coloured crystal; shimmering and expressing everything. He forced his gaze away, clenching his 
jaw as he inspected a particularly fascinating patch of carpet. “Don’t be. I’m fine.” Eames gave him 
a sceptical look and Arthur gave a tiny huff of annoyance; he had forgotten how irritating it was to 
have Eames around. The Forger, unlike every other team member he had worked with – including 
Dom – could tell when Arthur was lying and was willing to argue the point. “I’m going to take a 
quick shower,” he proclaimed before Eames could start an argument on Arthur’s mental state.

Once he was in the small washroom and had the door locked behind him, Arthur let out a hurried 
breath and leaned on the porcelain rim of the sink. He watched himself in the mirror, trying to calm 
down his flurry of thoughts. How was it that Eames’s presence always put him on edge, and yet 
Arthur could never get enough? He forced himself to look away from the mirror and begin 
stripping methodologically, remembering that he had already wasted enough time sleeping. His
shoes were nudged into a corner, suit material folded neatly, and waistcoat and collared shirt hooked onto a towel rack carefully. Arthur knew he could materialize a new suit if he wished, but organization calmed him down.

He took a moment to consider himself in the mirror again, fingers tracing the outline of one of the bare daggers Eames had stumbled upon moments prior. Who was Arthur kidding? The only thing he was good at being was a Point Man; a cold, ruthless dream worker. He didn’t know how to go to sleep without suspicion plaguing his thoughts, or without placing a knife or gun within reach. He didn’t know how to give himself up – to bind himself to someone else fully – without weighing the costs and benefits and fearing betrayal.

If he forced himself into a role he was unsuited for now, allowed himself to hope for some idealized future with Eames after this terrible nightmare, or gave indication to the Forger that there was a chance, it would hinder them both. Arthur didn’t want to promise Eames something he couldn’t give, whether he survived or not. And he was more than accustomed to relying only on himself; surely Arthur could manage without indulging in whimsical thoughts.

He unhooked the two slender sheaths from his biceps and placed the knives on the edge of the sink carefully before stepping into the shower. The scalding water helped wash away his uncertainties that Eames’s sudden presence had caused, re-balancing him, and focused his attention. Even though he was not entirely sure on the necessity of washing in a dream, he still went through the motions of cleaning his body and hair before shutting off the water and dressing quickly.

Arthur made sure that his knives were in place under his shirt and would not hinder his movements before he towelled his hair dry and gelled it back easily. He pulled the door open and blinked in surprise when Eames was right beside the door, leaning lazily against the wall. “You don’t mind if I shower, do you, pet?” the Forger raised an eyebrow, glancing over Arthur noticeably.

“No. Shower,” he offered, leaving the door ajar as he headed towards his desk. “Just don’t take forever,” he added loudly as the Forger slipped into the steaming room and pushed the door closed.

“Yes, dear!” Eames chuckled through the door.

Arthur narrowed his eyes and snatched his two handguns off the surface of the desk more harshly than was really necessary, shoving them into their holsters with little care. With his guns back in their proper place, Arthur sat down in his chair a little heavily as he heard the shower begin running. He rolled his chair a little closer to the edge of the desk, ready to get to work, when his eyes focused on a steaming bowl of pasta sitting in front of him. The map had been shoved aside slightly and there was a fork shoved into the noodles, as if Arthur had merely walked away from his meal for a moment.
The Point Man felt an annoying flush of affection towards Eames for the gesture before he carefully picked up the warm bowl and set it aside. He purposefully ignored the vocal protesting of his stomach and the sensation of his insides knotting angrily; he could go a month without food if he had to and there were more important priorities to consider. Arthur swivelled his chair and began rifling through the cabinets against the wall, pulling out relevant information on the enemy dream workers for Eames to read over.

He offhandedly noted the sound of the shower turning off but did not pause in his work to watch for the Forger’s reappearance. Arthur continued pulling out sheets of information and photographs that his memory had logged away and organized when he was in reality, as well as what he had added now with experience. He set the information in three loose piles, ready to be slipped into folders, and planned what to tell Eames about the situation at the same time.

It was luck, more than anything else, that kept Arthur from dropping his scads of paper when the unexpected presence of a broad, warm hand appeared on his shoulder. He forced himself to remain still and keep his breathing steady as Eames leaned over the edge of his chair. The spicy smell of the shampoo the Forger had apparently materialized – incredibly exotic in comparison to Arthur’s own – swarmed his senses and Arthur allowed himself a deep breath to savour the proximity of smell and warmth. Even though Arthur hadn’t known what to expect from the contact, he was slightly disappointed when Eames reached over to pluck the forgotten bowl of pasta up and place it in front of the Point Man again.

“I don’t need to be babied, you know,” he snapped as Eames removed himself from Arthur’s presence and wandered over to the kitchen to grab his own bowl of pasta. Arthur bit his lip, the sting of rejection and disappointment exaggerating his annoyance over someone trying to take care of him. He watched as Eames wandered towards the kitchenette, taking note of the subtle colours in the Forger’s clothing this time around; luckily the man knew enough to not draw attention with colourful clothing during a war. Arthur purposefully looked away though when the man turned back towards the desk, not wanting to spend another second focusing on those cheeks made rosy by the heat of the shower, or the hair still mussed and dripping slightly.

Arthur turned his chair back towards the main portion of his desk, placing his information into their folders with exaggerated care, ignoring the small crinkles in one corner of the paper where he had clutched it too tightly. As he set the three folders down again, this time on top of the large map, Arthur was once again faced with the bowl of pasta. “I know you don’t need anyone to take care of you,” Eames began as he took the chair across the desk from the Point Man. Eames looked as though he had a few choice arguments against the statement but kept them quiet and continued. “But there is no reason why you cannot eat and brief me at the same time. Besides, you’ll hurt my feelings if you don’t have any.”

“Yes, because your feelings are my top priority right now,” Arthur countered with a little more bite than he had meant. He winced as he watched Eames glance at him and then down at the floor,
downcast but understanding. Even though it was true that their feelings were the last thing that
should be on his mind at that moment, Arthur still felt a nettling guilt in his stomach; it was clear
that both of them had very important and personal feelings that needed discussing. As way of
apology, Arthur picked up his bowl and took a large mouthful of pasta, chewing quickly before
swallowing. “There. Happy?”

Eames was watching him curiously, a small smile tugging at the corner of those wonderfully lush

Arthur’s eyes narrowed even as he took another bite; now that his stomach had tasted food, he
wasn’t planning on stopping. “What?”

The Forger’s smile grew, looking devilish. “You’re so easy to manipulate.”

Arthur felt his teeth clench in irritation, subtly shifting the grip on his fork so that it would be more
suited towards stabbing. “Maybe...” he began with a deep, warning voice, “I should send you back
to reality right now.”

Eames’s eyes flashed to meet his quickly, humour immediately slipping away from the man’s soft
eyes and face. “Don’t you dare even think about that,” the Forger responded with his own warning
tone. Arthur barely suppressed his shudder in response to the deep, gravelly voice. “I’m not leaving
this dream without you.”

The Point Man’s eyes widened minutely as his heart began racing, momentarily at a loss for words.
Unsure of how to respond without sounding embarrassingly sappy or harshly disinterested, Arthur
took another large bite of his pasta. Needing to be focused on something he was good at, to be
back in his element, Arthur cleared his throat and nudged the three folders across the desktop
towards Eames. “There are three dream workers down here that we need to deal with. But before
we get to that, tell me how much you know.”

Eames still looked as though someone had ruffled his feathers, but he seemed willing to leave the
argument for the moment. The Forger remained silent as he chewed through another mouthful of
pasta, flipping open the three folders carelessly. Those sharp blue green eyes scanned across the
photos of the dream workers skilfully, picking out important details, and then glanced back up at
Arthur. “Cobb told me that you had locked down your subconscious – which you’re definitely
explaining to me later,” Eames pointed a warning finger at him. “He explained how people lose
their memory if they die down here, and the doctor told me how they found you.”

Arthur paled slightly. “The doctor,” he spoke slowly, testing out the word. “I’m in a hospital,
then,” he stated it as a question, hoping it wasn’t true.

“Of course you’re in a hospital, Arthur,” Eames grumbled, “You’re in a coma.” There was a heavy pause of silence before Eames continued, “You’re in the New York Presbyterian Hospital to be precise.”

The Point Man rubbed his eyes tiredly. He knew it was unlikely that Cobb would have found Arthur if he hadn’t ended up in a hospital, but this encounter was becoming far too similar to his childhood experience. “And how am I doing...up there?” he forced himself to keep his voice calm, clinical.

Eames let out a heavy sigh and sat back in his chair, folder and bowl of pasta momentarily forgotten. “Not good, love,” the man spoke worriedly as he fidgeted with the buttons of his shirt. Eames glanced up at him slowly, as if confirming for himself that Arthur was still okay, still seated across the desk from him. “It had been about a day and a half since they found you and they’re...” Arthur could see the Forger’s Adam’s apple bob slightly, “they’re only expecting you to last another two days.”

Arthur nodded, still trying to think about this from a detached mindset. “That will give us a maximum of six days to do this,” he thought out loud. He didn’t continue the line of thought though, not wanting Eames to get upset; Arthur would be sending the Forger back in five days at the latest, just in case they had no chance and the man remained true to his stubborn streak. He saw Eames shake his head in disbelief and Arthur raised an eyebrow. “Problem?”

Eames dropped his face into his hands for a moment, still shaking his head. “I don’t know how you can talk about this like it is just business,” the Forger admitted, finally meeting Arthur’s gaze again.

“What choice do I have, Eames?” he questioned softly, setting his half-finished pasta aside; his stomach was unaccustomed to dealing with food.

“Why can you not just drop the barriers and let them go?” Eames asked in exasperation, clearly desperate. “Cobb is up there to take care of them when they wake up.”

“And have Dom’s hands stained with blood again?” Arthur raised an eyebrow, fidgeting with his detailed map and pulling it back into position over his desk again. “There is no way to deal with the dream workers unless I kill them down here or they die with me, unfortunately,” Arthur admitted, having thought a great deal about the surprisingly lack of options he was presented with. “We’re in a hospital now; the dream workers can’t just wake up and then ‘die’,” he spoke in a way
“Can’t we just let them go and track them down afterwards?” the Forger proposed across the desk. He was leaning back in his chair now, one ankle hooked over the opposite knee, and finger pressed against his lips as he thought.

“No, absolutely not,” Arthur shook his head, purposefully placing his hands in his lap to avoid fidgeting. “They are not allowed to leave this dream with the information they came for. I won’t allow it to happen.”

“What are they after?” Eames asked curiously. “Can’t we just kill them before they find the information?”

“It’s not exactly easy to get close enough to kill them,” Arthur huffed. “Their projections are making it too difficult to get into their established territories, at least without the risk of me getting killed in the process.” Arthur specifically didn’t answer Eames’s other question; he couldn’t tell the Forger that the dream workers were trying to extract information about him and his team. The man would go on some self sacrificing rampage that Arthur simply wouldn’t allow. From the suspicious glance Eames sent him, he was aware of Arthur’s silence, but wasn’t going to push it.

“I’m amazed they haven’t attempted an escape of their own, yet,” the other man mused more to himself, turning his bottom lip white when he pressed a knuckle to it in thought.

“I assume they are unwilling to leave without the information they came for,” he gave a tiny shrug. “And even if they don’t know what the barriers mean, I’m sure they know it isn’t normal and know enough to be cautious.”

Eames hummed as he considered Arthur’s words, staring at the folders and map without really seeing them. “Why can you not kill yourself?” Eames asked him, dropping his finger from his lips to begin tapping, agitated, on his knee. In any other situation the words would have been cold and brutal; it was almost depressing how accepting they had all become of the thought of death with dream work. “That would get us out of the dream alive and without the enemy knowing the information. We could let them go until we knew it was safe to deal with them, knowing they didn’t have the extracted information.”

Arthur sighed and skimmed his fingers over the butt of his left handgun, wishing there was an answer as simple as that. “This is only my second time doing this lock down,” he explained, fingers still brushing against the hard, cold polymer. “I worry that if I kill myself as things are, with three other experienced, determined consciousnesses down here, they may remain in my subconscious
“Well then...” Eames huffed a sigh, reaching for the three folders again. “It seems like we have no choice but to kill these three dream workers with your barriers up and then head back to reality before you fade away. Sound about right, darling?” The Forger held the folders in his hand, but his eyes were trained on Arthur.

“We’ll see how things progress,” he responded, noncommittal.

Eames grunted his displeasure and slid his chair closer to the desk, sprawling the folders open on the surface. “Alright, tell me about them.”

Arthur slid his own chair a little closer to the desk so that he could reach across the desktop and move sheets of paper around as he talked. “There are three dream workers, like I said before,” he began as he pulled out photos of his enemies, pointing to each one in turn as he continued. “There’s Nikolas, the Architect, Amelina, the Extractor, and Louis.” Arthur paused for a moment, his own frustration welling up as he remembered his own stupidity. “He’s the leader, but I don’t know what type of dream worker he is.”

Eames looked up from the photographs he was studying to regard Arthur in surprise. “You don’t know, and yet you came down into a dream with him?” the Forger asked in disbelief.

Arthur felt his back straighten defensively. “Amelia posed as the leader with Nikolas behind her. Louis was the mark when they approached me. They’re professional, Eames,” he insisted, not sure why the thought of Eames’s disappointment in him was harder to handle than Arthur’s disappointment in himself. “They forged entire pasts for themselves. I didn’t know there was anything wrong until we were already down in the dream.”

“What happened, Arthur?” Eames asked softly. His hand was trailing hesitantly across the desktop until his fingertips brushed the Point Man’s fingers, which were by the photo of Louis. “This isn’t you.”

He tried to pull his hand away when Eames’s hand slid overtop of the Point Man’s own, but Eames tightened his grasp and pressed Arthur’s hand to the desktop so tightly that Arthur couldn’t move his hand. He forced himself not to wince at the pinch of pain caused by the vice grip. Arthur’s hand crushed between Eames’s hand and the desktop. “What do you care?” he bit out through clenched teeth, equally powerful instincts calling for him to fight and to escape. “You don’t even know me.”
“We both know that’s bullshit, sweetheart,” Eames looked worried, angry, and hurt. In that moment, Arthur didn’t want to know why. The intensity in the man’s eyes was simply too much for the Point Man to handle.

“You may know me better than anyone else,” Arthur agreed angrily, hating the fact that the statement was true. “But do not fool yourself into believing that you truly know me.” No one knew Arthur – knew every dark secret, every troubling thought. He doubted anyone could know everything and still want him around; it was easier if he didn’t put people in the situation to have to make that decision. His parents knew his past, but they knew nothing of who he had become after that. Eames, and maybe Cobb, knew about who Arthur was now; but they could not fathom how he had become this way.

Eames tightened his grip again and this time Arthur did wince as he felt bone grind against bone and veins get caught and pinched. His reaction had been tiny, but Eames released his hand immediately and pulled away as if burned. “I’m sorry--” the man began, but Arthur was already standing from his chair smoothly and walking across the room to step out onto the balcony.

He pushed the door closed behind him with more force than was necessary but gave little thought to the state of the glass. Arthur took a deep, calming breath of air as he leaned his elbows against the metal railing, cradling his left hand with his right and inspecting it critically in the afternoon lighting. The damage was minimal – Arthur would be surprised if there was much bruising – but his hand ached and throbbed painfully with his heartbeat. He knew the Forger had meant no harm, but it still hurt; when he was at war and the majority of the world he inhabited was trying to kill him, it stung that the only person he could trust had hurt him.

The sound of the balcony door being slid open and closed with more care could be heard over the sound of violence and Eames was by Arthur’s side in the next instant. Eames reached for his hand and Arthur snatched it away quickly. The Forger made a little ‘tutting’ noise and reached out again in determination, gathering Arthur’s left hand up between his hands softly and delicately. Arthur allowed his hand’s capture reluctantly, watching suspiciously as the other man held him with one hand and began massaging carefully with the thumb of his other hand. He had been expecting the touch to hurt, but instead Arthur felt the tension and pain in his hand slide away as Eames continued to work.

Arthur watched Eames work as the state of his subconscious fell into the background, mesmerized. The Forger began at the fingertip before moving down each finger to the second knuckle before beginning the next. Then that warm, calloused thumb worked over the back of Arthur’s hand and relaxed his wrist before overturning his hand and beginning anew on the fingers and palm. He wanted to pull his hand away, wanted to interrupt and remind both of them that they had no time for such things as this, but he found his throat sealed shut with unwilling affection and pleasure.
It was when Eames made it to Arthur’s inner wrist, thumb now circling in the form of a caress, that the other man spoke. “I may not know everything about you, darling,” Eames agreed. “But I’d love the opportunity to change that.”

The flock of butterflies returned to Arthur’s stomach, giving a sensation of tingling across his skin that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. He carefully extracted his hand from Eames’s grasp and purposefully placed it on the railing, dully noting how cold his hand suddenly felt without the skin to skin contact. He couldn’t begin to explain everything to Eames now – the fact that Arthur had apparently mistakenly thought that Eames didn’t care about him but couldn’t stop thinking about the Forger. They had neither the time nor energy to devote to the conversation that would no doubt ensue. “Can we not talk about this now?” he begged. “It isn’t the time. We do not have the time.”

“When, then, love?” Eames asked him sadly, leaning one arm on the railing and watching Arthur rather than the disheartening view of a city – of a subconscious – being torn to shreds.

“When we get out of this alive and return to reality,” Arthur offered, avoiding Eames’s searching gaze.

“Promise?” Eames questioned doubtfully, stepping into Arthur’s personal space.

Arthur glanced up to meet those beautiful, expressive eyes before looking away again, considering the skyline. It was hard to tell from this angle, but he thought the barriers holding back the fog might be a little closer than they were the day before. He remembered his internal debate right before this job as he considered his wallet. This was why Arthur was not suited for relationships and domesticity; he couldn’t make the promises a partner deserved. All he could do was sigh, straighten his back, and refocus on the horizon. “The three dream workers split up and took different corners of the dreamscape. Nikolas is in the east, Amelina the north, and Louis is in the west.”

Eames watched him for a long moment, silent. Then the man seemed to give up and turned to watch where Arthur was pointing, taking note of where the enemies were situated. Eames leaned more heavily on the railing and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Let’s head back inside,” the Forger proposed. “I have to read over the rest of those folders and you should try to eat some more, or at least have some water.”

Arthur nodded his agreement, his stomach already considering the thought of more food, and followed the other man into the top floor of the building. Eames settled down into his chair heavily and picked up one of the folders again while Arthur snatched up the two bowls from the desk and headed over to the kitchenette to refill them. The pot of pasta was still warm, a handy perk of being in a dream that he normally didn’t consider since he was rarely in a dream this long. He set Eames’s bowl beside the man before returning to his own seat, working on the pasta silently.
He watched Eames pour over the pages of information expertly, staring at one sheet until the information was understood and engrained before moving onto the next. Arthur knew he was normally the one announcing the information, but it would feel odd to debrief Eames without the rest of the team around. The Forger didn’t seem bothered by the set up though, nibbling at his pasta occasionally as he focused.

Arthur spent the time going over his plan in his head, looking for any angles or situations he hadn’t considered before he sent Eames out into his dangerous subconscious. It was when Arthur returned from grabbing a glass of refreshing water that he noticed Eames rubbing his eyes again, looking tired. He wondered if Eames had gotten sleep when flying from Mombasa – the last place Arthur had known the Forger to be before this disaster, even though Eames had not mentioned where he had flown from – to New York. “Do you need to sleep before we discuss our plans?” he asked neutrally, knowing Eames was just as stubborn as he was about being taken care of.

Eames didn’t acknowledge him for a moment, focused on a paragraph of information. Arthur waited patiently until those sharp eyes met his and a tiny smile tugged the corner of Eames’s mouth upwards. “I’m alright, pet. My body is getting rest while I’m asleep, which will help because I’m not straining to keep the dreamscape stable like you are. Besides,” Eames shrugged, already turning back to his task, dropping one folder onto the desk and picking up another one, “once we start fighting back I’m not expecting things to last long, no matter which way it goes.”

“All right,” was all he could say to that, knowing the man was most likely correct. Instead of arguing a useless point, he settled back into his place across from Eames and began drawing a condensed map of the dreamscape for Eames to use, focusing on the alleyway system.

Eames eventually set down the second folder and picked up the final one, determination and focus astounding when it was required. Arthur was just about finished the map, adding in directions and hints for Eames’s work when the Forger’s voice drew his attention. “So if Nikolas is the Architect, does that mean he created the dreamscape?” Eames asked, sounding confused.

“No,” Arthur answered, busy finishing up the last section of alleys. He looked up when he was finished, only then realizing that Eames had been watching him intently. “Nikolas showed me all of the designs for the dreamscape, so when they came down into my mind, I recreated what I expecting to see. It was only when I noticed my own personal styles in the architecture that I realized I was in trouble.”

“Why a skyscraper then?” the man asked, surprisingly Arthur slightly. “It is quite a vulnerable building if you think about it, especially with the methods of modern warfare that any skilled dream worker could conjure up.”
“It’s an excellent vantage point,” Arthur defended easily, having considered his base of operations thoroughly before setting up. “And besides that, the dream workers can’t just kill me from far away in the building if they don’t have the information they came for; if they were going to do that then they might as well have killed themselves already.”

The Forger nodded and returned to the folders, skimming through the last few pages of information as Arthur finished up the map and folded it neatly. “Alright, so tell me the plan,” Eames questioned him soon after, setting the final folder back onto the desk.

Arthur handed over the map, which Eames slipped into a pocket distractedly, his eyes still on the Point Man. “I think the best course of action would be for you to forge the projections of the enemy one at a time and slip behind their defences to deal with them. They are too spread out across the dreamscape to call backup in time, but I can’t get through their defences and the warring in the street to take care of them myself. I don’t want to send you out into that mess anymore than I’d want to go out, but I know your skills would provide a better chance for success.”

“I understand, darling,” Eames calmed him with a reassuring tone. “And I’m willing to do whatever it takes, so don’t concern yourself with my motivations. I think this is the best option we have, and you have already documented the distinct features of each dream worker’s projections for me to mimic.” The Forger motioned towards the scattered folders offhandedly.

He nodded, feeling frayed. “It’s not going to be simple, though,” he cautioned, not liking how cavalier Eames was being about this. “They have already captured a few of my projections to try to torture the information out of them and the barriers are shrinking by the hour. It should be fine for now, but the longer this takes, the harder it will be for me to control my projections to back you up.”

Eames pushed himself out of his chair with a slight groan, standing across the desk from Arthur and watching him with sad determination. “Then I best be off immediately, shouldn’t I, love?”

Arthur bit his lip and stood as well, feeling his entire body protest at the movement. Between the constant dull pain seared into his bones from the torture of his projections, and his desperation to postpone Eames’s inevitable departure, Arthur’s body was screaming for him to simply give up. He knew he couldn’t - the Point Man would like to manage to steal another few years from life – but he just felt so tired and worn down. He ended up beside the desk after grabbing something from one of the drawers, standing in front of Eames with no words on his tongue. Arthur couldn’t damn Eames to pain and death, and yet he couldn’t be selfish and tell him to stay. Instead, he handed over the mobile phone silently.

The other man seemed capable of reading the conflict in his face, giving him a small smile as he took the phone and inspected it carefully. The smile was more subdued than the first smile Arthur
had ever seen on those memorable lips and face, but it was still able to effortlessly make him feel as though he was basking in the sun. “It’s a mobile phone but functions like a two-way radio with the companion phone I have on me.”

“Thanks, darling.” Eames flipped the phone closed again and shove it into a pocket; Arthur could hear the map crinkle slightly as it got crushed under the device. The Forger appeared to waver for a moment, looking unsure of what he should do – or what he would be allowed to do. Eventually Eames simply smiled warmly, not forcing himself into Arthur’s personal space. “I’ll call you some time, yeah?” the man offered with a tiny, somewhat panic-stricken chuckle, and turned towards the door.

“Wait!” Arthur nearly shouted, surprising the projections he had almost forgotten were stationed against the far wall of the large upper floor. Before he really thought about it, his hand was on Eames’s upper arm and turning the man back towards him, fingers digging in as if to desperately hold him in place. “Eames, if you get hurt--”

Eames had turned back to him, looking hopeful; but at Arthur’s words, the man rolled his eyes even as he stepped more firmly into the Point Man’s grasp. “Don’t worry about me, sweetheart. I can handle pain--”

“Don’t interrupt!” Arthur snapped, tightening his hold until he knew it was probably painful. He was urgently attempting to memorize what it felt like to have Eames’s skin against his own, only a thin barrier of fabric between them, and of the warmth seeping into his palm. “If you get hurt,” he began again, deadly serious as he forced himself to speak even though it felt as though his throat was constricting and sealing shut painfully. “You call me.”

“Arthur, I already told you that I wasn’t leaving the dream without you,” Eames retorted, sounding upset now. Arthur couldn’t blame the man, really; this wasn’t exactly a heartfelt or perfect goodbye.

“If it gets that bad you are,” he insisted, finally loosening his grip enough that his palm and fingers skimmed down Eames’s arm slightly until it got caught on the crook of the man’s elbow. Realizing that this wasn’t getting him anywhere, Arthur changed tactics; for once he didn’t feel bad about being a manipulative liar because he knew it would probably save Eames’s life. “If you get hurt and can’t get away, I’ll need to drop the barriers so that you can wake up in reality unharmed. Remember that you can always come right back down again.” Not that I’ll give you the opportunity to waste your life a second time, he added silently to himself.

Eames narrowed his eyes for a moment, considering him suspiciously. Then the Forger’s body relaxed under his touch. “Alright, you win,” he finally conceded, lifting his right hand to cover Arthur’s for a moment. Arthur’s heart was beating rapidly in his chest as he felt that larger palm
envelope his hand, and then the moment passed. Neither of them moved to do anything more intimate, knowing they could not afford any further distractions. “I’ll see you again, Arthur,” Eames promised before taking the first, initial step away from him, paused, and then continued towards the door.

Arthur was sorely tempted to call him back but bit his tongue until he tasted coppery blood pool in his mouth, remaining silent. Once the Forger had glanced back at him one final time and slid out through the door leading to the guard room, Arthur let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and headed for the balcony. The air hit his face again, rustling the few free strands of hair, but this time it did nothing to calm him. He leaned on the railing and scanned the streets and intersections below him.

He knew that he would not be able to see Eames from this height when the man exited the building, but he couldn’t think of anything else to do with himself. Arthur had been surprised by Eames’s appearance in his subconscious even though he had asked Dom to find the Forger. The man’s presence had sent his thoughts and body into a flurry, feeling unsure and unbalanced and yet strangely comforted and hopeful. But now that Eames was gone again, Arthur couldn’t help but shake his head at his own stupidity.

The Point Man had thought he had been nothing more to Eames than someone to tease and entertain him until the job was over. He didn’t know how much of that was true, and how much more the other man felt towards him, but Arthur was entirely certain that he might have wasted an entire year of his life running from something and someone that actually would have welcomed him with open arms. It was disappointing to know that they would never get their chance to clarify and explore now; Arthur didn’t hold much hope for this plan and was expecting the plan to end with the Forger being sent back to reality and Arthur finally fading away into a state where he didn’t have to think about this anymore. But it was also wonderfully consoling to know that he had meant something to Eames; that despite everything, the Forger had noticed him and begun to care.

It was more than Arthur had ever expected to receive, and he was content.
Part VII. Eames

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: Very dark, graphic depictions of violence and torture. Seriously. I started writing this story by telling myself “this is a challenge for yourself. Write something dark, something you’ve never dared write before.” And I did. In a way I’m very...proud of this chapter. It turned out exactly as I wanted it to. I feel this chapter met my personal challenge, which should be warning enough.

Part VII. Eames

Eames felt an uncomfortable number of eyes land on him as he stepped through the door, away from Arthur, and into the guard room on his way towards the exit. Arthur’s projections, the last line of defence between the Point Man and his enemies now that Eames was leaving, watched him with mixed expressions. Some of them reminded him almost too much of Arthur – face like stone and eyes serious – while others were more fluid and open about their expressions of sadness, determination, and curiosity.

George was at the far end of the guard room, waiting for him. Eames didn’t pause in his pace as he drew alongside the projection, unwilling to waste anymore time, but the other man merely matched his pace and followed him out onto the staircase. He saw a few of the snipers along the upper balcony twitch slightly at their sudden appearance, but they calmed quickly and watched them begin their brisk descent down the spiralling stairs.

During the first few flights down the stairs, Eames was focused inward upon his memories. The sensation of Arthur’s hair – soft with broken and faded gel – slipping through his fingers, the calm that came over him while massaging Arthur’s hand, the feel of the Point Man’s fingers digging into his arm to stop him momentarily from leaving. They were all sensations that he had never expected to be allowed, and now he felt as though he had taken his first hit of something far too addicting to be abandoned.

Their stolen moments together had been juxtaposed to what the situation required – what they should have been feeling and how they should have acted – but he was thankful. Despite the fact that they were on a time limit of a few days before they both faded away into nothing, with three enemy dream workers trying to kill them, it had been almost calming working with Arthur again. There was something about how the Point Man held himself when focused on a job; calm, cool and collected. It was nearly impossible not to feel the same when working alongside the man; the mindset was infectious.
Granted, Arthur had clearly been run down and fading fast – less distanced from the job than he would have been if they were safe in some warehouse in reality. The knives strapped underneath a trim suit had attested to that. But that was understandable and the man had still been handling everything with a professionalism Eames knew he himself would never be able to achieve. It had been reassuring to him, despite everything, to see how well he and Arthur still worked together after a year apart – after all of the feelings they had both clearly been dealing with when apart. It had just been Arthur, doing what Arthur did best, and Eames, doing what Eames did best.

It was almost surprising how harmonious they had been and Eames was genuinely grateful that it was just him and Arthur down here. They had needed a large team to even have a chance of completing Inception, but each additional team member had added new stresses to the group. Ariadne had been new, which was stressful enough between teaching someone and making them comfortable and competent enough to complete their work – no matter how naturally talented they were. Dom was also extremely stressful, especially when in the vicinity of Arthur. The Extractor, despite his assurances against such claims, needed almost as much watching as a child. It was understandable after the man lost his wife, but Eames hated how Arthur silently took the responsibility and Dom allowed it without even a second thought. Yusuf was not stressful as a team member, but you learned to be on edge when working with a Chemist; there was no telling when they would mutter an ‘oh shit’ and reach for their gas mask.

He noticed that George was glancing at him subtly as they continued down the staircase silently and Eames raised a questioning eyebrow. “Question?”

George quickly looked away, looking bashful at being caught. “I was just wondering how things went up there.” The projection’s tone was curious and maybe even a little jealous, but it was clear that the man was trying to subdue these. Eames could still see hints of the Point Man in this projection, but now he couldn’t help but wonder what Arthur would be like with this lesser control over his emotions. The Forger kept remembering those stolen moments since he had arrived down in the Point Man’s subconscious, where Arthur had been too shocked, tired, or uncaring to hide some of his reactions to Eames’s presence.

Rather than treating Eames like a child that needed to be tolerated and watched lest they set something on fire, Arthur had reacted positively to Eames’s presence for the first time since they had split after Inception. Eames didn’t want to look too deeply into everything, knowing that the circumstances were unusual to say the least; there was no telling how Arthur would react back in reality if they even made it that far. But he indulged in a small fluttering of hope in his stomach, remembering how Arthur had seemingly relaxed once he knew Eames was there to help him battle this challenge. That, and the Forger was quite sure the sight and feeling of Arthur curled up against his side, leaning into his fingers’ touch, would be with him for the rest of his days.

“It went…well, I suppose,” he admitted, trying to keep his smile sombre enough to suit the situation. “We got a plan in place and Arthur finally got some sleep and food. You’ll have to keep at him though,” he glanced over at George as they rounded another landing on the stairs. They were near the bottom at this point, the snipers undefined black dots lining the balcony in an
organized fashion; Eames had always wondered if Arthur had been involved in the military – he would have to ask if – when – they got out of this alive.

“He’s so stubborn,” George muttered in the closest thing to a whine Eames could ever expect from a portion of Arthur’s subconscious.

“Just get into an argument with him where the only way he can win is to eat or sleep,” the Forger suggested with a playful smirk.

“Arthur’s already used to arguing with me; I’m the equivalent to white noise at this point.” They reached the bottom of the staircase and Eames paused for a moment to glance back up. There were about thirty flights of stairs winding up the large, tall room, encircling a tastefully elegant chandelier. The crystal refracted the brilliant light, turning the chandelier into a makeshift sun that lit up the entire room despite the size and lack of windows.

Eames turned back to George. “Well you need to figure something out because I’m already using all of my willpower to force myself to leave. I’m not sure I’d be able to stay focused knowing Arthur is allowing himself to fade away.”

“When will you be back?” George stepped part way in front of Eames’s path, stopping him from progressing through the only set of doors leading to the lobby.

The Forger was somewhat uneasy around this projection, not knowing how to behave. When going into dreams, there were generally projections that appeared and behaved so different from the dreamer that you’d expect them to be strangers on the street. There was, however, the rare exception where an individual you met in the dreamscape would seem to be a true projection of some aspect of the dreamer’s subconscious. The boundaries in those situations were always somewhat blurry; you never knew how to take the words and behaviours you experienced – whether they were true but suppressed in reality.

It was even more disconcerting with George since the projection was so conscious in comparison to normal projections. He spoke as though he was simply another being living inside Arthur’s head, bickering and questioning. Yet as much as Eames wanted to believe George’s actions as manifestations of what Arthur suppressed – the subtle concern and respect that the Point Man occasionally showed much more noticeable in George’s words and actions – he had to remember that even if George was a true manifestation, he was still only one piece of an extremely intricate puzzle.

It would be unfair for Eames to make assumptions about Arthur’s thoughts and feelings based on a
projection. The other dream worker had already showed more of his hand to Eames than the Forger had ever hoped for – he didn’t feel foolish assuming that Arthur had, in fact, been feeling something towards him during their time apart. Arthur had been willing enough to show that in those precious moments where the stoic professionalism faded away. And as keen as Eames was to pursue that, to determine how, exactly, the Point Man felt, he had to remember the situation at hand and push those thoughts aside.

Right now he had to work on saving Arthur. Feelings and embarrassingly sappy declarations – on his part – could come later.

“I don’t know,” he admitted as he focused on manifesting a handgun on his right hip. “We have a few days to work with but I’d like to get things sorted as quickly as possible; Arthur doesn’t need any more strain than is necessary. I’m hoping to have the Architect dealt with in a day at the latest.”

“And then you’re coming back?” George asked somewhat hopefully.

“Unlikely,” he sighed, rechecking his pockets for the mirror, map and mobile phone he would need on this job. “It will be better if I just hit the dream workers one at a time before they realize what’s happening. But don’t worry about me,” he gave George his most reassuring smile, the one he knew even worked on Arthur when he was the most high strung, “I’ll be fine.”

George nodded, jaw tense in a very familiar way. “Best of luck,” was all he said before he hooked a hand into the crook of Eames’s elbow and began leading him through the pitch black lobby expertly. Even when the Forger strained, he couldn’t hear any tell-tale signs of the snipers he knew were lining the outer edges of the room. They stopped shortly after and Eames could feel the cold metal of the door’s handle against his palm when he reached out. “Don’t worry about Arthur; I’ll take care of him while you’re away. I’ll just remind him that he has something to live for now.”

“Which is what?” Eames whispered. He knew he didn’t have to lower his voice, but when you were surrounded by an engulfing darkness and you knew there were snipers on standby, you couldn’t help but indulge your cautious instincts.

George gave a tiny snort of disbelief and Eames could practically imagine the man rolling his eyes. “You, of course.”

Before Eames could respond to that, much less comprehend the meaning behind the words and the fact that they had been spoken by a part of Arthur’s subconscious, Eames found himself being shoved outside with the doors closing quickly behind him. The Forger blinked a few times in quick
succession for a moment, glancing over his shoulder at the sturdy metal doors before dashing for
the cover of the alley system. Right now, this was a job. The Point Man was back at base,
remaining calm and focused. Eames had to do the same; he had to be the Forger Arthur expected
him to be.

With his professional focus restored, despite George’s final comment, Eames pulled out the map
Arthur had drawn for him and began making his way through the alleys towards the east side of
the city. It was still another hour or so before sundown in the dreamscape, but with the walls of the
buildings bordering the alleys being so high and narrow, it already seemed close to twilight for
Eames. He wished he could create some sort of flashlight to use, but that would certainly not aid in
his mission to remain stealth.

Instead he gave his eyes time to adjust to the dim lighting in order to make out the map properly.
At first he had been surprised that no other projections seemed to be utilizing the alley system, but
he understood why after only a few short minutes. Arthur was meticulous and skilled at everything
he set his focus on and Eames had no doubt that he could be the best Architect in the business if he
wasn’t too busy being the best Point Man in the world.

Every wall of bricks was identical – the same coloured bricks and no blemishes visible that could
be used as markers for location – and the maze that was the alley system was so complex that
Eames was confident no Extractor would stand a chance. If he did not have a map drawn by
Arthur, Eames knew he would have been lost and stuck in the maze until he or the dreamer died.
The alleys were as much an asset to Arthur as they were a death trap to any ambitious, daring
projections.

It took much longer to cross the city through the alleys than it would have if he had taken the main
roads, but he did not experience any violent encounters on his trip. He was forced to stop at one
point to memorize the rest of the map as the sun inched down towards the horizon and finally
slipped away from view. Once he was sure of the remainder of the route and the fact that he was
now in Nikolas’s territory of the dreamscape, Eames shoved the map back into his pocket and
pulled out his mirror.

In the last rays of dying light, Eames recalled all of the detailed descriptions Arthur had noted of
the Architect’s projections and began pulling those characteristics onto himself. It was over in less
than a minute and Eames squinted at the mirror to check all of the details carefully. If he wasn’t
careful – wasn’t completely sure that he had all of the details right – he would not just let Arthur
down; Eames could lose his memory, leaving Arthur alone to fend for himself.

Once he was happy with the results, he pocketed the mirror and recreated his handgun into the
make and model Nikolas was apparently most familiar with; it wouldn’t do to walk into the party
with the wrong gun. After that was complete he headed down the next route he had memorized,
finally heading for the main streets. Nikolas’s projections would be the easiest to forge out of the
three dream workers, making him the easiest first target. The Architect was skilled in his own
down the right, but he had not been in dream work nearly as long as his two team members; he was
practically a baby when compared to Arthur and Eames.

Because of this, Nikolas’s projections were manifesting the behaviour of a beginner who had not
joined this profession for the subtle brutality of the acts. The projections, according to Arthur’s
records, had been ruthless but sloppy; it seemed that the Architect was busy focusing on staying
alive and impressing his other team members. The projections were less likely to plan an attack
ahead; they would simply attack the first one of Arthur’s projections that they came into contact
with. This made it easier for him to forge and fit in with the projections – the novice
unpredictability meaning he didn’t have to stick to any strict string of behaviours to remain hidden
– but it also set him on edge at the thought of the Point Man’s projections at the mercy of an
inexperienced torturer. No type of torture was enjoyable, granted, but novices were much more
likely to go too far too fast; experienced torturers knew how to get their information without utterly
ruining an individual.

With that worrying thought as motivation, Eames finally found a mouth of the alleys and
cautiously stepped out into the open. The sun had long since set by this point but the moon was
edging up into the sky, almost nervous as it exposed itself to the violence below. The light shone
through the few scattered clouds and plumes of blackened smoke, aiding Eames as he picked his
way through rubble and debris. The streetlights dispersed along the empty street helped as well,
sharing their golden glow, but many of them had been smashed with their glass hiding in the
patches of darkness.

Eames was just about to congratulate himself on successfully sneaking into enemy territory when
he heard a voice call out to him, words spoken with a touch of a Norwegian accent. “Hey!” The
Forger frozen. “What were you doing in that alley?”

He turned on his heel slowly, memorizing and adjusting his own internalized speech to match the
accent as he looked for the speaker. A moment later a projection in torn jeans and a blood-soaked
collared shirt slipped out of the darkness and jogged up to him. Confident in his forgery, Eames
relaxed his posture slightly, as if he had suddenly encountered a friend in enemy territory. “I was
chasing one of those projections; I wasn’t going to let him get away, was I?”

“Where is he then?” the projection glanced back into the shadowed alley suspiciously. “You know
we’re supposed to bring back as many as we can for questioning.”

“Course I know,” Eames scoffed, “But he was squealing like a baby and would’ve drawn too
much attention. So I silenced him,” he finished with a voice that was cold but with a touch of
excitement, like he was still new to this. He pulled the base of his jacket aside to show off the butt
of his gun before allowing the fabric to fall back into place.
The projection, seemingly satisfied with his gun, appearance, voice and excuse, fell into a relaxed stance as well. “Good on you,” the young man nodded, not looking much older than the dreamer he was projected from. Eames watched with disgust as the projection pushed his hair out of his face, many of the strands sticking in place with half congealed blood. “But you know we’re not supposed to go in the alley. You’re lucky you managed to find your way back out alive.”

“Yeah, well,” Eames shrugged, arrogant but pretending to be modest, “it was only a few turns in.”

“I’ve seen people get lost with less.” The Forger did his best to remember and mimic the projection’s mannerisms while they were both still somewhat shadowed in the empty street. He wondered how long it would take the projection to notice he had a streak of blood down his cheek, or whether he would even care. “Anyway, we better head back.”

Eames didn’t know where ‘back’ was, but he nodded all the same and joined Nikolas’s projection as he began towards the eastern edge of the city. They were alone for a few blocks, neither of them speaking, and then they began to come into contact with larger mobs of projections. There were a few crude barricades that had been set up, Nikolas clearly lacking the strategizing skills and experience required to create a security perimeter like Arthur’s. He was concerned about getting through the intermittent walls of projections, knowing he would never be able to outrun them all, but he was not subjected to any questioning since he was coming in with other straggling projections. Nonetheless, Eames kept a careful eye on the alley openings he passed, noting with smug satisfaction on Arthur’s behalf that everyone gave the alleys a wide berth.

It was as they continued on that other projections began joining ranks with him and the nameless projection, all of them heading for what Eames assumed was Nikolas’s own version of a base. He could feel his insides churning though and wondered what colour he would be in natural lighting; pale from nausea, or red with rage? There were a few projections flanking him on each side that were dragging projections behind them on the pavement. Arthur’s projections, he reminded himself painfully.

None of them were in good shape and it looked like some of them might die before they even made it back to the base for questioning. It broke his heart to think it, but Eames silently wished for all of their deaths; no one deserved what they were being dragged towards. The projections were of varying ages, some males and some females, but they all broke Eames’s heart equally. All of them were bleeding from one cut or another, and a few of them looked as though their bones had been snapped as their limbs were bent the wrong way. One or two projections glanced up at him – just once – silently pleading for help or mercy. Many others kept their eyes on the ground, hopeless.

Eames couldn’t help them and couldn’t hold their gazes; he couldn’t risk one of them being connected enough to Arthur’s thoughts to recognize him. Besides that though was his own
cowardice; he couldn’t bear to meet the gaze of those he was basically damning to torture and death for his own cover. It felt as though he was tearing a piece of himself apart, and there was nothing he could do to fix it. Instead, he had to make it worse by sending the occasional smug or victorious smirk to one of the projections dragging their bounty.

By the time they made it to Nikolas’s base of operations, Eames was honestly concerned that he might puke. He had known that things were going to be bad, but he couldn’t even fathom how Arthur was still alive, let alone coherent with this sort of assault. If this was the novice of the team, however dangerous his inexperience made him, the Forger feared for what the two more experienced dream workers would be like. He wanted to run back to Arthur right then but knew there was nothing he could do to help other than to cut the Architect out of the equation.

He continued to follow the nameless projection he had first met, who seemed rather keen on Eames’s forgery, as they entered a rather lavish hotel on the eastern edge of the city. The carpeting they crossed as they headed towards the main lobby had trails of blood soaked into it, showing the direction that Arthur’s projections would be taken as they veered off from the empty-handed projections. There were a few weak cries before the projections headed into a row of elevators aimed downward.

Eames swallowed thickly, reminding himself that even though Arthur would be suffering the effects of the torture, it was not Arthur himself being treated so cruelly. He closed his eyes for a breath, solidifying his forgery before blinking and following the others into a large reception hall. It was clear that this was used for meetings, though the décor was far too posh and extravagant for the war happening just outside the building. No one else seemed to notice though, how the elegance of the chandeliers and fabric of the seats were contradictory to the basics normally seen in a time of war.

They took seats without organization in the hall, though all of them ended up facing towards a podium at the far end of the room on a small platform. Eames was desperate to ask what was going on but held himself back, knowing that his question might destroy his façade. Instead, he sat back in silent dread as a young man – identical to Nikolas’s photo except for the long blond hair that brushed his shoulders – stepped up to the podium. There was a racket of cheers and whistles at the man’s appearance and Eames had to consciously hide his sneer of contempt; they acted as though this was a college football game.

Eames’s dread continued to grow, sitting like a ball of lead in his stomach as a clear manifestation of Nikolas began questioning the projections on the rumoured appearance of another dream worker. There were a few shouts of distaste as well as a few jeers towards ‘the enemy’s cowardice to call in back up’. Eventually, when things calmed down again, the leading projection began sharing the rumour – luckily it had been based upon hearsay from tortured projections rather than legitimate sources – and plans to deal with the new threat. The Forger joined in on the yells and calls alongside the projections around him, shouting outlandish things and threats towards his own person as though he truly wished for death.
The projection Eames had met by the alley had joined in with his shouts, grinning stupidly as though he had just made a best friend through these words of hate. Eames felt a distinct chill run down his spine as he called for his own torture, his own death, and heard the chants of similar messages echo around him. It was always somewhat disconcerting being surrounded by the enemy, but never before had the stakes been quite as severe as they were right then.

The projection behind the podium waved his hands, quieting them all down. Eames hoped that things might end then, all of the projections receiving their mass, sloppy orders to go out and cause more havoc while bringing in more projections for torture. But his new ‘friend’ leaned over to him and whispered something that made the Forger realize that things had only just begun. “This is my favourite part.”

Eames glanced over at him before scanning his eyes across the full reception hall. He noticed that every projection had fallen silent and still now, but it was a silence that was alive with tension and anticipation. The excitement and expectation in the air was like electricity skirting over his skin as he trained his gaze on the small stage. Eames didn’t manage to suppress his groan when a half-conscious projection was dragged on stage, but it didn’t matter; the roar of approval from the audience was deafening.

“This is the first projection we managed to capture, and he has fought us silently for the last two days,” the leading projection yelled across the noise as Arthur’s projection was strung up using two cables that had been thrown down from a light fixture over the stage. Eames watched with dismay as the young man, only a couple years older than Arthur himself, was strapped into the spotlight. The metal cuffs around the man’s wrists were too tight, cutting into his skin as the projection’s knees buckled and most of his weight swung precariously from the cables. “Today I say no longer! He will not hold his secrets from us for another day, and you will all get your chance on him!”

There were more cheers as the projections in the hall began pushing their way towards the stage. Eames felt his throat go dry when he realized how close he was to the stage already, only about twenty or so projections between him and the stage. The thought of having to watch a room full of other projections torture a part of Arthur set his teeth on edge, but the idea of having to take part in the torture himself was nauseating. He could already see that the captured projection was bleeding from a nasty gash on his forehead, as well as a few cuts across his chest under a t-shirt. The man’s left ankle and knee was also bent in an abnormal way and Eames guessed the leg was basically ruined.

He watched with mounting helplessness as Nikolas’s projections took their turn while the unnamed projection he had met in the streets quickly pushed the Forger closer and closer to the stage. Arthur’s projection let out a few heartbreaking whimpers and gasps as knives and fists met his already spoiled skin. There was screaming in the room that almost made it impossible to keep track of his own shouts; projections yelled at the prisoner for secrets and answers while others loudly demanded their turn.
Eames wanted to draw his gun and bury a bullet in as many heads as he could manage, but that wouldn’t fix this; Nikolas could simply regenerate new projections. He wanted to cut the captured projection’s bonds and rush him to safety, but that would do nothing to save the other projections being tortured behind closed doors. Eames couldn’t remember the last time he had felt this helpless and felt his fury mount at an alarming pace; he could do nothing but watch.

He was so lost in his anger and disgust that he didn’t realize he was at the stage until a nameless projection pushed him up the stairs encouragingly. Suddenly Eames was met with an uncomfortably close view of Arthur’s projection. The man’s breathing was harsh and ragged, he was sickly pale, and Eames could see a few unshed tears caught on long eyelashes. The projection didn’t even raise his head when Eames came to stand in front of him and the Forger knew with apprehension that the man was on the verge of breaking. “I can’t be here,” Eames muttered, taking a step away from the prisoner before he regained control of his instincts.

“And why would that be?” the leading projection stepped away from the podium where he had previously been watching the proceedings without any apparent qualms.

Eames heard the suspicion and growing awareness in the other man’s voice as he spoke over the impatient crowd. The Forger knew that he was close to losing his cover and needed to fix things fast. He also knew that he had to get to Nikolas before this went any further. “I need to see Nikolas,” he stated as strongly as he could manage, not knowing if this might be his downfall. “I… I have new information on the enemy. I think I know how to get past his security perimeter.”

“Is that so?” The man regarded Eames curiously as he brushed some of the blond hair out of his face, strands sweaty from all of the heat beating down from the overhanging light fixtures. He seemed to be sizing the Forger up, and then he gave a dangerous smile that sent a chill down Eames’s spine. “How about you finish off this projection,” a finger was jabbed towards Arthur’s projection and the crowd began yelling angrily, “and I’ll take you to see Nikolas to share your news personally.”

The challenge had been set and Eames was out of options. He could refuse, thus destroying his cover and fixing nothing, or torture this innocent piece of Arthur’s subconscious and finally get at the enemy dreamer. So with no choice in the matter, Eames nodded and stepped into the personal space of the captured projection. He grasped the man’s clean shaven chin so tightly between his fingers that the skin at contact turned white and the young man groaned. The Forger, heart weighing heavily and shattering with guilt, jerked the man’s face up until their eyes met. His breath caught when those eyes blinked open and landed on him, slightly unfocused. The few trapped tears finally fell free, skidding down bruised cheeks, but no others fell as Arthur’s eyes met Eames’s. He knew that this projection wasn’t Arthur, but the man had identical eyes. They were
the same soft shape and dark brown colour, and they shone with a familiar defiance and strength Eames had always admired. The eyes watching him were sharp with pain, but not with fear despite everything, and Eames prayed that Arthur could not see him through those eyes in that moment.

“You have thwarted us long enough,” he yelled loudly enough for the crowd of projections to join in, making sure his accent remained precise. “You will tell us everything you know about the enemy!” The projection flinched at the volume of answering yells behind them. The man never broke eye contact with Eames, but he could see that more tears were beginning to well up; helpless and finally willing to give in. The Forger had to force himself not to loosen his grip on that formerly smooth skin as he yanked the projection’s face closer and leaned in. “Hold out,” he whispered desperately, voice fearfully soft in the throng of voices. “It’ll be over soon.”

Arthur’s projection’s gaze sharpened slightly, looking at him with suspicious confusion. Then the gaze softened with what Eames could only describe as relief before the projection allowed his head to drop between his raised shoulders loosely. “Problem?” the lead projection asked smugly.

“No problem,” Eames spoke confidently, releasing his fingers from the projection’s chin to stand beside the blond projection. “Just trying to decide which method would be the most effective and gratifying.”

“Might I suggest my personal favourite?” the man suggested with an eager grin. Eames’s hand twitched, eager to feel the weight of his gun in his hand when he saw a medium length bullwhip being drawn and presented to him, handle first.

“This is perfect,” Eames whispered as he accepted the whip, converting his hatred momentarily into fake delight for his audience. The leather of the handle felt worn and rough against his palm as he gripped it tightly; it was well used but dedicatedly taken care of. He drew the leather strap of the whip across his other palm, knowing how deeply this type of whip would cut. There were some dispersed shouts of impatience and only then did he realize the reception hall had fallen silent. When he glanced out at the sea of similarly-liked projections who all looked almost identical to himself, he realized he would never be able to forge this identity again without being violently sick.

He readjusted his grip on the handle and unfurled the whip. There were shouts of excitement. He remembered bitterly that Arthur had always been more skilled with a whip than Eames. The Forger knew the mechanics of the movements required to aim and make a mark, but it was Arthur who knew how to curl and flick his wrist to adjust the angle and force of a hit. Eames thought a silent apology and prayer, hoping that Arthur would not feel this directly, and then brought the whip harshly across the back of the captured projection’s back.

There was a vicious crack as the tail of the whip broke the sound barrier. It was all Eames could
hear as the rest of the room faded away to white noise; that and the utterly wrecked sob that fell from the projection’s lips. He could see the gash he had created through the tear in the man’s shirt. The Forger felt his mouth go dry when he saw the damage he had caused, knowing some of it would have ricocheted back to Arthur. He licked his lips nervously as blood welled up from the gash and stained the ruined shirt, even as he raised the whip again.

The crowd’s shouting turned frantic at the sight of violence, egging him on. Finally ready to fulfill his promise to Arthur’s projection, Eames took careful aim and swung the whip again. He watched with morbid fascination as the leather strap wound around that bruised, pale neck, shortly followed by the tiny end that cut a small groove into the projection’s neck under his jaw. There was an immediate choking noise and he saw Arthur’s projection attempt to reach down to his neck; his attempts were unsuccessful though, fingers broken now that Eames took a closer look, and hands bound in place.

There were shouts of ‘more’ echoing around the room, and the leading projection gave him a nod when Eames glanced back, feigning uncertainty. He turned back to the tortured projection and stepped closer until he practically had his chest against that bleeding back – bleeding because of him. “Tell us what you know!” he yelled into the man’s ear, starting a new wave of shouts as he strategically placed a fist against the middle of the projection’s spine. Novices were expected to make mistakes sometimes. “Forgive me,” he whispered, hoping Arthur would survive this, let alone understand. Then he readjusted his grip on the handle, confirmed the placement of his knuckles between the vertebrae of that delicate spine, and yanked the short remainder of the whip backwards with violent precision.

Another sickening crack filled the room, but this one had Eames’s hands shaking as they gripped the handle of the whip responsible for breaking the projection’s neck. His other hand was still against the projection’s limp back, feeling the last struggle for breath before the man was finally gone. A few disappointed moans filled the room, mixed in between angry groans and victorious yelling. Eames ignored it all as he subtly checked for a pulse; he wasn’t going to leave the projection paralyzed but alive. There was no heartbeat though and the Forger had to allow himself to be dragged away from the dead projection. He knew that his last sight of the man would haunt him for the rest of his days though; whip still hanging tightly around the bruised neck. Thankfully, the projection had died with his eyes closed.

“You know, I didn’t mean for you to actually kill him before we got information out of him,” the blond projection hissed angrily as he pulled Eames’s forgery further into the decadent hallways of the hotel. The man was upset, obviously, but it seemed clear that Eames had made the correct assumption; as a rookie, mistakes were easily forgiven.

“I-I’m sorry,” he allowed his voice to waver slightly, though he forced away the messages his body was sending him, telling him that he was about to vomit or faint. “I-I didn’t mean…”
“Don’t worry about it,” the man cut him off, pausing to push an elevator button before pulling Eames into the lift. “It’s better that he’s gone anyway. He was never going to break and it was just ruining morale. Besides,” he shrugged as they watched the numbers of the floor slide by. “We have plenty more.”

Eames nodded, silently wondering if he would be able to kill this man and get away with it, when the elevator slowed and finally stopped at the top floor. The door pinged its arrival, and just as the Forger reached for his handgun, another voice joined their conversation. “What are you doing up here?”

He glanced up quickly, not expecting a female voice that cut more sharply than any knife. The woman standing right outside the elevator, clearly waiting for them, was dressed in a suit Arthur could be proud of. It had been tailored to fit her figure well and was obviously made of a very expensive material; the projection looked like she was about to brief security on how to guard a president or king. “I’m bringing this projection to see Nikolas. He said he had information on how to break into the enemy’s security.” While the formerly-leading projection had sounded authoritative and strong down in the reception hall, his voice had suddenly fallen weak in the presence of the new authority.

“Who do you think you are?” the woman sneered at both of them, looking impatient at the fact that she had to deal with such ‘low level’ projections. “You, get back downstairs and clean up the mess you’ve caused,” she ordered to the blond projection. “And you, follow me,” she waved Eames forward, eyes icy sharp as they scanned over his form critically before heading down the hallway. Without a second glance back at the projection who had brought the torture of Arthur’s projections to a gleeful audience, Eames stepped out of the elevator and followed behind the new leader.

“Nikolas, you might have actually manifested a projection that can do more than wield a gun,” the woman spoke in a rather condescending tone as she pushed two heavy wooden doors open into a large living room.

Eames was surprised by the clear disrespect coming from the projection. He assumed that Nikolas had experienced his own conscious projections, though his made his internal mind look much more discordant than Arthur’s – and that was saying something. He was even more surprised when Nikolas glanced up lazily from the sketchbook he had been working at, looking at the woman with a rather bored expression before turning his gaze on the Forger. “Oh, really? What do you have for me?” he asked Eames mildly. It seemed as though the Architect had already grown bored of war, his sketchbook pages filled.

“I think I know how to get past the enemy’s line of defence,” Eames proposed carefully while taking a directed seat on a couch, not wanting to give away too much information in case this encounter went disastrously wrong.
The Architect’s eyes flashed with noticeable fear at his words and the young man was not skilled enough to hide it. Despite the fact that Nikolas seemed unburdened and bored in his posh hotel room, torture locked away in the basement and violent war beyond the barriers of windows, the Architect was not made for dealing with offensive violence. Eames guessed that the dream worker had been using Arthur’s impressive security as an excuse not to try. Nikolas’s cowardice rested on Eames’s tongue like a bad taste in the air, and the Forger was suddenly desperate to have this encounter come to an end.

Nikolas looked as though he was about to say something in response to Eames’s opening statement when the conscious projection interrupted him. The woman had trailed across the room purposefully to stand by a large two-story window that overlooked a vast amount of the downtown cityscape. “Nikolas, it looks like a riot has come to your doorstep,” she informed the silent room matter-of-factly, sounding terribly unperturbed for stating imminent violence.

“What?” Nikolas spluttered as he pushed himself from his indented cushion on the couch. The Architect rushed over to look out the window beside his projection, forgetting all about Eames. “Arthur has never pushed hard enough to wage a full offensive attack before,” the young man whispered, voice now quiet and panicky, “Why would he try now?”

_The harder it will be for me to control my projections to back you up_, Arthur’s words rang through Eames’s mind in response to the question that had not been directed towards him. He felt a flush of gratitude rush up inside him at the realization that the Point Man was still behind him, backing him up, despite his suffering. Eames knew that Arthur would not be able to maintain this frontal attack for long though, especially after the Forger’s recent abuse towards his projection, so he had to act now before his window of opportunity faded.

He remained seated, unsure of the reflection of the window giving him away, and cautiously slid his handgun from its holster. The brush of metal against leather was so soft that it did not alert anyone, though that did not help relax Eames’s tense shoulders and back. He raised the gun precisely, taking aim before pulling the trigger. The sound of the gun being fired momentarily deafened him as he rushed to his feet in preparation for whatever aftermath would occur.

The bullet had a fair distance to travel across the room, but his aim had been perfect. Unfortunately, the female projection turned and moved in front of Nikolas – reacting at a pace only the subconscious instincts could manage. There was a tiny crack, a mere echo compared to the noise of the initial shot, as the bullet lodged in her skull and she toppled to the carpeted floor, immediately dead and soon to fade. Nikolas spun on his heel, regarding the dead woman for just a moment before focusing on Eames. He knew that his forgery was still impeccable, but that would do nothing to save him now that he had shot Nikolas’s main projection.
Eames was already aiming the barrel of his gun again, unwilling to fail now that he was so close, that Arthur was relying on him to succeed. He knew that Nikolas would not be able to bring the woman back to life, at least not in time for it to matter; too many of the Architect’s projections were being slaughtered on the streets below as Arthur kept his subconscious occupied and worn. Unfortunately, while his offensive skills were basic to say the least, Nikolas was a brilliant Architect. As the Forger pulled the trigger back, ready for this to be over, a wall suddenly grew from the carpet to swallow up the bullet.

The wall shuddered and fell a second later, just in time for Eames to see Nikolas dash into the adjoining bedroom. Eames cursed loudly even as he silently thanked Arthur for wearing down the enemy enough to make it more challenging to maintain an architectural change. He rushed in through the doors behind the other man, only to see him disappear through a newly created door leading into the hotel’s hallway. The Forger ran for it with everything he had, but his shoulder met with solid wall when the door faded away behind the Architect.

Eames backtracked, heading for the living room and the room’s entrance without even taking the time to catch his breath to swear or rub the pain from his shoulder. He burst into the hallway with such force that he stumbled into the wall across the hall, using it as a launch base to push himself down the hallway after Nikolas, who was rushing around a far corner. He began again, his gun prepared in his right hand as he sprinted along the carpeting in focused pursuit. This time he was prepared for the turn and placed his left hand out as a buffer to tilt his direction without losing all of his momentum.

There were more barricades in place along the long expanse of hallway, but they were already fading by the time Eames was about to come into contact with them. He was gaining on the Architect, whose skill at running was quickly becoming obsolete when matched with Eames’s determination. But that also meant that he encountered the obstacles before they had had time to fade, forcing him to detour through side rooms and zigzag around the light fixtures and ornamental statues crashing to the ground around him.

Eames took another desperate shot at the fleeing Architect, concerned about what might happen if the man made it all the way down to the main floor of the hotel and amongst the masses of his subconscious. The bullet landed, but not in the desired location. It lodged into the Architect’s right bicep, ripping a startled cry from the dream worker’s lips as he stumbled and practically fell through a doorway into the hotel’s stairwell. Hoping the added pain of the wound would cause Nikolas to make a fatal mistake, Eames followed into the stairwell, causing the metal door to slam against concrete with his speed.

He was immediately met with a looping staircase, the entire flight of stairs on the same level and no chance of getting to a lower floor without jumping. Dragging oxygen into his lungs somewhat shakily, Eames rushed to the railing and stared down at the flights below them. Nikolas was already two floors below him, glancing up at him fearfully as he clutched his bleeding arm. Forcing himself to focus, Eames closed his eyes and remembered what Arthur had taught him about crafting Penrose stairs one late afternoon; the Point Man had thought he had dazed out and
not given the slightest attention, but he had been wrong.

Eames knew he had been successful in his attempt to manipulate the architecture of the staircase when he heard a surprised yelp, the sound of skin meeting concrete, and the distinct sound of bones snapping. The Forger blinked his eyes open when the other dream worker let out a piercing scream, though he couldn’t see the enemy from where he was standing. He altered the staircase enough to be able to rush down the two flights of stairs to come parallel to Nikolas. The man was crumpled on the landing of the stairs, legs bent at odd angles that made Eames momentarily bite his lip in sympathy.

Nikolas was sobbing, not even bothering to attempt crawling away. He would never make it between the damage done to his legs and his wounded arm’s inability to support his weight. His projections would never hear him yell either, the distance too great and the projections already distracted by Arthur’s projections. “Please,” the Architect begged raggedly, “I never wanted this. I just wanted the chance to create.”

Eames sat on the bottom stair of the rising staircase, regarding Nikolas sadly. Violence was a requirement in their job, especially when dealing with a threat that simply could not be trusted to be left alone. That didn’t mean that Eames had to like it; that he had to be alright with shooting a young man and forcing him to experience the consuming pain of so many bones breaking. He also couldn’t forget, before dealing the final blow, that he was about to utterly destroy everything that made this man who he was. When Nikolas woke up in reality, all of his experiences and memories would be gone. He would be alive, true, but was waking up as a twenty-something year old man with no close family or friends – those who got into this profession rarely had such a thing – really a blessing over death? He would be lost, with no one to help him through it. And who was Eames to force him to begin anew?

“You never attempted to make things right,” he pointed out, causing Nikolas’s crying to grow louder. “You never had to start torturing Arthur’s projections.” He tapped the barrel of his gun against the side of his knee, safety momentarily flicked back on since Nikolas was clearly going nowhere. Eames didn’t want to do what he knew he needed to, but sitting here doing nothing was only prolonging the man’s suffering; Nikolas was pleading under his breath nearly incoherently as he sobbed despairingly to himself. Eames had to remember why he was here, why he had done everything today that churned his stomach; to save Arthur. If he didn’t deal with Nikolas now, it was almost guaranteed that his Point Man would fade away, out of Eames’s reach, and die.

In moments like this, the decision always came down to loyalty. And Eames was loyal to Arthur until the end.

He stood slowly, legs stiff from built up tension and exertion, and flicked the safety off his gun. The Architect’s sobbing began anew, louder than ever before as fat tears fell down the young man’s cheeks. Eames swallowed thickly, mouth dry as he stepped closer and placed his gun
precisely, wanting to ensure that Nikolas would not suffer longer than he needed to. “I’m sorry,” was all he spoke before he decisively placed his finger on the trigger and pulled.

When Eames blinked his eyes open a moment later, the dreamscape around him had noticeably changed. There was a sudden stillness and silence in the atmosphere, giving off a sense of confused expectation at the sudden shift. Nikolas’s body had already disappeared, dead and no doubt waking up in reality at that very moment. The only evidence that the enemy dream worker had ever been there was the blood streaked across Eames’s pants and shirt. He felt bile rise in his throat and immediately shifted out of his forgery, returning to his own form and clothes. Eames told himself that he removed the blood for the sake of getting close to the next two dream workers, but he knew it was for more selfish reasons.

Nonetheless, Eames wiped off his gun with forced indifference and headed down the rest of the staircase towards the main floor of the hotel. He paused behind the stairwell door for a moment, listening for noise, but heard nothing that indicated any life. Just as he had expected, there was no evidence of any of Nikolas’s projections when he finally slipped out into the main lobby of the hotel and headed for the downtown streets. All of the projections had faded away with their dreamer, eliminating a third of the threat against Arthur. What was more surprising was the fact that the Point Man’s projections, who had come to this part of the city for an effective distraction, were also absent. Even the projections that had been brought here for torture seemed to be gone, finally free from their suffering.

Feeling a little shaky, hands trembling in his pockets as he ran fingers over his pocket mirror and Arthur’s map and phone, Eames sat down hurriedly on the front staircase at the entrance of the hotel. The marble was cold under him, even through the fabric of his clothes, but he didn’t mind; it was focusing. The chill was permeating, the low-hanging moon sharing no heat. He pulled out his mobile phone carefully, making sure he didn’t drop it as his whole body began to shake with every act he had just committed. He needed to talk to the Point Man to plan their next move, but he also desperately needed to talk to Arthur as a means of comfort. He had to know that Arthur was alright, that the man would still be there despite what Eames had just done.

He flipped the phone open and selected the only number programmed into the device before bringing the receiver to his ear. Eames brushed his palms across the fabric of his pants one at a time, wiping away nervous sweat as the phone continued to ring out. After about eight rings with no response, Eames hung up and immediately selected the number again, trying to keep his breathing steady. Why was Arthur not picking up? Had something happened? Was it because of something Eames had done?

The Forger’s breath was close to hyperventilating as the sixth and seventh ring passed again. But finally, just as his sight was about to black out due to lack of oxygen, he heard the phone connect to the other line. “Eames,” came Arthur’s voice, horribly weak and hoarse. Eames’s heart stuttered to a stop at how the Point Man sounded over the phone, his voice doing the exact opposite of calming him down. Arthur’s breathing was dangerously slow and it sounded as though the man was struggling to drag each breath into his lungs.

“Hang on,” Arthur cut him off, voice shuddering as the Point Man audibly fought to continue breathing. Eames heard the phone clatter to the ground – tile, by the sound of it – and then the sound of violent retching into a toilet. The Forger winced as the sound echoed around the small, pristine bathroom; Arthur sounded like he was on the verge of death. The dream worker kept throwing up until Eames was sure there was nothing left to expel, Arthur merely gagging on nothing. He knew how painful that could be, and how much it could hinder your ability to breathe.

“Oh, Arthur…” Eames whispered in horror as he sat down again, placing one palm over his eyes and pressing his fingers against his eyes to force away the tears he felt stinging the corners. He knew the Point Man couldn’t hear him, the man still busy vomiting, but that was probably a good thing. Eames did his best to focus on not sobbing as he continued to listen to Arthur suffer, pressing the mobile phone against his ear so tightly that it hurt.

After what felt like an eternity, Arthur finally fell silent. Eames heard the Point Man tumble back to the tiled floor, no energy left to make the fall graceful. There was another long moment of ragged breath before he heard Arthur fumble for the phone, finally bringing it back to his ear. “Sorry,” the Point Man apologized softly, trying to remain stoic and professional even now. “Tell me…” Arthur spoke between long, purposeful breaths, voice echoing against the tiled floor, “what happened.”

Eames took a shaky breath, pulling his hand away to swipe at a few stray tears angrily. He glanced around the abandoned east end of the dreamscape and relayed everything that had happened since he had left Arthur’s side. When he was finished there was no response and he felt his heart jump up into his throat. “Arthur, are you there? Make some noise for me, love, please.” If his voice wavered, neither of them commented on it.

Arthur gave a long, suffering sigh and a tiny grunt. “Ever the worrier,” the man spoke across the phone, trying to downplay the seriousness of the situation.

Eames felt a tiny hysterical chuckle rip up through his throat. “What happened, darling? And where’s George?”

Eames had no choice but to sit silently as the phone clattered to the floor again. He strained to listen for details, guessing by the sounds he was hearing that Arthur was slowly dragging himself up into a sitting and then standing position. Eames could hear the Point Man’s hands skid along the porcelain of the sink as he struggled to maintain his balance and weight before the taps turned on. The Forger assumed Arthur was cleaning out his mouth and drinking some water before he heard the phone being picked up and the sound of determined, shuffling steps cross the tile and then carpeting.


Eames knew it was probably killing the dream worker to be speaking only short strings of words, but the man would have no other option until he regained control over his breathing. It was true that Arthur’s breathing had returned to a somewhat normal pace, but the Point Man sounded dangerously far from healthy. “Tell me what’s going on,” he pleaded, though he hated to ask Arthur to speak more at that moment.

“Sent George out…to lead riot,” Arthur admitted. “Felt him die and…can’t bring him back…too weak.” The other man sounded extremely displeased and frustrated about this fact, never suffering enough to not beat himself up over what he saw to be shortcomings on his part. A sharp pang of regret shot through Eames at the thought that George was dead – dead to save him. He had become oddly fond of the projection, and felt guilty at the realization that he couldn’t even take the time to mourn the man as Arthur continued to speak. “Think this is from…the projections’ torture…” Eames swallowed, guilt all-consuming as it weighed on his mind, heart and body. “Don’t you dare…feel guilty,” Arthur managed to snap. Eames chuckled weakly despite himself, the momentarily semblance of normalcy calming him.

The Point Man paused for a long moment and Eames felt suddenly self-conscious, somehow feeling that Arthur was considering his tiny snort of laughter. Then it was back to business once again. “Also from dreamscape…manipulation,” Arthur continued. “I’m the dreamer so…it wore me down to…to have someone else change architecture. I’m fine now.”

“Bullshit,” Eames hissed into the phone, suddenly angry. He couldn’t save Arthur if Arthur wasn’t going to work on saving himself. “I’m coming back right now.”

“No,” Arthur couldn’t yell the way he was, but his harsh whisper had the same effect. Eames immediately felt his back straighten and his teeth clench at the order he wished to directly disobey. “I need you…to deal with…Amelina. She has my projections too and…she’s more skilled…” Arthur paused, taking in a slow, deep breath. “Please Eames.”

The Forger sighed angrily and pulled himself to his feet again, knowing that there was no way he
could argue the order. Returning to Arthur’s side would do nothing to help anything; it would not improve Arthur’s state and it would leave the remaining enemy dream workers out in the dreamscape to wreak havoc. “Fine,” he grumbled, orienting himself towards the north end of the city before trotting down the entrance staircase of marble. “Please take care of yourself, for me.”

Another long silence met his ears and Eames bit his lip nervously, wondering if he had said too much – gone too far. However, instead of commenting on his words, Arthur changed the subject seamlessly – neither making the situation uncomfortable nor agreeing to Eames’s demand. “Get out of the east end…” Arthur ordered and Eames could tell that the man was, in fact, improving somewhat; he was managing to string together more words before being forced to stop to catch his breath. “I’m too weak to rebuild…the east side and the fog…is coming.”

Eames spun on his heel at the words and felt a chill wash over his body. The boundaries keeping the fog away truly were encroaching upon the city at a slow but steady pace. “I hear you, pet,” he agreed, adopting a quicker pace as he dashed down a main street of the city. “Stay strong, for me, alright?” he pleaded shyly.

“I am,” Arthur whispered before disconnecting the phone.

It was with a hopeful, motivating fluttering in his heart that Eames stole one final, nervous glance back at the fog engulfing the buildings and pavement behind him before slipping into an alley. He pulled out Arthur’s map again, unfurling it carefully as he headed towards the north end of the dreamscape. He was ready to deal with the enemy dream workers and get back to reality with Arthur safe in tow.
Cobb was forced to dodge out of the way and into the corner of the hospital room when Dr. Maxwell and three nurses rushed into the room in a flurry. He recognized the nurses to be the only three that had ever been allowed into the room while all of the dream workers were attached to the PASIV device and unconscious. The Extractor had had minimal contact with them but had experienced enough to know that they were entirely unimpressed with the situation; they gave him a disapproving look every time they had to let him back into the room after he left to buy food or go to the washroom.

Now they didn’t even look his way as they swarmed Nikolas’s bed; he was aware of the dream workers’ names from overhearing the nurses work earlier. Cobb had known something was happening just by listening and watching the monitors that all five dream workers had been attached to – Dr. Maxwell had insisted on hooking Eames up to a monitor when he returned to find the Forger unconscious. He had wanted to move the man to a different location but had lost the argument to Cobb when being forced to admit that he could not safely be removed from the PASIV now. The doctor and nurses had sent looks mixed with annoyance and grudging approval at Eames, who still had his head pillowed on the mattress beside Arthur and had their hands entwined.

Shortly after Eames had gone down into Arthur’s subconscious, Dr. Maxwell had come into the room and proclaimed that the Point Man’s vitals had finally stabilized. It was around that time that he had agreed to leave Eames where he was, as close to Arthur as he could be without sharing a bed. It was completely unorthodox and probably against every procedure the doctor had ever been taught, but the whole situation was uncommon to say the least. The three nurses and Dr. Maxwell had all been obligated to sign additional confidentiality agreements before they were allowed into the room.

Cobb had been grateful to spend a few hopeful hours listening to the machine beep out Arthur’s heartbeat, finally calm and at a somewhat normal pace. His friend was certainly not back to reality yet, but it had been encouraging to know that Arthur had stopped fading away – that there was still a hope for saving him. He had Eames to thank for the improvement; he knew that without a doubt. As he watched his two team members from his seat under the window, feeling a little uncomfortable as though he was encroaching upon an intimate moment, he hoped that Arthur might finally realize what Eames meant to him. His primary concern was on them waking up at all, of course, but it would be wonderful for the two of them to finally stop the dizzying dance they had been sharing since they met. And with the way their vitals seemed to almost synchronize on the machines, growing stronger together, Cobb had high hopes. They could do anything together.

Unfortunately, good things could never last forever.
He had been a few hours since Eames had gone down into the dream and Dr. Maxwell had hooked the dream worker up to his own machine beside Arthur’s own. Without warning both Arthur’s and Eames’s vital signs had destabilized and begun to drop. It was not a fatal drop for either of them and the Point Man had still experienced a slower decrease in health than he had been suffering through before the Forger’s arrival. But it was still discouraging, letting Cobb know that something bad was going on down in Arthur’s subconscious and that he could do nothing to help them.

Then things had taken a turn for the worse.

Cobb had thought the slow but steady decrease in vital signs was the worst that could happen, but he had been terribly wrong. He had been alone in the room with the five unconscious dream workers for about half a day when Eames’s heart rate had spiked, indicating high exertion levels. At the same time, Arthur’s vitals had gone critical. It had been so bad that Dr. Maxwell and the nurses had been muttering about ‘losing him’ while they swarmed around his bed and did everything they could to keep the Point Man alive, let alone get him back to consciousness.

The Extractor had begun pacing along the back wall of the hospital room behind his chair, trying to keep out of the way while working out the nervous tension that had his hands shaking until he clutched them together behind his back. The thought of losing Arthur, now that it was a horribly plausible option, had his thoughts scattering in a useless frenzy. Even worse to consider was the fact that if Arthur did die, Eames would die along with him. And no matter what the Forger had said about not leaving the dreamscape without the other man – stirring up incredibly frustrating thoughts of Romeo and Juliet and irrational choices for love – the loss of life was always tragic.

His palms were sweaty as they clutched one another, looking for comfort but only finding his own trembling, panicked skin. He began running his fingers through his hair, pulling too tightly just to have something to focus on, even if it was pain. Cobb hadn’t said anything to the doctor or nurses as they worked, knowing that he did not have the skills to save Arthur on his own and he had to put is trust in these professionals. He did speak up though when one of the nurses suggested they push Eames out of the way for more working room.

Although he wasn’t sure why exactly – whether it was some unconscious instinct or merely wishful thinking – Cobb was completely sure that the physical contact between Arthur and Eames in reality was the only thing anchoring the Point Man and keeping him from fading beyond their reach. “Don’t move him away from Arthur,” he had ordered fearfully, knowing he had no true authority here and yet hoping nonetheless.

The nurses paused in their work and looked to Dr. Maxwell for direction. The man hesitated for just a moment, considered Cobb and then the two dream workers with hands twined together, and
finally nodded. “Don’t move him. We wouldn’t have the time to waste anyway.”

Just as quickly as Cobb had fallen into everyone’s focus, he was suddenly obsolete again as the medical professionals turned back to reviving Arthur. The Point Man was, no matter how one looked at the situation, about to die. His heart rate was so slow that there was no way his whole body was getting enough blood and oxygen to function. It was almost as though the man was being suffocated; his body was fighting to hang on, hoping for that reviving breath of air, but failing quickly.

He wanted to know what was happening down in the dreamscape, wanted to slip a PASIV needle in his wrist and join in on the war that was no doubt occurring during each second that ticked by on a loud wall clock behind him. But he knew that he couldn’t, and not just because there were no more needles attached to the solitary PASIV device sitting on the bedside table, looking innocent. Entering the dream alongside the others would only put more strain on Arthur’s subconscious as he struggled to maintain the dreamscape while fighting against a vicious onslaught of attacks. He would have to rely on Eames to fulfill his promise to bring the Point Man back to reality, safe.

The sound of a new wave of warning beeps filled the room, fighting the sounds from Arthur’s machine for dominance and attention. Dr. Maxwell cursed under his breath and sent two of the nurses down to the end of the room where Nikolas was twitching under the crisp white sheets of his hospital bed. The young Architect was panting so loudly that Cobb could hear him from across the room even as the two nurses called updates across the small expanse of the sterilized room. The Extractor never left his position near the edge of Arthur’s bed, but he did momentarily shift his attention to try to discern what was happening down in the dreamscape.

Nikolas’s heart rate had picked up in time with Eames’s – though at a much more frantic, desperate pace. The nurses sounded panicked and confused as they shouted changes in the Architect’s vitals as the doctor and remaining nurse continued to work on keeping Arthur alive. Cobb wanted to yell at them to get back to the Point Man and leave Nikolas to die, but the words caught in his throat as he fought to keep his breathing steady. Instead, he gripped the cold plastic of the back of his chair so tightly that his knuckles cramped, watching the flurry of action in the room with a disorientating sensation of detachment and uselessness.

Suddenly, the chilling sound of a heart rate flat-lining filled the room, encompassing and suppressing everything else. Cobb’s eyes flashed to Arthur’s monitor desperately, feeling his throat begin to seal closed. With a simple flash of his gaze and the frenzied shouts of the nurses by Nikolas’s bed, he was sure that the Point Man was not dead. That did not make it any easier to swallow though, a lump still lodged deep in his throat as his eyes stung with fearful tears; he didn’t know what to do with himself as Dr. Maxwell sent him a guilty look before rushing over to work on the Architect, leaving the final nurse to watch over Arthur.

Cobb ran up to the closest side of the bed beside the nurse, neither of them really having much
room to work on the other side with Eames clutching his Point Man close. “Don’t you dare give up now,” the Extractor demanded loudly, making sure he could be heard over the screaming sounds from the monitors and the nurses and doctor shouting orders and updates. He gripped the collar of Arthur’s shirt even as the nurse attempted to push him away, achieving little success. “I’ve never known you to quit and now is not the time to start. I’m counting on you…” he hissed, inexplicably angry at the thought of Arthur leaving him to fend for himself in the world alone. He paused, eyes falling on the dream workers’ combined hands; Eames’s knuckles were white with how tightly he was clutching to Arthur, holding him as tightly as he could. “Eames is depending on you, Arthur.”

“He’s awake!” Cobb heard a nurse proclaim with an exhausted, relieved voice across the room. The Extractor didn’t even spare a glance over at Nikolas to see what state the man was actually in. He kept his gaze trained on Arthur, the Point Man’s skin practically translucent now with how pale the man had become. Mere seconds later, the warning signals from Arthur’s monitor disappeared from the whirlwind of sound – Arthur was stabilizing.

The Extractor let out a huge sigh of relief as stress and tension melted from his body. Arthur wasn’t back to reality yet, but he wasn’t going to die in the next few minutes either. And better still was the proof in Nikolas that Arthur and Eames had managed to kill one of the enemy dream workers. He finally allowed himself to be shoved away as the nurse continued to fret over Arthur and, to a lesser extent, Eames. His whole body was shaking with adrenaline as he collapsed into the chair that had become his temporary home, watching events unfold tiredly.

The two nurses across the room were busy checking monitors and IVs while Dr. Maxwell was leaning over the edge of the bed, checking reflexes and for any damage caused by being unconscious for so long. From what Cobb could hear, Nikolas was giving all physiological indications of being conscious and healthy. Unfortunately for the enemy dream worker, his awareness had been reverted back to that of an infant’s. The man was babbling and cooing, no knowledge of any language, and moving his limbs around as if experimenting for the first time.

“Nikolas, can you hear me?” Dr. Maxwell was asking slowly, still checking the young man over. “Can you tell me your birth date?” There were a couple more babbles in response before the dream worker got distracted with the shiny metal of the pole holding up his IV drip. Cobb heard another quiet curse from across the room as the doctor straightened beside the bed. “I hate to expose him to radiation so soon after he’s woken, but we’re going to have to give him a brain scan,” Dr. Maxwell began reciting to one of the nurses, who was scribbling information onto the dream worker’s medical chart. “I can’t do anything until I know what’s going on in his brain; I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“What should we do after that?” the second nurse asked, sounding a little jittery and wired. Cobb wondered how long it took doing this job to become accustomed to the spikes of adrenaline that came from situations like this. He knew that he had eventually grown accustomed to the adrenaline rush from dream work, using it to his advantage. But it was surprising how quickly that adjustment faded when you stopped your exposure.
“Get him set up in his own room,” Dr. Maxwell had continued to give orders calmly. “I’ll need to go over his scans once they’re complete and then we’ll need to go through testing to determine how aware the man is.”

The Extractor was unconcerned with determining where Nikolas was being taken as the nurses and doctor got him set up and prepared to be transported to a new room. Before he had thought that he would need to deal with the enemy dream workers personally to make sure that they never escaped with any knowledge they shouldn’t have. But Arthur’s warning about the effects of dying in the dreamscape had proven accurate – Nikolas’s memories did indeed seem to be completely wiped – and Cobb expected it would be permanent since the Point Man had never told him that he would need to deal with the enemies as they woke up.

So he sat silently, rubbing the sweat from his palms onto his pants repeatedly. He watched Nikolas get pushed back onto the bed when the man attempted to crawl over the edge before the bed got rolled out of the room and into the hallway. The two nurses trailed along with the bed, directing it around a corner and out of sight, but Dr. Maxwell stayed behind and returned to Arthur’s bed. The Extractor forced himself to stay in his chair and out of the way, though he felt a little nauseous as the adrenaline slowly slipped from his body, leaving behind a pounding headache.

He watched the doctor and nurse work as a cohesive pair, checking over Arthur and Eames and injecting something to hopefully strengthen and further stabilize the Point Man into his IV drip. Dr. Maxwell turned to him eventually, leaving the nurse to work as he stepped over to stand in front of Cobb. “Tell me what’s going on,” Cobb demanded, standing up himself to match the doctor’s height; he felt like someone about to receive distressing news when he was looking up at the medical professional.

“You might want to sit down,” Dr. Maxwell offered, merely shrugging when Cobb narrowed his eyes in anger. “Alright, fine,” the man sighed as he shoved his hands in the pockets of his white jacket that almost looked like a lab coat. “I honestly have almost no idea what is going on,” the doctor admitted. “Whatever went on down there, it had a huge toll on the three involved. Your friend Mr. Eames seems to have suffered the least from the encounter, which is good since he seems to be stabilizing Mr. Tilmont, but the other two did not fare so favourably.”

“But Nikolas woke up,” the Extractor offered weakly, hoping he might be able to get more information from the doctor. Extracting information in reality was always more challenging than in a dream, an individual more consciously aware while it was impossible for him to manipulate the area to his advantage. But Cobb hadn’t been the best by chance.

“Despite the fact that Nikolas has woken up, the man is far from fine,” Dr. Maxwell reminded him carefully. It helped to extract information when experts and authority figures had the insistent
desire to always be right. They were often likely to correct false information before they truly thought about what they might be giving away in the process. “From what I can tell, it looks as though his memory has been completely wiped and I have no idea whether it is temporary or permanent and if we can reverse it. I have no idea what could have caused it.”

“What about Arthur?” he asked impatiently. Cobb knew what had caused the memory loss and was almost entirely sure that it was permanent and irreversible. He also knew that all of the other dream workers in the dreamscape were at risk of experiencing the same memory loss – even Eames – but there was nothing he could do to help. Instead, he needed to know about Arthur’s conditions because if the Point Man died in reality, everyone else would die along with him.

Dr. Maxwell rubbed the back of his neck worriedly; Cobb could already see the concern in the man’s eyes and stance before he spoke. “Whatever happened down there had the biggest effect on Mr. Tilmont. I’m not going to lie to you; we nearly lost him. At this rate, Arthur has twenty four hours left before his mind and body simply cannot take the strain anymore…if he’s lucky.”

“Twenty--” Cobb’s voice caught in his throat as he struggled to breathe. He cleared his throat, feeling how dry his mouth had suddenly gotten. “Twenty four hours?” he repeated, horrified. “It has only been a few hours since you told me he had two days left.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cobb,” the doctor placed a hand on his tense shoulder, though it did nothing to comfort him. “I have never dealt with a situation like this before during my experience as a doctor and all I can do is work with things as they happen. All I know right now is that Arthur cannot survive another encounter like whatever just happened down in his subconscious.”

“There has to be something I can do,” he pleaded, pinching the bridge of his nose as he willed his eyes to stop stinging – crying would not help anyone right now. Cobb was used to being in control of entire worlds, entire city populations of projections. And yet now he was utterly powerless; he could barely comprehend the feeling, especially when he knew that it was Arthur and Eames who might die because of his uselessness.

He assumed doctors had to be accustomed to giving bad news to loved ones by this point, but Dr. Maxwell seemed to be struggling with the news as well. Maybe it was because the doctor felt just as lost and unsure as Cobb did, dealing with a new and confusing situation, or whether the man was just one of those people who never grew accustomed to death despite his profession. He was fidgeting with the stethoscope wound around his neck now, watching Arthur on the bed with Eames sprawled out beside him. “Talk to him – them,” Dr. Maxwell corrected quickly. “The reminder that there are people out here in reality waiting for them might help them.” There was a long pause of silence before the doctor sighed. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to go check on Nikolas. I’ll be back to check on Mr. Tilmont and Mr. Eames shortly.”
The Extractor nodded and watched the doctor leave the room with a heavy heart. Cobb leaned against the wall for a while, watching Arthur and Eames before scanning the other two enemy dream workers – Amelina and Louis – suspiciously. They had shown no effects to whatever encounter had occurred, but he doubted they were innocently sitting by in the dreamscape. He eventually sat in his chair again, noticing that his legs were weak beneath his weight after everything that had happened.

He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket absentmindedly, first just so that he had something to fidget with as he watched the final nurse finish up doing everything she could for his friends before quietly excusing herself. Then he flipped it open, scrolling through his menu screen idly while looking for any sort of distraction. The Extractor considered calling the rest of the team briefly, feeling a clamouring need to have someone to talk with about this. He knew he would only be able to tell the whole story to a member of their former team due to the involvement with the PASIV device, but he felt oddly uncomfortable with informing any of the others about the situation.

Arthur had managed to set up an emergency contact sophisticated enough to contact Cobb when necessary while keeping it completely off the record the rest of the time. He was quite sure the Point Man would have created something similar for the other members of the team if he had wanted them to be informed of any emergency situation. Also, as far as Cobb was aware, Arthur had purposefully fallen off the map and ceased communication with all of the other members of the Inception team after their job together. It was not the Extractor’s place to call them now if Arthur did not want them involved.

However, a different number caught his attention as he skimmed through his contacts list blandly. Cobb checked his watch quickly, calculating the time difference before pressing the number. There were a few rings before he heard the phone connect and a soft female voice answer. “Hello?”

“Hi Melissa,” he greeted. He still felt an odd mix of emotions towards his neighbour, feeling equally grateful, bothersome, and suspicious of the fact that she was taking care of his children while he was away. “How are things?”

“Oh, hello Dominic!” the woman greeted cheerfully, “Hang on just one moment.” Cobb closed his eyes as he listened to the phone being set on a counter, shortly followed by an oven door squeaking as it opened and a metal tray landing on stove elements with a small clatter. “Sorry about that,” Melissa apologized, sounding a little out of breath. “The cookies were about to burn when you called.”

His neighbour chuckled and Cobb felt himself smiling at the floor as he kept the phone pressed against his ear. The sounds of a domestic life were so different from what he was used to, but they had truly become comforting to him. “That’s alright. Sorry for the interruption; I was just calling to see how everything was doing and to say hi to James and Phillipa if they’re around.”
“No trouble at all,” Melissa assured him warmly, “and James and Phillipa should be downstairs in just a moment. They’ve been wonderful, of course,” the woman laughed again and Cobb could hear her sliding a spatula across the cookie sheet and no doubt putting the warm cookies on a plate. “I took them to school with Maya and Rosa this morning and they’ve just been working on their homework for the past hour. Oh, here they come now…” Melissa trailed off. When Cobb strained his ears, he could hear the sound of multiple little bodies clamouring down a staircase and down the hallway towards the smell of baked goods. “James, Phillipa, guess who’s on the phone. Do you want to talk to your daddy?” the woman’s voice was faded as she spoke away from the phone. His children’s cries of joy were definitely not quiet. Melissa chuckled again, “Alright, here they are Dominic. Feel free to call anytime. I hope your friend is doing alright.”

“Thanks,” Cobb responded before he heard the phone being passed over into new hands.

“Daddy!” was the chorus that filled his ear as James and Phillipa got hold of the phone. “We miss you,” Phillipa added for both of them.

“I miss you too, guys,” Cobb agreed, feeling his whole body relax into his chair at the sound of his children’s voices. “How’s school? Are you behaving for Melissa?”

“Of course!” Phillipa proclaimed, James giggling beside the phone. Cobb raised an eyebrow at how guilty his children sounded, but assumed that Melissa would have said something if there had been any serious issues. “It’s fun with Maya and Rosa,” Phillipa continued. “It’s a sleepover.”

“I’m glad you guys are enjoying yourselves,” he said with a smile. It was one less thing he had to worry about when he knew that his children were being taken care of and were happy.

“Uncle Arthur?” came James’s tentative voice.

Cobb felt his stomach drop uncomfortably as he glanced back at Arthur and Eames, still unconscious on the bed. “We’re doing everything we can to help him,” he explained, not sure how much detail he should give about the situation.

“We help?” they both chorused loudly into the phone, sounding eager. Cobb doubted they could truly comprehend what state Arthur was in, but he appreciated his children’s enthusiasm and drive to help in any way they could.
Cobb remembered Dr. Maxwell’s suggestion to talk to Arthur even though he was unconscious and swallowed down the lump in his throat. “Yeah, you guys can help. Uncle Arthur is asleep right now, but if you talk loudly enough I think he’ll hear you. Do you guys want to tell him you miss him?”

“Yes! Yes!” they both chimed in excitedly and Cobb thought he heard James jumping around by the phone. “We help!”

“Alright, one moment,” he hushed them lightly as he flipped his mobile to speakerphone. He pulled himself out of the chair and crossed the room quickly, leaning against the edge of Arthur’s hospital bed. “James and Phillipa want to talk to you,” he told his friend, feeling a little foolish for speaking to someone who was unconscious but indulging the glimmer of hope in his chest anyway. “Alright guys, say hi to Uncle Arthur.”

After he spoke he pressed the phone against Arthur’s ear, ignoring how harsh the contrast between his black mobile and the Point Man’s pale skin. “Uncle Arthur!” he heard shouted through the crackly speaker of his phone. “Be better soon! We miss you!”

Cobb felt his nose and eyes burn as his throat began to constrict. He fought back the tears for what seemed like the millionth time that hour, knowing he had to be strong for James and Phillipa. Arthur did not show any physical response towards his children’s voices, but there was a short blip on the dream worker’s monitor as his heart rate momentarily picked up. Cobb was willing to allow himself to believe that it meant Arthur had heard the message. “You guys did great,” he praised his children when he flipped off speakerphone and held his phone to his ear again. “I think he heard you.”

James and Phillipa cheered across the phone so loudly that Cobb had to yank his mobile away from his ear for a moment. The smile on his face almost hurt, it was so large. “We miss you too, daddy,” Phillipa spoke for both of them, though James added in his own subdued ‘daddy’. “Hope we helped.”

“I know you guys helped,” the Extractor assured them warmly. “And I miss you too. I’ll be home as soon as I can, alright? I love you.”

“Love you!” James and Phillipa chorused before there was some fumbling and the phone disconnected.

With a shaky sigh, Cobb flipped his phone closed and slipped it back into his pocket. Arthur’s heart rate had returned to its slow but stable resting pace, while Eames’s own heart rate had
strengthened again after the previous encounter. “There are a lot of people waiting for you back here in reality, Arthur,” he reminded the Point Man again, hoping that he could hear Cobb’s voice, or at least gain some strength or motivation from his words. “So you better keep fighting.”
Part IX. Arthur

Arthur watched his world collapse in front of his eyes with dismay, curled up uselessly on the couch. It was hard to believe that less than a day ago he had been snuggled up against Eames on this couch, with the Forger’s fingers running through his hair and Arthur so much stronger. Now it felt as though he might never wake up again if he allowed his eyes to close for too long; he might just fade away into nothing and take Eames along with him into death.

The Point Man hadn’t slept since Eames had left and he wasn’t planning on allowing himself to fall into sleep again until this was finished – whether the end was a success or a failure. He couldn’t afford to lose any more awareness of the dreamscape he was supporting with everything he had, especially considering the fact that he was in such a terrible state with only one out of three enemy dream workers taken care of.

It was encouraging to know that he and the Forger only had two dream workers remaining to deal with, and that Nikolas would never be any trouble again. Arthur had begun keeping a subtle track on Tyson a short time after he had run away from the hospital that night; it was partially due to guilt and also due to a sick curiosity to understand what he had done to a boy who had really never gotten an opportunity to live his life before Arthur came along.

Tyson had reverted back to that of an infant, no recollection of language or procedural memory, let alone any memories of friends, family, or his life. It was as though the teen had had his mind wiped clean – a blank slate. The doctors had done every test imaginable to determine what had caused the memory loss and how to retrieve the memories, but they had never been successful. Tyson had never again regained his original memories. Luckily, Arthur’s shattering influence had not been permanent in every sense; Tyson had been capable of gaining new memories and relearning at a somewhat accelerated pace in comparison to infants.

Before Tyson had been allowed to leave the hospital though and return to his family, there had been some serious accusations towards the capabilities of his parents to take care of him properly. Not just because of his new condition – having to be re-taught everything as though he were only a child – but also due to their parenting before the memory loss had occurred. Arthur had always wondered what had driven Tyson towards drugs and then dream work, and he received his answer when the questions towards Tyson’s parents’ suitability led to a full-blown court case.

Alcoholism, physical and emotional abuse, negligence…the list had been surprising and heartbreaking to read. Arthur and wondered to himself why he had complained so much about his life when he had been young. At least Tyson had had someone to blame for driving him towards
There was a silver lining to the story though as the Point Man continued to track the case with his quickly developed skills after running away. When it became apparent that Tyson’s parents were unfitting to take care of him, especially when he required a great deal of support as he relearned everything, it had been decided by the state that Tyson would be adopted by new parents. Things had only improved from there as Tyson’s new parents supported him patiently as he slowly caught up to his peers as the years passed. The last time Arthur had enquired into his state, Tyson had no recollection of his past life – of his birth parents, of their abuse, of drugs, of dream work, or of Arthur. Tyson had become a functional adult back in the society of Arthur’s home town. He had taken a keen interest in mechanics and was now famous for his work on cars and motorcycles.

It should have made Arthur feel better, knowing that Tyson had gotten a second chance at life because of what Arthur had done, however convoluted that might sound. It didn’t make the Point Man feel any better. Instead, every time he thought about Tyson, he got a gut-wrenching discomfort in the pit of his stomach that made him feel off-balanced. Who was he to determine what was ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for someone else’s life, or to alter the course of an individual’s path so violently. In Arthur’s mind, the end did not justify the means, but there was nothing he could do to reconcile that now.

At least he knew for certain that Nikolas would never regain his memory of dream work or Arthur or this job, but that the enemy dream worker would still be able to relearn and become a functional individual again. It would take time and a lot of effort and support, but it was possible. It was one less thing for Arthur to worry about, knowing that the Architect was out of his subconscious and that he would never hunt the Point Man down for his secrets again. But that only did so much in easing his worrying thoughts.

There were still two enemy dream workers in his subconscious, working on wearing him down and stealing his secrets; it was even more concerning since he did not know what sort of dream worker Louis was. They were the more experienced and skilled of the three as well, making Nikolas’s absence even less prominent in making him hopeful for a successful end to this encounter. Having the Architect gone would ensure that he could not assist the other two dream workers in the fight, evening the odds now that Eames was down here with him. But Arthur was forced to admit that he had barely survived the moment when Eames had confronted and dealt with Nikolas. The Point Man hated to acknowledge it to himself, but he didn’t know how he would manage his way through the next few confrontations and support the dreamscape long enough to get Eames back to the safety of reality.

The thought of the Forger had Arthur sighing and fingering the edge of his mobile phone in his pocket nervously, wondering how the other man was doing out in the destroyed cityscape. Depending on what route Eames took through the alley system and what Amelina’s security was like, he expected that his ally would be nearing the Extractor’s base of operations soon. Arthur hadn’t noticed any changes in the projections’ behaviours and rioting in the streets since the east end of the city had fallen silent – no doubt drawing the enemies’ attention by this point – but
Eames had made it to Nikolas without alerting any outside security either. The Point Man could only hope that the other dream worker managed it for a second time as well.

Arthur had been truly astounded by Eames during the day down here in the dreamscape since the Forger had come down to assist him in winning and surviving this war. The man had been willing to do far more to save Arthur than he had ever expected, trusting Arthur’s information and forging an identity Eames had never had direct contact with, sneaking into enemy territory that greatly outnumbered their side. The Point Man had never had someone in his life before now that he felt so comfortable trusting with his life; he felt entirely sure that Eames would do everything he could to help Arthur in any way he could and keep him safe.

The thought was incredibly disconcerting and unsettling. The notion that Eames would do everything to keep Arthur safe, even if it meant endangering his own life, made the Point Man feel nauseous with nerves. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he was willing to do just about everything in his power to keep the Forger safe and alive as well; having Eames die for him would completely ruin Arthur’s goals at keeping Eames alive.

Even more than that, Arthur was terrified that he would ruin it. He had never had anyone in his life before now that he could trust as completely as he thought he might be able to trust Eames now, if he allowed himself. But he didn’t want to give in to that desire, however tantalizing it was to consider. He didn’t have anyone else like that because he had always ruined everyone’s trust in him and accidentally sabotaged his relationships. It had all started with Diane and had escalated from there, and who was to say that Arthur was suddenly ready and capable to return that trust now, when he had failed so utterly before? Eames was quickly becoming more to Arthur than the Point Man had ever thought possible, and the one thing he was completely sure of was the fact that he would rather have Eames as a friend for the rest of his life than attempt something more and have it crumble around him.

That still didn’t save him from his regrets though; Arthur’s thoughts dismal as he continued to watch the fog endlessly inch closer and swallow up all of the remaining dreamscape. He wondered what it would have been like if he had not avoided Eames during and after Inception, when the Forger had actually approached him. The dream worker had given him a contact and viable excuse to use said contact. He had proposed something that sounded innocent, even though they had both known that it would have never remained innocent if they began down that path.

If Arthur had considered his feelings then, rather than promptly and skilfully running in the opposite direction for a year, it was unlikely that he would be in this situation now. After all, the Point Man knew that even if he had initially begun dream working again due to his enjoyment of the freedom and creativity, it had turned into an excuse to avoid and ignore the Forger and Arthur’s feelings towards the man. He might have stopped dream working, or would have at least stopped taking such unnecessarily dangerous jobs. He might know what it was like to wake up beside Eames in bed every day, rather than on the couch after he collapsed due to sleep deprivation. He might have even gotten the opportunity to come to know Eames’s touch in his hair and on his skin, to feel the fluttering in his chest every time the Forger spoke one of his many pet names; Arthur
would have known that the man meant more to it than to simply tease.

Instead, the Point Man had been a coward and ran. He had got himself in this situation where he might die and take Eames along with him. Sleeping next to Eames had been a one-time luxury, as had those touches and stolen moments where Arthur had allowed his heart to fly in response to Eames’s affections. They were moments and luxuries that he would likely never experience again, and it was all because he had run. He was almost positive that Eames cared for him, but Arthur would not allow himself to hope or wallow in his regrets any further. There was no turning back time now, no rewind and reset buttons to fix past mistakes. It would not solve anything; he didn’t even think he would make it out of this alive.

Arthur’s thoughts faded away to a quiet flurry at that point, the Point Man focusing mainly on keeping his eyelids from falling shut permanently. He stared up at the ceiling blandly, feeling each acute pain across his body with a blinding clarity. Each muscle felt stretched and worn, each bone out of place and each nerve burning as though it was on fire. The headache cutting a groove into his head had his eyes watering with the pain, and each tiny movement sent a new flare of pain down his spine. His throat burned with stomach acid and his stomach cramped from how much heaving he had done.

He felt ripped and worn thin, as though he was an old and damaged rag doll tossed on the couch and forgotten. The Point Man had attempted to eat and drink something after he had finally finished throwing up – grimacing at the thought that Eames had been forced to hear that – but he hadn’t managed to keep anything down. He had given up quickly, unable to handle the exhaustive process of throwing up whatever he had just worked to swallow. He knew that without any food in him, he would get weaker at a much quicker pace; it would be even worse as he grew dehydrated since the amount of water he managed to digest was far below the amount he was losing. There was nothing for him to do though, other than to try to conserve his energy and focus on keeping the dreamscape as stable as possible.

Arthur decided to check on the dreamscape from the only vantage point he had now that George was gone and could not update him. He was curious to know if he could see any indication of Eames’s progress, and to get a better estimate of the fog’s progress. He began the slow process of peeling himself from the comfortable cushions of the couch, feeling every inch of his body scream in protest at the slightest of movements.

His joints were stiff from exhaustion and disuse as he carefully stretched out his legs and then swung them over the edge of the couch, planting his feet firmly on the carpeted floor. It took longer for him to push himself into a seated position and get his back straight since it felt as though each vertebra in his spine was out of alignment and searing with heat. The Point Man forced himself through the movements though, until he was seated properly and ready to push himself into a standing position.
Maybe this was a stupid idea – fuelled by stubbornness and hard-headed determination – but he had to prove to himself that he was still capable. Arthur had been taking care of himself for most of his life with no one else to rely on, so the thought of being unable to do something as simple as sit and stand up easily was terrifying. It was probably some inset instinct for survival causing the spike of fear deep in the pit of his stomach; if you couldn’t move and take care of yourself, you weren’t going to survive.

When he pushed himself onto his feet, he was unable to hold back his audible string of curses as his body’s entire weight was supported by his lower half. He bit his lip, tasting the tang of copper, and gripped the edge of the couch to hold himself up as he adjusted to the new pain; if he sat down now, he would never get up again. Sweat was beading on his forehead and running down his back under his shirt and his breathing was unsteady as he focused through the pain, his body struggling to match his mind’s willpower.

Arthur took a deep intake of breath and held it as he took his first determined, hesitant step. He swore again even as he took another step, and then another. It felt as though he was walking on a floor of knives – blade tip up – as he crossed the short distance from the couch to the balcony. He would have stopped and examined the bottom of his feet, hardly believing that there could be so much pain without a physical source, but he was too afraid of what having his entire body weight on one foot would feel like, so he kept walking.

The Point Man made it to the balcony eventually, though it was a slow process. Once he made it to the railing he did his best to lean on the metal so that there would be less pressure on the soles of his feet, shifting near-constantly for a comfortable position that he knew would never be found. Instead, he focused on the dreamscape and the state that his subconscious was in. The whole east end of the dream had been swallowed up by the fog at this point, cracks in the barriers visible with the hazy, half-hidden morning sun. Arthur had no doubt that the south portion of the city would be consumed by the fog now as well, even though he could not see to confirm this; he didn’t have the energy to maintain the southern portion of the cityscape, especially since there was no real reason to do so.

Eames was in the north end and Arthur would be in the centre of the dreamscape until the end. Even though he could not willingly shift the barriers to swallow up the enemy dream workers – he did not have enough experience with locking down his subconscious to know what he was capable of and what was safe – he was putting less focus on maintaining the west end of the city; if the barriers happened to collapse there without his attention, he would not be unhappy. The Point Man had to focus on keeping his base of operations safe and support the northern end of the city until he knew Eames was out and safe.

The northern and western parts of the city looked like the remains of an apocalypse by this point, all of the projections’ rioting concentrated in these two remaining areas. Arthur was finally able to see what had caused some of the trembling in the floors earlier, noticing that a few buildings had been destroyed at their foundations enough for them to topple over into other nearby buildings or to crush the ground as it collapsed. It almost looked as though the very streets and buildings were
at war with one another, one building stabbing and crushing the nearby frame of another as gravity pulled it downward.

Just about everything that could be set on fire had been, though it had long since burned to piles of ash on the pavement by this point, easily swept away by the wind – wiping away any evidence of the existence of many aspects of his dreamscape. There were not as many dead bodies littering the pavement anymore either, some burned to ash while others had faded with Nikolas’s disappearance and Arthur’s inability to sustain them in the dream any longer. The city truly looked like a barren wasteland, nothing alive remaining except in the straggling projections and their dreamers. Wood had burned away and glass had shattered, leaving only the harsh metal frames of the buildings remaining like a giant, abandoned jungle gym.

He was tempted to call Eames in order to warn the Forger of the instability of the urban streets and, if Arthur was being honest with himself, to hear the man’s voice and confirm he was still alright. He knew that would be idiotic though since for all he knew, Eames might be with Amelina in that moment, forging better than anyone else Arthur had ever met, and doing his best to save him. It would hardly be prudent to call and ruin the dream worker’s cover, potentially getting them both killed.

The sound of rioting in the streets below his balcony suddenly rushed up to assault his ears, and Arthur glanced down apprehensively. It had been quiet in the city blocks surrounding his building despite the fact that a good portion of his army had faded away when Nikolas changed the architecture and wore Arthur down. The Point Man had been hopeful that the two enemy dream workers might not notice his shortcomings in terms of defence before Eames managed to get to them and deal with them. Unfortunately, it seemed that someone had noticed his weakness and taken full advantage, and Arthur could not hold back a full assault without exhausting himself to the point of collapse.

He squinted down into the darkness of the city, the clouds and fog blocking out so much of the sky that it was hard for him to determine the time of day now; they were moving towards an eternal night. His balcony was located too high on the building for him to distinguish any noticeable characteristics that would let him know who was attacking, but Arthur had a pretty strong assumption of who it was. The enemy projections swarmed in from the north and west, while all of Arthur’s remaining projections rushed out to meet the oncoming force from the remainder of the east, the south, and his main building.

The two groups met with the sharp flashes of steel and the ear-splitting crack of gunpowder being lit. There were battle cries and shouts as people fought and died, both sides losing members quickly with the skill of the dream workers behind their movements. The Point Man redirected his focus from the warring streets to the interior of his building, aiding his projections and altering architecture to the best of his ability. He had a sharp awareness of the dreamscape around him and the deaths occurring in his building; he could tell that he was significantly cutting down the offensive attacker’s army numbers, but knew that it would not be enough.
Arthur had a heightened awareness of his own stamina as the onslaught continued, projections attacking in mass numbers wave after wave. His hands were shaking with exertion and his headache was worsening to the point where every sound seemed amplified to a painful degree. But he was holding out, the adrenaline from combat and the life and death seriousness of the moment had his attention focused and his body momentarily forgetting the pain, the hunger, the thirst, and the fear.

Just as he began to feel his strength return with the necessity of the situation, he nearly fell to his knees at the sensation of someone knocking the wind from his lungs and kicking his knees in. He could tell immediately that another one of his highly conscious projections had just been killed, recognizing the sensation of shared pain from when the leading projection in the east, the south, and George had all lost their lives permanently in their attempt to get Arthur back to reality.

The Point Man dug his heels in and gripped the railing as tightly as he could, keeping himself from toppling to the ground – barely. He was blinking hurriedly, chasing away the black spots on his vision from the pain as his breathing stuttered into a harsh panting. His knees were half buckled under his weight, knees resting against the grating of the railing to keep them from folding in on themselves. Arthur allowed himself the briefest of moments to rest his forehead on the cold metal of railing before he yanked himself into a standing, fighting stance when he heard gunfire out in the stairwell.

Arthur closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath. He had failed. The enemy dream worker would get through the Point Man’s final defences soon enough and there was nothing Arthur could do to stop it. He didn’t have the energy to spare for manifesting a larger army and jumping over the balcony to end this before his enemies got the opportunity would still kill Eames. Arthur was just beginning to focus on dropping the barriers, hoping Eames might realize what the sudden spread of fog meant and get out safely, when a string of voices fluttered by his ear on the passing wind.

*Be better soon…we miss you.*

*There are a lot of people waiting for you back here in reality, Arthur…*

*So you better keep fighting…*

He heard three quick, precise shots and the sound of three bodies hitting the carpeted ground behind him. His final projections, his last line of defence in the building, were dead. “Good to see you again, Arthur,” the unmistakeable lilt of Louis’s voice greeted him. “Though you’re looking a little worn down, aren’t you?” he added with a mocking tone.
Arthur’s eyes flashed open again. He clenched his jaw as he slowly slid his left hand, the one out of the enemy dream worker’s view behind Arthur’s body, from the railing. It no longer mattered how much every movement hurt; now was the time to fight. For everyone who was counting on him. “You’d be surprised,” he countered.

There was a disbelieving but amused laugh behind him. “We shall see,” Louis warned, almost directly behind the Point Man now judging by the direction and closeness of his voice.

“Yes, we shall.” Arthur slid his hand slowly and carefully over the handle of his gun, confirming his grip. Then he spun, gun in hand, to meet his fate.
Part X. Eames

Eames racked his brain for a new plan as he continued to slide through the alley systems, already in his new form to match the Extractor’s projections. It had been difficult to make the forgery since the fog and clouds had mostly covered the sky, making the atmosphere as bright as twilight at best and as dark as midnight on a new moon after a power outage at worst. It was even worse considering the fact that large portions of the urban cityscape had been destroyed, disrupting power circuits and leaving many of the unbroken streetlamps unlit.

He had eventually managed to find a streetlight near the opening of one of the alleys he was walking by, bulb flickering and letting out a warning buzz sound, but lasting long enough for the Forger to complete his transformation. Even though Amelina had both male and female projections under her control, Eames chose to forge a female form. He was less likely to experience as much aggressive trouble in that form and he might be lucky enough for the enemy dream worker to assume he could only forge male personas; some forgers were trapped with forging their own gender.

His form was slim, Amelina’s projections generally following her basic body shape, which was somewhat uncommon. It would have looked odder if Eames had forged a male though, while his prominent hourglass shape suited him now. The Forger was not unfamiliar with the female form and enjoyed the change from time to time. The clothing he had been forced to wear in order to match the projections was less than comfortable though. Eames assumed that Amelina had been involved in the military at some point in her life before dream working in order to influence her projection’s wardrobe so completely.

Black combat boots were on his feet while the rest of his skin was covered in a dark, fitted material he knew was preferred for many military uniforms. The cloth was already uncomfortably hot as it clung to his skin, but he couldn’t complain; between the outfit and his tied back dark hair, he was a shadow swallowed up in the darkness of the alleys as he moved into the northern end of the dreamscape.

The Extractor’s territory of the city was surprisingly full of projections, many more than Eames would have expected to see out on the streets. He had assumed that Amelina would have had more projections with her in her base rather than out on the streets fighting the last few remaining projections of Arthur’s. Her base was actually a large glass spire that looked like it was from some futuristic city; it was the only building he could see that still had all of its glass intact. All of the lights still seemed to be on inside the building, giving the entire spire an eerie, orange glow. It seemed rather arrogant and foolish for a dream worker to create such a beacon in an enemy’s subconscious, and Eames could only guess she was aware that the Point Man was too weak to retaliate offensively.
Eames dodged back into the alleys when he saw some projections headed his way, one of Arthur’s being mercilessly chased by three of Amelina’s. The Forger felt guilty as he slid back into the shadows, doing nothing to save the projection as the young woman rushed by the alley mouth, gasping for breath and tears streaming down her cheeks in the passing wind. He wished he could manifest his own projections to aid in the fight against the two remaining enemy dream workers, but he was terrified about what it might do to Arthur’s stability. Eames had never even considered how badly shifting the architecture of the dream might affect Arthur until he had heard the Point Man over the phone. Now he was petrified of hurting Arthur further by bringing new projections into the dreamscape for him to struggle to sustain.

He was forced to return into the alleys and purposefully ignore the sound of a woman tripping, crying out, and then silence. Eames was concerned to note that Amelina did not seem to be taking any prisoners back to her base in order to torture and interrogate. He knew the Extractor should be working hard to draw the information from Arthur’s subconscious – she would be the most likely of the three enemies to succeed - but any projection of the Point Man was dealt a swift death. Though Eames felt horrible at the thought, it was a relief to know that Arthur would not experience more prolonged suffering.

Every moment that Eames headed further away from the central part of the city, he felt an insistent urge tugging him back towards Arthur’s base of operations. When he had seen Arthur – the real Arthur, at last – down in the dream for the first time since Inception and yet after nearly a year of dreams and fantasies, Eames had barely been able to contain himself. The only thing that had kept him focused was the seriousness of the situation, the fact that Arthur’s life was hanging in the balance, and that the Point Man had asked for his help specifically. However, that did not mean that Eames had not been sorely tempted to drag Arthur over to the couch and kiss the man’s breath away.

It had torn at Eames to leave Arthur alone in his building in order to go after Nikolas, knowing it was vital for both of their survival but also knowing that he might never see the man he loved again – never get the opportunity to speak his mind and heart. He had managed to leave and focus on his job, motivated with the knowledge that Arthur was depending on him. But now that he knew how greatly his Point Man was suffering, it felt as though each step away from Arthur was tearing Eames’s soul to pieces.

Nonetheless, he pushed himself forward at the fastest pace he could manage without tripping or stumbling in the darkness. It was treacherous, making his way through the city in this state. It looked as though a bomb had struck nearby, shattering everything fragile and burning away everything living. Eames was thankful that he was able to move throughout the alleyways while Amelina’s projections still kept a cautious distance. The high and narrow walls left less open air for debris to fall through as buildings collapsed around him.

Once on his sneak through enemy territory he had been forced to backtrack and follow a new route
from what had been drawn for him. His first warning had been an ominous moan of metal straining against gravity. After that had been a rain shower of glass shards – the remainder of broken windows falling from quite a far distance. It was only then that he realized he was standing underneath a skyscraper that was bent at an unnatural angle, metal screeching in the quieting streets by that point as the metal hinges began to skid and break. Eames had barely managed to run back a few blocks of alleyway before the metal frame of the building had finally toppled with a low, pained groan.

Metal, wiring and glass all rained down and filled up the narrow alleys like a violent storm and Eames barely managed to get around a corner in time to avoid the rush of debris that had been pushed further away with the force of impact. The Forger had covered his face and head with a coat he had forged into existence in a panic, though he was forced to continue breathing through the fabric for another few minutes before he thought it might be safe to breathe normally. When he did finally venture back up the alley slightly, he saw that the metal framing had carved out a deep groove in the top floors of the buildings lining the alleys, but that the building had come to a rest. Eames had attempted to maintain his route, wanting to take the quickest route to Amelina possible, but the sparks trailing down like dying fireworks from the electrical systems in the skeleton of a building had deterred him. He had been forced to rush away as electrical wirings continued to crack and spark, finding a more stable light source in the form of a rare working traffic light that tinted his map red. As soon as he had his new route memorized, Eames slipped back into the alley. Even though he knew he had not been down in the dreamscape long, it felt like this war had been dragging on forever.

He felt impatient as he neared Amelina’s hideaway, like every step, every breath, every second was taking too long to pass. It almost felt like it had when he was in his apartment in Mombasa, waiting for the day when things finally started to improve. He was ready for all of this to be over, for Eames to open his eyes and watch Arthur open his own beautiful ones in the hospital again. Before all of this began, Eames had thought that there would be no bigger challenge than to track Arthur down and convince the Point Man that there was some value in taking a chance. Now that challenge was all he could hope and look forward to; admitting his feelings to Arthur – no matter the response – seemed like a reward now, rather than a moment to dread.

As if to answer his plea for this to come to a close, Eames turned a corner and came face to face with the mouth of an alley looking directly at the entrance of Amelina’s glimmering spire. He stumbled back around a corner for a moment, blinking furiously as his eyes burned from the sudden appearance of bright lights. He had become so adjusted to relying on touch rather than his sight now, fingers gliding over brick walls as he made his way through the alleys, that it hurt his eyes to be forced to adjust to light again. Even worse was the fact that the light coming from the Extractor’s spire was enough to light up an entire downtown area of a normal urban centre.

Once the spots on his vision had faded away and his eyes had stopped streaming with tears, Eames swiped away the remaining tear tracks with the sleeve of his jacket before heading for the mouth of the alley. The Forger did not see many projections entering or leaving the main doors at the base of
the building, but he could think of no other method of sneaking into Amelina’s hideaway. He knew that this enemy dream worker was not a novice so Eames would not have the same leeway as he had when forging one of Nikolas’s projections. If he acted incorrectly as a projection, he would be noticed.

He had spent all of his time while crossing the large expanse of city from the east end up to the north trying to think of some solution to this issue. But in the end he could not think of any alternative other than to rush the building. He would draw attention to himself quite quickly and he would just have to work with that; it was unlikely that he would manage to sneak all of the way to Amelina in person without being caught. So he would just have to be prepared for a violent greeting.

The courtyard of cobblestone and long-since burned potted plants surrounding the building left the whole area open and visible. There were a few groups of projections patrolling the area and Eames remained in the shadows of the alley as he watched the routine carefully. Each passing minute was another minute where Arthur was suffering, but rushing in with guns blazing would do nothing but get him killed and leave the Point Man alone.

It was worth the wait to watch the routine when he finally noticed the pattern and identified the precise moment he would have an opportunity to slip through safely. It was understandable that even someone as skilled as Amelina would get caught in maintaining a routine when down in a dreamscape this long. She was forced to keep control of her building and her projections while attempting to stay alive and extract information from the Point Man. There was only so much someone’s subconscious was capable of when put under stress, and those shortcuts and routines that resulted were what Eames had been hoping for.

He confirmed his forgery quickly before slipping out of the alley behind one group of projections that had just walked by but far enough away from the next patrol that he would not stand out. Then he stepped forward, matching the pace he had been watching, and joined the end of the line of the next projections swinging around the courtyard. He had seen Amelina’s other projections join and leave the patrol groups as they entered the courtyard or returned back out onto the streets to continue causing damage.

Eames followed the patrol’s path, even as it circled away from his goal before doubling around towards the base and entrance of the large glass spire. None of the projections looked over at him as he joined and then left the group, seemingly content with his forgery and seeing no reason to regard him with suspicion. He peeled away from the end of the line as quietly as he could, re-joining the few rare shadows on the ground surrounding the base of the building – caused by the outlining support beams. Again, no one looked his way as he deviated from the norm and carefully slipped in through the metal and glass entrance double doors.

The moment Eames was inside Amelina’s base of operations and the door slid closed behind him,
he paused. He slid out of view behind another support beam, this one made of metal but made to look like white marble. His outfit was suddenly like a beacon now, all-consuming black on a white background. Amelina had been smart to dress her projections like this; they could easily hide in the darkness of the city but would never be able to hide in her hideaway, making any deviance obvious. The projections kept to their routine on the courtyard, only visible in the ruined city because of the glow from the spire. There was also no one in the blindingly white lobby with Eames, leaving an eerie silence that set the Forger on edge.

Too easy, his mind screamed. Trap.

He recognized it for what it was, but that did not mean he could make a run for it now. Leaving would only increase the distance between himself and the enemy dream worker he had to dispose of as soon as possible. That was why he forced himself to remain still when he heard the distinct sound of high heels clicking on the shiny tiling of the floor. The sound echoed around the circular room, beginning as a soft pace before growing louder and steadier as his heart rate began to race.

From what he could guess, the high heels stopped a short distance away from the pillar he was hiding behind, an ominous click, click, silence. “I know you are there, Mr. Eames. Playing the hero today, are we? It would be better if you just came out.”

Eames raised an eyebrow for his own benefit, wondering how the Extractor knew his name. The fact sent a streak of fear through him, worried that her knowledge of his name might be an indication that she had managed to extract her desired information from the Point Man. If she knew his name, what else did she know about him? What had she learned about Arthur? Had she torn the information her team had come for from Arthur’s subconscious?

Deciding to hide his fear and concern for Arthur with a show of bravado, Eames circled around the pillar while still forged, eyes focusing on Amelina the moment she came into view. “I’m sure I have no idea to what you are speaking about,” he returned in a soft, feminine voice as he mimicked the dreamer’s accent. English accents were always the easiest for him to forge, the subtle differences easily mastered.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Amelina smiled back in amusement, watching him like a well-trained hawk from across the empty space of lobby, neither of them making a move towards each other. “My,” she whispered appraisingly when he came into full view, “You are quite a skilled forger, aren’t you? If I hadn’t been smart enough to plan for an intrusion like this,” the Extractor boasted confidently, “I might not have been able to pick you out of a crowd of my projections. I’m impressed.”

“Joy,” Eames bit out, teeth bared behind his lips, “My life’s goal, complete.”
Amelina giggled then, voice like high pitched wind chimes. It was a startlingly beautiful sound to hear, but it was also sharp and deadly, like the warning rattle before a snake struck. “Sarcastically witty and gorgeous, no wonder you’re so prominent in Arthur’s thoughts,” the Extractor taunted, falling silent while watching him knowingly – knowing he could not resist a hook like that.

The Forger forced himself not to ask the question that was on the tip of his tongue at the woman’s words, but it was hard. Instead, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and straightened his back, realizing that this encounter would be a battle of wit and words rather than a physical chase. “A little overdressed for the occasion, aren’t you?” he asked, tone curious and mocking.

The Extractor gave a pleased smile, taking a moment to look over herself arrogantly. She was dressed in an emerald green evening gown, the fabric clinging to every curve and reflecting the light in the room so that it shimmered. The high heels Eames had heard approaching earlier were barely visible under the trail of her dress, the white satin tips just poking out in front. Her rich brown hair framed her face and fell down the back of her neck in ringlets, a few thicker strands pinned back with a jewelled hair clip. She had a matching necklace that caught the light and white satin gloves that covered her forearms.

“You look quite attractive in my form as well.” she teased lightly, finally looking back up at him again. “As for my outfit…” she smirked mischievously, “I do not enjoy getting my hands dirty.” Then she held her hands out in front of her and flipped them over so that they were facing palm-up. Eames could see the stain of old blood on the white palms and fingers of her gloves, being shown off like a trophy. He took one menacing step forward but forced himself to stop when she matched him and took an equal step backwards. Eames had to keep this woman in sight; he couldn’t afford to change the architecture around to trap her as he had with Nikolas. Amelina gave another surprised giggle and allowed her hands to drop to her sides again. “You have more self-control than I was expecting.”

“I’m full of surprises,” he warned, mentally reviewing where his two guns were hidden on his form and how many seconds it would take for him to get the gun in hand, aim and shoot. Seeing the blood of Arthur’s projections – there was no other explanation – on the enemy dream worker’s hands had sent him into a poorly contained fury. He had felt bad for killing Nikolas on some level because the Architect had not looked for this; he had merely been swept up in the situation. Amelina was different – she was relishing this.

“As am I,” Amelina smirked, “As you have already come to realize. Tell me, are you wondering how I know your name, how I know you are a forger? It is certainly not information I would have known on my own.”

“I’m pretty sure I have a good idea,” he shrugged the questions aside, unwilling to fall into her trap
as she attempted to capture him within his own curiosity and fear. All the while he was busy trying
to estimate how close he would have to get before he could safely confirm he would hit the
Extractor on his first shot. His odds for dealing a fatal blow on his fist shot – before she could run
away – were not good. He also had to remember the projections lining the streets outside of the
building because if Eames only managed a superficial shot, he would have swarms of projections
coming in to murder him while Amelina got away.

“Good,” the woman nodded in approval, “then you are intelligent as well. However,” she took a
measured step backwards without looking over her shoulder, headed towards the centre of the
room. Eames matched her step. “With intelligence comes curiosity, and I will bet that you are quite
curious about what else I have come to learn during my time down here in the dreamscape.”

“Not really,” he blatantly lied, taking a moment to survey the rest of the room in order to distract
himself from Amelina’s advances. It was disconcerting how persuasive she could be, definitely
skilled at what she did.

The room around them was large and circular at the base of the spire, glass and metal framing
surrounding the entire outer wall. Eames was surprised to see that there were no floors above him,
but that the entire spire was hollow and glass all the way from the base up to its glass tip. He could
see the city around him as well as the sky, though it looked as though someone had turned off the
moon and stars, leaving the world in darkness. The only thing breaking the monotonous whiteness
that was the entire building was a set of metal double doors in the centre of the lobby. The Forger
could see that the doors led to a tiny circular, glass elevator, which no doubt took its path up the
centre of the spire.

“Really?” the Architect hummed thoughtfully, taking another step back towards the elevator doors.
Eames matched her again, growing impatient. Battles of words and wit were enjoyable when he
was in reality and was not under the pressure of keeping himself and Arthur alive. He looked
forward to matches like this when he got to see Arthur frown in thought or distaste before he
produced a brilliant comeback, never one to leave Eames disappointed. But this was not enjoyable
for Eames to endure, and not just because it was not the Point Man squaring off against him. “You
seemed to react quite strongly to me telling you that Arthur thought of you often.”

“Nothing you could ever say or tell me would make me believe a single word you said,” Eames
reminded her, taking another calculated step forward. His heart raced in anticipation and confusion
when Amelina did not match his step backwards. “So it really doesn’t matter what secrets you say
you have uncovered.”

“It’s a shame that you feel that way,” the Extractor sounded genuinely sad as she plucked at the dry
blood on her glove idly. “Because there is so much that I have come to learn down here about your
precious dream worker. Secrets that, and this you can believe, you will never learn from Arthur
himself.”
“Arthur is allowed his secrets,” Eames proclaimed, taking yet another step closer, closing the gap between himself and the enemy dream worker. Just a few more large steps and he would be close enough to draw his gun and feel relatively confident in his ability to land a fatal blow. The fact that Amelina was not stepping away had him on guard though, unsure of what her intentions were.

The woman scoffed disbelievingly and dropped her hands to her hips. “You don’t honestly expect me to believe that, do you?” she taunted, painted red lips curled in a dangerous smile. Eames felt unnerved as he watched that smile grow, wondering if he had made a mistake without knowing it. “Your very nature is to learn absolutely everything there is to know about an individual – every mannerism, every expression, and every thought and memory behind those.”

“You don’t know me,” the Forger argued, standing still. He was terrified of making the wrong decision and scaring away the Extractor. He was also petrified of waiting too long and wasting his wonderful opportunity.

“Don’t sound so proud,” Amelina chided him snidely. “Every forger is the same. You are far from unique.” She took another step backwards, now only one or two steps from the elevator door. Eames followed her anxiously, unwilling to lose her in the mess of reflecting glass that was her spire. “You are entirely too predictable, Mr. Eames. It is almost dull. I knew enough to prepare for your invasion the moment I knew of your existence, and it has clearly left me with the upper hand. I know your moves before you even consider them.”

“Boasting is unbecoming in a woman,” Eames baited her. “And if I am so predictable, I suppose my next move will come as no shock,” he added as he slowly slid his hand down and around the handle of his gun, pulling it out and aiming it precisely.

“I’m afraid not,” the Extractor giggled again; this time the sound grated on Eames’s nerves, like fingernails scraped down a chalkboard. She seemed entirely unperturbed to have the barrel of a gun pointed directly at her forehead – in fact, she looked pleased. Eames felt dread develop heavily in his stomach. “Which is also why I know that you will follow me into this elevator without shooting me,” Amelina betted with a smile on her face as she stepped backwards again and pressed the ‘up’ button.

Eames cocked his gun, took another two steps forward, and adjusted his aim on the woman’s forehead again. “Sadly, you might be mistake this time.”

Amelina shook her head and grinned childishly. “Tell me, Mr. Eames. How much do you really know about Arthur? Has he ever told you about his parents? How about Tyson?” she spoke the name like a dagger, and Eames couldn’t stop the curiosity and jealousy from welling up inside of
him. “Diane?” Amelina said the name precisely, lips caressing the name like a delicate secret. “No?” the Extractor asked him, faking disappointment. “I guess you don’t mean as much to him as I thought if he hasn’t trusted you enough to share those important people with you.”

Eames did not recognize either of the names spoken and knew nothing of Arthur’s parents. It was impossible for the Forger to determine if the woman was lying through her teeth and just making things up to get Eames to react, or whether she really had broken into the Point Man’s subconscious and begun working through his memories. She seemed too smug to be lying, but it hurt that Arthur truly hadn’t trusted him enough to share his past in order for Eames to figure out Amelina’s plan.

“Everyone has their secrets,” he tried to defend Arthur’s choices, remembering that Eames himself had not told Arthur his life story either. They were both dream workers involved in an illegal profession where keeping secrets kept you alive. It was unfair for him to assume that the Point Man would just tell him everything there was to know, especially since they had just started to reconnect while in the middle of a war. And it wasn’t like Arthur had entrusted his secrets to the Extractor – she had stolen them. But he couldn’t stop the small sting of hurt and disappointment in his chest – Amelina had struck a nerve.

“Of course they do,” the woman agreed, smoothing out a few invisible creases on her dress. “And I can show you Arthur’s if you follow me,” she offered as the elevator chimed and the two metal doors slid open.

She stepped backwards into the elevator, watching him expectantly. This time, Eames did not match the woman’s step as he remained stationary on the white tiling of the lobby. Despite the fact that he had a large room of empty space behind him, the Forger suddenly felt cornered. “I’d rather Arthur tell me himself,” he countered, refocusing his aim on the Extractor when he realized that the barrel had slipped down towards the floor.

“That’s a fair enough desire,” Amelina nodded, doors of the elevator remaining open without any interference. “But I can assure you that if you allow me to escape from your sight now, or if you kill me, you will never know any of Arthur’s secrets. After all,” she shrugged, dress and jewellery somewhat shadowed now that she was out of the direct light of the lobby, “he could have called you anytime during the last year. There was nothing stopping him, but Arthur never called you, did he?”

Eames swallowed hard and bit his lip, trying to block the Extractor’s voice out. It was so difficult though as her words swam around him teasingly, voice as soft as silk and as tempting as honey. It didn’t matter if Arthur didn’t want to tell Eames everything about his past and how he had ended up as the most skilled Point Man in the profession of dream working. It didn’t matter if Eames didn’t know about all of the important people in the man’s past. He could live with that, or at least he thought he could. But…But Eames had thought that Arthur had been more affectionate to him
when the Forger had entered the dream so why…why had Arthur never called?

“There is no reason for you to want to help me and answer my questions,” Eames hedged angrily, frustrated with himself as he felt his resolve crumbling beneath his feet. “Why would you agree to sate my curiosity, especially since I’ll be at point blank range to shoot if I choose?”

“Because, Mr. Eames,” Amelina crossed her hands in front of her so that just the edges of her fingers and the blood caked onto the white fabric there was visible. “I enjoy watching people suffer, and I never promised you that knowing Arthur’s memories would make you happy.”

The Forger hesitated for a long moment, though Amelina never commented or pushed him – she probably knew that he was already lost. The thought of betraying Arthur’s trust like this and taking advantage of the knowledge already stolen from his subconscious had his stomach roiling with guilt. But at the same time, even though he knew it was wrong, he felt an unbelievable sense of morbid curiosity. He fought himself as he slowly stepped towards the elevator, lowering his gun but not putting the safety back on. However, Eames could do nothing but continue taking measured steps forward – he felt bewitched.

It seemed like no time at all before he was in the small glass elevator with Amelina and the doors were sliding closed behind him despite the fact that he had been dragging his feet the entire time. “I’m glad you decided to join me, Mr. Eames,” the Extractor raised one blood-stained glove and rested it on the crook of the Forger’s arm tauntingly. Eames found himself unable to move or shake her off, even as he felt vomit rise in the back of his throat. “Even though free will and choice really had nothing to do with it.”

Amelina smiled up at him evilly, still a few inches shorter than him despite the aid of the high heels, before the elevator slid into motion without any physical intervention. As he had suspected, the elevator rose straight up through the centre of the spire, giving him a perfect view of the entire building from the inside with everything made of glass. The elevator rose slowly enough that he was able to watch each passing floor, though he also felt the pressure in his ears build as their altitude continued to increase.

His attention was caught when he noticed movement on the large panels of glass that served as the outer wall of the building. It was like an entire wall of large screen tellies, and he would have sworn that’s what it was if he had not stood outside the building and seen that he could look right through the material into the lobby. On each slab of glass they passed, there seemed to be a video playing on a loop. There were too many for Eames to focus on all of them as they continued upwards at an undisturbed pace, but he could see Arthur at various stages of his life in all of the videos.

The Forger watched with mounting curiosity and guilt as the apparent memories continued to flash
by his eyes, wondering if this was still causing Arthur to suffer as the memories kept repeating. There were flashes of scenes Eames could barely make sense of, the Point Man’s age fluctuating each time. He was keeping a close eye for these so called ‘important people’ in Arthur’s life, but he just kept seeing images of Arthur and nobody else. “Arthur has always been alone,” the Extractor stated simply, softly. “And he has always been fine. Why would he suddenly decide to give everything up and trust someone like you?”

He felt Amelina’s nails dig into his arm through the fabric of her glove and his jacket – only then did he realize that his forgery had fallen and he was back to his normal form. Eames attempted to pull his arm away from the stinging pain, or to lift his other hand to aim his gun and bring this to an end, but he found himself still paralyzed and unable to retaliate in any way. The elevator’s pace sped up as they headed towards the top of the spire and Eames became dizzy with a sense of vertigo when he glanced down and noticed that the bottom of the elevator was glass as well.

“No one could love you, Mr. Eames. You know this well enough from your own past, don’t you?” she asked, feigning innocent curiosity. The outer glass walls of the spire had begun to close in around them as the building narrowed towards the ceiling. This put all of the glass panels replaying memories closer and closer to the elevator and Eames’s eyes as they began flashing with images of the Forger’s own suppressed past.

Eames clenched his eyes shut but found himself unable to keep them closed, either forced to stare down at the glass bottom of the elevator and the entire building below him or his looping memories. Neither option was pleasant and both left him feeling unbalanced. Images of bullies at school, the sound of beer bottles shattering against the wall, the feeling of a hand hitting him – hard – to the ground, the gleam of a knife streaked with blood. The Forger gasped, finding it hard to breathe, and attempted to close his eyes again as he felt tears prickle at the corners of his eyes.

“Your father hated you, didn’t he? And your mother hated you by the end as well, I’m sure. She would have been able to leave and live a happy life if it wasn’t for you,” Amelina spoke as if reading the script of his life, his thoughts, his deepest fears. He was amazed at how quickly the Extractor had managed to tap into his memories and place them on the screen to increase his horror, but wondered if it had something to do with her design of the building and elevator. He had no doubt that his weariness from fighting and uncertainty when it came to the Point Man was not helping him keep his defences up. “Is this really what you’re offering Arthur? The obligation to stay with you until it ends up killing him? You aren’t capable of giving anything else to a relationship. It’s no wonder he avoided your advances.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he chanted, something he had spent years dealing with after his father had murdered his mother. He thought he had gotten past this, had managed to put it in his past and move on; apparently he was wrong. “I’ve changed. I can give Arthur everything he deserves and more.”
“Really?” Amelina dug her nails in harder, sounding pleased at the pain he knew was in his tone. “You consider a history of failed relationships and one night stands to be a good indication that you can give Arthur a proper relationship? I kind of feel bad for him, knowing you’re the one trying to gain his affections,” the Extractor taunted.

The images of Eames’s past faded away into a blur before the Forger’s memories of his time during Inception began skidding across the glass at a disorienting place. “You’re wrong,” he whispered weakly, unable to look away from those flashes of annoyance and glares he had always received from the Point Man when attempting to tease and flirt with the man. Each look of hatred had his eyes burning and his heart clenching painfully.

“Am I?” Amelina crooned in his ear, teeth sharp and white as she grinned again. “It certainly doesn’t look like I’m wrong with these memories. And this wasn’t that long ago, was it? This was your last job with Arthur before he never called you again despite your best efforts. I’m surprised, Mr. Eames; I thought you were intelligent enough to understand a refusal that obvious.”

Eames opened his mouth and then closed it again without speaking a word, unable to think of any argument to refute the woman who was still hanging on his arm. Had he really just been a hopeless romantic, allowing his infatuation to drive him despite Arthur’s obvious refusals? Had Eames mistakenly seen affection in the Point Man’s words and actions when he arrived down in the dream due to his own hopes and desires, projecting his feelings onto the other man? Was he really such a fool to think that it was possible for Arthur to suddenly have a change of heart – to suddenly care for Eames the way he had always wanted? Why would he? Why would anyone?

“Tell me, Mr. Eames,” Amelina’s lips were by his ear again, voice so soft and comforting as he felt his heart and hope shatter. “What was it you were doing on that last job with Arthur? Who were you working for? Who were you working with?”

Eames saw familiar faces flicker across the passing glass, panels nearly scraping the edges of the elevator at this height. He wondered towards the sudden change in topic and the Extractor’s interest, and then he felt his mind fog again. The Forger slumped against the glass wall of the elevator, only kept from falling completely by Amelina’s insistent grip on his arm. He realized idly that this was probably what the enemy dream workers had come down here to learn in the first place, to steal all of the Point Man’s knowledge about the Inception job. But if the Extractor was asking him now, that must mean that Arthur had still managed to fight her off.

He felt a mix of pride and shame at that thought, astounded by Arthur’s abilities and embarrassed by his own. All it had taken was a day and a half in the dreamscape, one fight with an enemy dream worker, and a few key insinuations towards Eames’s blindness to Arthur’s disinterest for him to crack. The Forger couldn’t think of any reason to fight though, to hold out on the information Amelina was looking for. After all, what would it really change at this point?
The elevator was slowing down as they neared the peak of the spire, the web of metal framing joining above them quite close. “Just tell me,” Amelina persuaded him, running her gloved fingers up and down his forearm – it would have been comforting if not for the blood. “If you tell me then this can all be over. You won’t have to feel this pain any longer. Arthur won’t matter any longer and you’ll finally be free.”

The Extractor’s words were somewhat hazy now as they swam around Eames, confusing him. “Arthur…” he whispered, trying to focus his mind past the insistent string of questions from the beautiful woman beside him. Past the pain in his heart at the thought that he had been imagining Arthur’s affection towards him, making it hard for him to draw in breath as his chest constricted. What would he do with himself if he woke up in reality and Arthur pushed him aside, disappeared and never spoke to Eames again? He had barely survived the last rejection.

“Yes, Arthur,” Amelina repeated. “Would you like to forget him, Mr. Eames? I can do that for you if you tell me what it is I want.”

“Forget Arthur…?” he asked blearily as he slumped more completely against the elevator wall. The thought was tempting; he would never have to suffer through this heartbreak and unrequited love again, if only he forgot that the Point Man existed. The elevator slid smoothly to a stop at the top of the spire, the glass around them mere inches away from the walls. Eames blinked his eyes open at the tiny jolt as they stopped, and what he saw on the panels in front of him took his breath away.

It was Arthur, sitting at his desk when Eames had first found the man in the dreamscape. Those beautiful, sharp eyes were alight with relief and genuine happiness. Those thin lips were curled into a welcoming smile. Arthur’s face and body was suddenly relaxed, and that photo of Eames with his arm around Arthur was behind the man, telling more than the Point Man ever would. I need someone I can trust. He was not sure if the words were spoken aloud with the memories or if his mind was just remembering them, but it didn’t matter; they rang out loudly in his mind.

He could tell that Amelina was aware of a change immediately, but the Extractor no longer had any hope of winning this battle. Eames’s mind was clear now, free of the dream worker’s persuasion. His memories of Arthur reminded him why he was down here risking his life, and why he could never give up. Arthur was relying on him – trusted him – over anyone else. Whether that came along with other feelings for the Forger or not didn’t matter; he had to get Arthur back to reality safely.

Amelina let go of his arm as if burned, taking a step back and reaching for a gun the Forger honestly couldn’t guess where she had been hiding. Eames was faster though, lifting the hand that had been loosely holding his gun before that moment. He levelled the barrel and aimed even as the Extractor fumbled to reach her own. “Thanks for the memories, Amelina,” he spoke his farewell as
he confirmed his aim and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot was deafening in the small confinement of the elevator and the glass walls shook dangerously with the aftershock. Eames’s ears rang as he watched Amelina’s form crumple to the glass floor of the elevator, blood pooling quickly to surround the soles of the Forger’s shoes. He grimaced uncomfortably at the sight of the dead Extractor, wiping his blood-speckled hands on his pant legs grimly. Eames still felt horrible – he always did when he was forced to look down on a dead body that he was responsible for – but he did not feel guilty over the fact that she would be waking up with no memory.

He was grateful that the elevator and building had not collapse around him, just as the dreamer had. Unfortunately, he seemed stuck without some intervention and was forced to manipulate the architecture just enough to get him back down to the ground despite knowing it was probably draining Arthur. He made his descent as quickly has he could manage, making his ears pop with the pressure.

The Forger stumbled out of the elevator when it reached the ground floor, knees weak with nausea and relief. Amelina’s body had faded away by that point, but the blood had not. Eames forced himself not to look back as he crossed the lobby purposefully, knowing that there would be footprints of blood following him but unable to bear seeing such a thing. Instead, he pushed himself through the large entrance doors and out into the deserted courtyard. The shadowed darkness of Arthur’s dreamscape was suddenly more comforting than the bright lights of the spire, which were slowly flickering out of life, dropping him into a slow darkness.

There was no one in the courtyard as he crossed the open area towards the welcoming mouth of the alley – it seemed safer knowing that Arthur was the one who had created the alley system. He wanted to be away from the sterile brightness and the empty, vulnerable areas that had been abandoned. It was relieving to know that all of Amelina’s projections had faded along with her, leaving him no enemies to be concerned about in this part of the city. He only had to deal with one more enemy dream worker, Louis, in the west side of the city and then this would all be over.

Eames settled on the ground once he was a few feet into the alley, tucking his knees against his chest as he pulled out his mobile phone. He prayed that the Point Man was not suffering too badly from Eames’s manipulation of the architecture as he chose the man’s number and brought the phone to his ear. He wasn’t sure whether he should head directly to the west to deal with Louis or if he should head back to the centre of down and check in on Arthur.

As he waited for the Point Man to pick up the phone, his whole body anxious as the rings passed once again, he noticed that the fog was already swarming the area. The tip of the spire had already been swallowed up and Eames could see through the glass walls that the opposite side of the building also had fog swirling against it. He couldn’t physically see where Arthur’s barriers were, but he knew for sure that he had to get out of there quickly. He picked himself up off the pavement
and rushed out onto the main city streets, knowing he would not have the time to manoeuvre through the alley system while outrunning the oncoming fog as Arthur’s barriers collapsed.

Just as he began a light jog back towards the centre of town, the phone connected and Arthur breathed across the phone. “Eames.”

“Arthur, love,” he greeted warmly, relieved to hear that the man did not sound like he had been throwing up at all from Eames’s slight architecture manipulation. “Amelina is dead,” he promised. “I was wondering if I should go after Louis immediately or if I should come back and regroup briefly.”

“Come back,” Arthur insisted immediately. “I have new information for you.”

Eames raised an eyebrow in confusion, glancing back over his shoulder to consider the fog’s advancement. He was safe as he was, but he would need to continue moving at a quick pace until he made it out of the northern end of the dreamscape before he could relax. “What sort of information?”

“I can’t say over the phone,” the Point Man answered, sounding distant and forced.

“Arthur, are you alright?” Eames questioned in concern. He may not know everything there was to know about the Point Man, as Amelina had pointed out, but he knew the man well enough to recognize when his tone was off. “You sound strained.”

“I just wanted to say…” Arthur fell silent for a moment, confusion and nerves sparking up in the Forger. “I love you.”

Eames blinked at the words and felt his heart jump before it promptly plummeted into the pavement below his moving feet. But before he could respond, Eames heard the phone disconnect on Arthur’s end. The Forger pulled the phone away from his ear and considered it for a moment in disbelief, the Point Man’s words still echoing in his ears. If Arthur had just said that, then it must mean that things were really bad and that the Point Man was in serious trouble. If Arthur had said it and meant it, which Eames wouldn’t allow himself to hope for right then, it meant that Arthur thought he was going to be dead within hours and Eames had to get there immediately.

With this realization, the Forger paused in his jog for a moment. He listened for any indication of what was going on and realized with horror that the west side of the cityscape had fallen silent.
Eames cursed loudly, his voice echoing off the concrete and catching on the wind – Louis must have abandoned his hideaway in the western end of the dreamscape and attacked the Point Man while he was weak from Nikolas’s attack and Eames was away fighting Amelina.

If Eames had not gotten caught up in the Extractor’s persuasion and disposed of her sooner, he might have realized Louis’s plan and been able to get to Arthur before the enemy dream worker had gotten there. He forced himself to remember that Arthur was still alive though, conscious enough to speak and warn Eames away from danger. The Forger knew that the Point Man was trying to subtly tell him to run for it, Louis no doubt listening in on the conversation, but Eames was not about to give up on Arthur at this stage in the game.

There was still a chance that he could get to Arthur in time to save him before Louis did any more damage. He might even manage to get them both back to safety after dispatching the enemy dream worker. But by this point, Eames just wanted to make sure that Arthur’s suffering ended, whether that resolution came from waking up or death. He also wanted one last, selfish moment to tell Arthur that he loved the man too, uncaring of whether the Point Man had only spoken it as a warning or whether it had been his final farewell.

And with that motivation in mind, Arthur’s words still ringing in his ears, Eames pocketed his phone and began sprinting towards the centre of town.
Part XI. Arthur

Arthur flinched the moment before the hard metal of a gun slammed into his cheekbone and jaw, fracturing bone and cutting into skin. “What the hell was that?” Louis screamed in his ear, wiping Arthur’s blood from the gun on his pant leg in agitation. “I told you not to say anything that would let the Forger know I was here!” The gun struck again, harder this time with the enemy dream worker’s rage and panic at a plan gone wrong. “I told you to say just enough to get him here!”

Arthur remained silent for a moment, moving his tongue, wincing, and spitting out a broken tooth to the carpeted floor. Blood pooled in his mouth and under his tongue until it overflowed and tricked down his chin and neck lazily. The Point Man’s headache, which had already been painful, had now been struck into a vicious migraine that had the corners of his eyes burning with tears. “It’s not the first time we’ve said that,” he lied through his remaining, blood-stained teeth. “If anything it will make him get here faster.”

Silently, Arthur was hoping for the exact opposite to occur. He hoped that Eames knew him well enough to recognize the difference in his speaking in order to take his words as a warning to stay away. He knew the Forger would want to play the hero, but Arthur just wanted the man to get to safety so that he could escape when the Point Man’s barriers inevitably dropped. Things had all gone terribly wrong and Arthur knew he was far past the point where he had a chance of being saved, of getting the chance to return to reality. He refused to drag Eames down with him.

When he had spun and drawn his gun, he had been lucky enough to catch the other dream worker off guard – if only for a split second. He had landed two bullets, jostled from the original fatal mark, but still close enough to dig into delicate skin, muscle, and nerves. Arthur’s satisfaction had not lasted long though, when the gun Louis had been aiming at the back of his head fired as the enemy stumbled back. The hit only grazed his knee – a wound Arthur would brush off on a normal job – but in his weakened state it caused him to stumble before he could lunge forward to take Louis to the ground. Despite the fact that Louis had been cursing as though never experiencing pain before, the other man managed to dislodge Arthur’s grasp of his gun, sending it toppling over the balcony.

Arthur was halfway to standing again after his leg had buckled, dragging himself up with the unyielding railing, when Louis had aimed his gun back up to Arthur’s head. He had been expecting it to be the end. He had thought about all the things he wished he could have said to Eames. But then the other man had smacked him with the barrel of the gun on his temple, just enough force used to stun him. Arthur had thrown up with the pain as Louis dragged him into the room and chained him up before leaving him there to hang while tending to the two wounds on his arm. The Point Man had honestly wanted to cry in defeat when his enemy – properly tended to – finally turned back towards him with a vicious grin and Arthur’s mobile phone.
Those words were still on his cut, swollen lips though – *I love you* - and Arthur couldn’t help but wish he had gotten the opportunity to say them to Eames outside of this disaster. He regretted that he ran away from the Forger, from a relationship he could have begun nearly a year ago. Arthur had not spoken those three words to anyone since he had lived with his parents, and although they were only words, they left a bittersweet taste on his lips. How sweet would it have been for him to whisper it in Eames’s ear one night when they were together, rather than across a phone connection, the words paired with affectionate looks and touches rather than tinged with panic and pain.

Nonetheless, Arthur mentally shrugged his regret away, knowing there was nothing else to be done. After all, at least he had gotten the chance to say it before he died, right? If you didn’t say it when you were about to get tortured and brutally murdered, when would you say it?

Louis’s voice drew his attention back to the dream worker. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter either way if he guesses I’m here. He’ll come racing to your side no matter what, and that’s all I need.” He knew Louis was trying to force him to answer his questions using the threat to Eames, but Arthur had to hope that the Forger would steer clear and remain safe. Arthur knew Eames was well versed in withstanding torture, but Arthur honestly wasn’t sure if he would be able to remain silent if he was being forced to watch Eames suffer.

The enemy dream worker, never silent for long, continued. “I’ll admit that I’m surprised by your ability to withstand physical pain,” the man sighed, as if mildly disappointed. Then he turned, stepped closer to Arthur and kicked his left shin – hard. His foot, chained to the floor, could not accommodate the movement and the Point Man cried out before he could stop himself at the sensation of bone splintering. As his ability to stand on his left leg fell away, he felt the cuffs around his wrists dig into his skin painfully. “I’m not sure why you’re being so persistent. All I want is to know about how you managed Inception and the details of who you worked with so that I may...contact and approach them as I see fit,” he smirked. “Is that information really worth all this pain?”

“Absolutely,” Arthur hissed, spitting out more blood as he forced himself back up onto his feet. It was excruciating, forcing his body’s weight on his splintered bone, but he had no other option. Louis had manifested some chains and chained Arthur in place in the middle of the top floor of the building. The two cuffs around his ankles were attached to only a few short links of metal, giving him no leeway to move and shake the pain and cramps from his legs. The Point Man favoured his left leg, holding more weight on his right one as he straightened his body and took some of the pressure off his wrists.

The other two cuffs were linked to the ceiling, giving him a wider freedom of movement. The metal of the cuffs were narrow though, biting into the skin, veins and tendons of his wrists when his weight had fallen forward with no other support to keep himself up. Arthur wiggled his fingers, trying to bring feeling back to his digits as his blood circulation was momentarily cut off. He
swayed on his feet, trying and failing to find some position that didn’t send hot bolts of pain up his leg, through his spine and into the base of his skull. It felt as though the slivers of the bone in his left leg were travelling up his body to embed themselves in his nerve endings, even though he knew that wasn’t the case.

“How noble.” Arthur jerked away when Louis stepped closer and gripped his chin roughly, tilting his face up to meet the dream worker’s gaze. “Suffering to protect the one you love. I think I might just cry,” Louis sneered and allowed Arthur to pull his face away, but remained in the Point Man’s personal space. “However, I think it is about time you realize that Eames will suffer a lot less if you just give me what I want.”

Arthur felt his right leg involuntarily jerk and collapse under him when Louis shoved a short but brutally effective knife into his upper thigh. He groaned loudly at the momentary flash of hot numbness before his leg was searing. Things were made worse when his body automatically shifted his weight to his other leg to save himself some pain, only to collapse again as his shin bone shifted and cut into muscle. His right leg twitched violently as the blade was slowly removed, purposefully dragged along new skin on its retreat. It was not deep enough to do any serious damage right away, only the severed nerves causing him pain, but Arthur knew that if it wasn’t allowed the time to clot, he could eventually bleed out from the wound.

He groaned again as he forced his eyes open, refusing to show any more suffering and weakness than his body showed instinctively as it protected itself. A few rivulets of hot blood skirted down his forearms from where the cuffs had dug in again, though he forced himself to ignore it. He was also forced to ignore the distinct pain of makeshift stitches from his previous bullet wound on his arm tearing. “You’ll have to kill me,” he spat, anger and determination fuelled by his pain. He might be exhausted, starving and dehydrated, his body littered with cuts of varying depth and ferocity, but he was far from finished.

“Believe me when I say that I would take great pleasure in killing you, Arthur,” Louis whispered, wiping his blade clean and slipping it out of sight for later use. Arthur believed him. “I have heard about you for years, in the field,” the man began, almost conversationally except for the dangerously calculative edge to his words. “Impressive legacy you have,” Louis praised, “You have been a challenge in the back of my mind since I met you.”

“I’m flattered,” Arthur deadpanned, sarcastic. He watched the other man with suspicion as Louis began trailing around him until he was standing behind the Point Man, still talking while out of view.

“As you should be,” came the man’s suddenly soft voice, right by his ear. Arthur forced himself to remain still, not wanting to give his enemy any more satisfaction at seeing him fight his bonds uselessly. “I underestimated you. I’ll readily admit that. You far exceeded my expectations down here on your own. I was somewhat disappointed when you brought reinforcements, though. Too
scared to fight your own battles, Arthur? Had to put Eames at risk?"

Louis gave a ‘tsk tsk’ against his ear, hot breath ruffling his hair, and then took a step back. Arthur’s whole body was rigid, both legs on the verge of collapse, entire body aching and stretched, arms and wrists burning. His back was straight when it stiffened as he heard Louis slip his knife back out from its hiding place – the cuts from the man’s previous enjoyment with a whip were far from healed. He hated not being able to see his enemy, to gauge what was coming next in order to brace himself for the oncoming blow.

Arthur didn’t respond to Louis’s bait and the man sighed again, a condescending, eager sigh. “Do you really think that remaining silent will save Eames, Arthur?” He flinched when he felt the cold edge of the blade rest against the back of his neck. He arched away but it did little good, except to jostle everything that already hurt. “If you withstand me, you will eventually be faced with a choice. You will either have to drop your pesky barriers to let your lover return to safety, which means I can escape safely as well. Or you can push me until you die by my hands – and trust me, I won’t let you fade away on your own – and take me and Eames with you.”

The Point Man clenched his eyes closed at that word – lover – and felt his motivation refocus. All he had to do was make sure Louis didn’t get any information out of him. He trusted Eames to be watchful of the barriers in order to determine when he should get himself back to reality. If Arthur failed to get the barriers back up at the last minute to drag Louis down with him after Eames had slipped out, as long as the man didn’t get the information he wanted, they could hunt the man down at their leisure in reality.

“You know, Arthur,” Louis began again, dragging his blade down the centre of Arthur’s back at his spine with agonizing slowness. “Just because you are skilled at withstanding physical pain doesn’t mean you can withstand psychological pain.” The blade tip inched down his back, deep enough to cut and make it sting while not making it fatal; Louis was very skilled at causing pain without death. Arthur thought he might be able to get through it relatively unharmed, busy focusing on the dream worker’s warning of other types of attacks. But then his bit his lip, groaned, and finally screamed when Louis dug the blade in a little deeper and slashed it down the rest of his back. It dipped into each groove of torn flesh streaked across the Point Man’s back from a whip that his enemy had initiated this encounter with.

Arthur was whimpering by the end of it, when Louis had pulled his knife away, only to choose one strip of skin on each side of his initial cut and slide the blade down again. It caught the same gouges. It caught new ones. It dug in, dislodged skin that had barely been hanging on and disturbed the solidifying blood clots. Soon Arthur’s back felt hot and wet as new blood trickled down and stained his pale back, soaking into the waistband of his pants. He wanted to say something defiant, or at least stop the pitiful sounds escaping from his lips as tears streamed down his cheeks. He couldn’t though, using every inch of his will to keep himself from begging.
The sound of the knife being slid back into a sheath came from behind him but the Point Man could not bring himself to be pleased. That just meant that his enemy had grown bored of his failures at getting a rise out of Arthur and was ready to move on to a new tactic. Sure enough, the dream worker’s voice had taken on a new hint of challenge when he spoke again. “Amelina might not have dug out the information I wanted before your previous teammate finished her, but you’d be astounded at the memories she *did* manage to steal and pass onto me.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes in anger at the new challenge despite the fact that his enemy was not in front of him to notice. At the same time, he felt his stomach drop with fear. How much had the Extractor managed to learn about him before Eames had silenced her? Had all of her findings been passed on to Louis? Arthur had spent years suppressing and ignoring all of the memories and guilt of his past; hell, that was what had driven him towards dream work as much as the freedom had. He needed an escape to remain sane.

But now his escape had become his prison, his chains. He was locked away in his own subconscious where no one could help him and Arthur couldn’t run. Even though he was in a dream, he was far too weak now to break the chains that held him in place. The Point Man had been fighting these memories off for years and succeeded. But how would he hold up now that his body had been so severely weakened and abused? Already his eyelids felt a little heavy each time he blinked, pain fogging his mind and blood loss stealing the last drops of his energy.

Louis circled around his side and caught his chin again, this time fighting him when Arthur weakly tried to pull his face away from the grasp of the man in front of him. And, to his horror, it was not Louis standing in front of him. Instead, the hard eyes meeting his own, *judging* him, were Tyson’s. Arthur groaned despite himself at the realization that Louis, the leading enemy dream worker who had snuck into his subconscious to steal everything from him, was another forger. Even worse was the obvious proof that Amelina had managed to steal at least some of Arthur’s childhood memories if Tyson was standing in front of him, tilting his face one way and then another as though he were considering a purchase. The Point Man silently prayed that his enemies had not managed to dig up everything from his past.

“Hello, Arthur,” Tyson whispered delightedly, still looking around the same age he had been that day Arthur had gone down into the dream with him. The same age as the day Arthur had run away, leaving the teenager alone in the hospital to fend for himself in a cruel world that would not understand his problem.


“No, no, you must have me confused with someone else,” Tyson’s eyes widened slightly, a little glazed as they continued looking over Arthur’s face. “It’s me, Tyson. Don’t tell me you forgot about me, Arthur,” the teen pouted, using his free hand that was not gripping the Point Man’s chin to skim his thumb over Arthur’s bottom lip. When he pulled it away, Arthur could see blood on
that pale skin. “That would be incredibly rude of you,” Tyson chided him, retracting his hand and sucking Arthur’s blood off his thumb curiously. Arthur grimaced. “Considering the fact that you were the one to ruin my life.”

“I didn’t ruin his life,” Arthur argued, trying to keep it straight in his mind that this was not actually Tyson standing in front of him, treating him like this. It was difficult though, his brain hazing over as his body slumped in its bindings. Tyson would be older now and would certainly not remember Arthur if their paths ever crossed again, but Arthur wondered silently if the man would ever resort to something like this if he knew Arthur, what the Point Man had done.

“You didn’t ruin my life?” Tyson retorted, digging his fingers into shaggy hair in performed agitation as he let go of Arthur’s face. His jaw ached but Arthur didn’t take the time to give it a second thought – it was the least of his concerns. “Is that what you tell yourself at night when the guilt starts creeping in?”

“He has a good life now,” he refuted, verbalizing every argument he had ever told himself when he thought back to Tyson as he ran away from the hospital.

“Who are you to decide which life is good for me?” Tyson spat, pushing him backwards harshly with two well placed palms on his chest, nails digging into the few cuts across the skin there. Arthur winced as he rocked back on his injured legs and yanked himself back up into a standing position with his abused wrists, breath coming in short bursts through the pain. “You betrayed me! Left me for dead! You think you gave me a better life?” Tyson hummed like a hive of angry bees. “What makes you so sure that my life is everything that the papers proclaimed?”

Arthur didn’t know how Louis was hitting every mark, every one of his fears. Whether his thoughts had been imprinted upon his memories when Amelina had extracted them, or if Louis really was as skilled at reading him as most forgers became, he didn’t know. The Point Man’s head had lolled down between his shoulders as he caught his breath, but now he dragged it up again to meet the teen’s eyes. “Tyson is fine.”

“Oh yes?” Tyson nodded, as if considering Arthur’s argument. “Do you have any idea about how people looked at me when I tried to relearn everything you had stolen from me? No one can look at a teenager without judgement when he barely has the coherency of an infant. I never fit in Arthur, never. And you know what I did, once I had finally caught up? I turned back to drugs and alcohol. It was worse this time though,” Tyson shook his head this time, sad and disappointed. Every inch of Arthur’s body was pulsing, trying to keep itself together in one piece, but he followed the forger desperately with his gaze. “This time I was legal age so it was much easier to get what I wanted.”

“No, he had a good family,” he whispered, grappling to the last argument he had always relied on when his brain had attacked him with these thoughts before. “Support. He wouldn’t need to turn to
substance abuse again."

“You didn’t rewire my genes, Arthur,” Tyson hissed against his ear, stepping close again. “And you’d be amazed how quickly a caring, loving, supportive,” he spat the words, “family will grow tired of being the centre of attention due to their failure, dud of an adopted son. People like success stories though,” the teen shrugged, patting him on the shoulder in a would-be innocent matter. Except for the fact that Louis knew there were cuts located there, still sluggishly bleeding. Arthur wrenched away awkwardly with his minimal amount of moving room, eyes dropping to the floor. He tried to remind himself that this wasn’t real, that Louis did not know Tyson and would not know how the man was doing. He only had Arthur’s buried fears to lead him and his own skills at lying to try to persuade the Point Man. But before he could retaliate, to show Louis that he hadn’t succeeded at beating him with Tyson’s persona, a new voice assaulted his ear. One far more familiar. “Of course, you know all about disappointing people, don’t you, Arthur?”

“Dom,” Arthur choked out desperately before he regained control of his mind and instincts. When he glanced up quickly, the Extractor that he once called teammate, friend, brother, was staring down at him with a look of contempt. The voice and accent were off slightly, but the image of Cobb was completed to perfection in front of him. It took Arthur a few drowsy blinks before he had focused his mind enough to remember that this wasn’t Dom here to help him. But by that point, he had already betrayed himself to his enemy with his reaction.

Cobb’s eyes narrowed in disgust before the Extractor backhanded him across the cheek, snapping his neck painfully to one side. “Don’t look at me like that, like I should be here to help you. You have done nothing to earn my aid.”

“Enough of this, Louis,” Arthur forced a drawl in order to hide the plea behind his words. “You are wasting your energy.” He tongued one of the teeth further back in his mouth quickly, feeling that it was loose but not yet dislodged. The last thing the Point Man needed was to choke on one of his teeth.

“I knew I made the right choice when I stopped dream working with you,” Dom snarled, not responding to Arthur’s retort. “You can’t be trusted to do anything right, can you? Can’t be trusted a moment lest you betray everyone and flee to save your own sorry ass.”

“Me, flee?” he huffed in disbelief, inexplicable anger making him speak before he reminded himself that this was not his teammate. “You are the one who left me alone.”

“I have more important things to deal with than taking care of you, Arthur,” Cobb bit off the name, looking triumphant. Arthur hated that he had allowed himself to slip and make the mistake into believing Louis’s forgery. “I found someone to love me and start a family with, in case you forgot. Someone who you could never compare to, no matter how much you tried. Following me around
like the lost puppy you were; it was pathetic.”

Arthur winced both at the noise when the man in front of him suddenly yelled, and at the words themselves. It had been many years since he had held those feelings for Dom – the first person he allowed himself to trust after running away from his past life – but it still stung to hear such mocking, hateful words slipping from his friend’s lips. Even though... Even though it was Louis and not Dom speaking. The Point Man felt his mind try to sharpen again, to withstand this onslaught and remember that it was just a good forgery, but he was struggling to keep himself standing at this point.

“I have children to take care of, to love,” Louis continued, pacing back and forth in front of him in a very Cobb-esque manner. “I can’t afford to have someone as dangerous and irresponsible as you in my life – in their lives. How could I ever trust you with them? I need to keep them safe somehow and if that involves cutting you out of my life, all the better for me.” Dom paused and stood in front of him again, considering him for a moment. “It’s no wonder Eames ran away from you. Rejecting him was probably the only selfless thing you’ve ever done in your life. At least he realized how terrible it would be to start something with you, how it would drag him down. He got out while he could.”

Arthur was shaking his head desperately, tears catching on his lashes as his heart clenched. “No, he’s down here because he--”

“He what?” Dom whispered in amusement by his ear, causing Arthur to shudder. “Loves you?” The Extractor sneered and walked behind him again, out of Arthur’s view. “How naive. He came because you selfishly dragged him into this, called him back. How terrible are you, to shatter someone’s hopes and then lead them on just so that they’ll help you live? Even if it means sacrificing their own life.”

“I’m not leading him on,” Arthur defended, voice catching in his throat as he tried to breathe normally. He had been unsure of his feelings before this – or was at least too terrified of them to readily admit what they were – but now it was crystal clear in his head. There was nothing Arthur wanted more than Eames’s embrace in that moment, to whisper everything he never said in the Forger’s ear.

“It doesn’t really matter, Arthur,” Dom reminded him harshly. “Once someone gets to know you, they could never love you. Why do you think I never indulged in you after Mallorie, despite your willingness? Why do you think I cut you out of my life the moment I had the chance?” The Point Man’s breath sped up when he heard the knife being drawn again, body tense as it waited for new pain. The cuts that horizontally and vertically littered his back were still burning horribly. “Why do you think Eames never made another attempt to contact you after the job? Because we realized that you were poison, Arthur.” The blade’s tip rested against his right shoulder warningly. “No one could ever love you after what you’ve done.”
Tears fell again, rolling down his bloodstained face slowly, though he could lie to himself and say it was from the pain when Cobb – Louis – used his knife again. Two jagged lines were cut across his back in quick succession, from his right shoulder to left hip, and then from his left shoulder to his right hip. The new X across his back hurt so badly that Arthur’s vision blurred – or maybe that was from the tears – and the Point Man wondered if there was any skin left for Louis to manipulate.

“Enough suffering, Arthur,” came a softer, warmer voice from behind him. Arthur swallowed hard, barely able to contain himself when he felt a smaller, dainty hand brush along the untouched skin of his neck. “Just tell Louis what he wants and all of this can stop. The pain and guilt will finally be gone.”

The Point Man allowed his eyes to drop closed as that comforting voice wrapped around him. He felt a little lightheaded as he swayed on his feet, feeling as though the world was shifting below his feet even when his eyes were closed. “I can’t,” he spoke brokenly, wanting so badly to lean back into the touch and for it to be real.

“Of course you can, sweetie,” the woman encouraged him, petting his hair until he sobbed and tilted his head back, desperate for the touch. He just wanted to go back to a time when everything was simple, before Diane, before he had run away from home. He wanted the woman brushing his hair kindly, calmly, to really be his mother, rather than Louis managing yet another effective forgery. “All you have to do is answer his questions and you will never have to suffer again.”

The words were so tempting; such a simple solution to solve his pain. Every inch of the Point Man’s body was screaming for mercy, aching with a pain he was unfamiliar with. He had been injured and killed many times in his line of work, but that pain never dragged on – it faded away once he was back in reality. But this was all encompassing and inescapable until he reached reality or, more likely, died. Arthur thought he might have managed to remove himself from the physical pain considering how weak and detached his body already was, but the pain in his mind and heart kept him focused and rooted in the moment. It was incredibly hard to remember why he couldn’t just answer the questions and have this end. But he found himself shaking his head anyway even though he couldn’t recall why he was being so stubborn, especially when it meant everything would stop hurting.

The hand that had been petting his hair suddenly snatched up a chunk of hair and yanked backwards violently. Arthur’s head snapped back painfully and he sobbed – just once – when the movement rippled through his body. His scalp felt pinched as hairs were ripped away in small numbers and Arthur was forced to shift his weight on his legs lest he fall. He came face to face with his father’s upside down face as his back bowed so much he worried the bones might just snap. “You always were a disappointment,” the man stated blandly before releasing his hair and shoving him forward.
Arthur stumbled, attempting to catch his balance but getting tripped up by the short leads on his floor chains. His ankles caught and he rocked back on his heels, gripping onto the cuffs around his hands in an attempt to steady himself. This time he was sure he felt the bone in his left leg shift and dig into new nerves and muscle, causing new damage. His left leg hung uselessly while Arthur maintained his standing position on his right leg as he continued to clutch at the metal above him. It wasn’t ideal – he swung slightly with the extra metal links between him and the ceiling, but it was the best he could manage.

By the time he got himself standing again, forcing his roiling stomach into submission before he vomited on the carpet, his father had come to stand in front of him. The man watched him somewhat sadly, though there was also a look of satisfaction – as if he had been waiting for some sort of vengeance. “You are not my father,” Arthur hissed vehemently. “My father would never treat me like this.” And his convictions were true; before Diane he had had a normal, if not perfect childhood. His parents had been strict, certainly, but they would have never hit him.

“No before you ran away,” his father agreed in an accusatory tone. “But after what you did to Diane, after you fled your mistakes and left us to deal with the consequences, things changed.”

“It was a mistake,” Arthur pleaded, memories of that fateful, moonlit night playing behind his eyes in vivid colour. “I didn’t mean for her to die.”

His father raised a sceptical eyebrow, arms crossed tightly across his chest – looking unimpressed to say the least. “Then why did you run away, Arthur?”

“Because you blamed me,” he whispered hoarsely. “Because you hated me. You couldn’t look at me the same after Diane died.”

He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting in response, but what he got shattered his heart. “You’re right.” It was hard to focus now, some of his wounds clotting while others continued to allow his life force to seep away. It was harder to breathe now and his head ached with the lack of oxygen, less blood in his body to deposit oxygen in all the necessary locations. He felt dizzy as he slumped forward, wishing this could all just fade into blackness. “We did blame you for Diane’s death and we hated you for it. We were glad when you ran away and became someone else’s problem. Do you want to know why?”

“No,” Arthur begged. He didn’t want to hear any of this. It was one thing for him to tell himself all of this in those moments where he would crawl into bed but be unable to find sleep. But this was his father’s voice confirming every fear he had ever possessed when he ran away from home – every fear that had kept him from returning home to his parents.
“Because if we had had a choice,” his father began again, ignoring his plea. “We would have wanted you to take her place. She was a much better child than you ever were. She had potential, while you just scurry around trying to live up to what she could have been if she had gotten a chance to live her life. All you can do,” the man in front of him reminded him coldly, “is run away and hide from her shadow.”

“I’m sorry,” Arthur sniffled, unable to wipe his dripping nose on a sleeve with his arms chained up. “I never wanted her to die. I would have traded places with her if I could have. I’m sorry.”

“Saying it over and over isn’t going to fix anything, Arthur. It’s too late; it will never be alright.” Arthur’s father stepped into his personal space and tilted his face up, forcing him to make eye contact. “The only thing you did right was run away so that we wouldn’t have to look at you and pretend to love you anymore. That doesn’t fix things though,” Arthur couldn’t look away from his father’s gaze, eyes nearly identical in shade to his own. “Do you want to know how you can redeem yourself?”

“Yes,” he agreed immediately. He had been living with this fear and guilt for so long, it felt like a weight that had moved from his shoulders into his heart. Something he had grown accustomed to carrying around with him wherever he went, although he had always wished desperately for it to be gone.

“Tell Louis what he wants so that he’ll finally end your miserable life,” his father implored him darkly. “You don’t deserve to live another moment longer, and each second that passes by is an insult to Diane. You took her life and yet cling to your own as though you deserve a choice in the matter.”

“Louis?” the Point Man questioned in a daze, momentarily confused. And then, slowly, the realization returned to him that this wasn’t reality. That Louis was attempting to steal information from him. That understanding was flighty though and he struggled valiantly to keep hold of the thought as it tried to fade away. “I...I can’t,” he grumbled, almost disappointed that he had to disagree. It wasn’t his father standing in front of him – was it? – But he couldn’t argue with the logic either way. He really didn’t deserve to live any longer. Arthur couldn’t give in though; he had to keep his team – keep Eames – safe. He hated himself for what he did to Diane and to his parents, but he would only hate himself more if he proved everyone right and betrayed Eames and his friends.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked up just in time to watch his father step further into his personal space. And then all of the wind was knocked from his lungs as his father, still larger than Arthur’s lithe form, elbowed him brutally in the solar plexus. The Point Man was forced to expel all of his breath with a loud, outward gasp as his father straightened to stand in front
of him again. Arthur was wheezing quickly, struggling to bring enough oxygen back into his lungs even as his stomach and chest cramped up from the abuse. “You are no son of mine,” his father whispered hatefully and then stepped out of Arthur’s view, his eyes watering as they watched the bloodstained carpet below his feet.

Arthur wanted to apologize, to call his father back to him, but he couldn’t find the breath to make a sound. His chest remained constricted as his stomach continued to spasm, leaving him gasping for breath while fighting the dark spots on his vision away. It took him a long time to recover, his whole body running on the last dregs of energy it had stored away. He was not entirely sure what had happened to his father – Louis – since he had not heard the door to the guard room open. But the room was eerily silent and he couldn’t hear anything over his own desperate breathing. There was an energy in the air though, an expectant, anticipatory shock of electricity brushing across his exposed skin.

When the Point Man did finally manage to raise his head enough to look around, neck barely able to manage pulling the heavy weight of his skull up, he groaned. There, standing a few feet away from him and watching him, was Diane. She had her hands clasped behind her back, still in the dress she was wearing the day she had died, and watched him with a curiosity common for a ten year old. “Diane,” he whispered brokenly.

“Hello, Arthur,” she hummed thoughtfully as she skipped closer to him, unmindful of the blood she was stepping on while she moved. Her manner of speaking was more mature than someone her age could manage, but it was only a fleeting thought as Arthur watched her approach. He reached out to touch her, to gather her up in his arms, but his metal cuffs bit into his skin as a sharp reminder. He fell back, unable to get any closer, and clenched his eyes closed when he felt small childish hands touch him softly. “You’re bleeding,” she stated with mild concern when she dragged her hand away and found blood stained onto her palm.

“Don’t worry,” he spoke softly, terrified of scaring her away. “I’m fine.”

She glanced up at him with a suspicious, disbelieving look, and then dropped her hand to his right thigh and dug her nails into the gouge there. Arthur hissed and tried to pull away, but there was nowhere for him to go. “Do you know what it feels like to drown, Arthur?” she asked him, curious again even as her malicious fingers continued to dig into his flesh with no qualms about the blood pooling and slipping over her fingers.

It was terrifying, seeing such violence and hatred from someone so young and innocent. “I’m sorry, Diane,” he apologized, knowing there was no hope in forgiveness anymore. “I never meant for you to die.”

“You have an interesting way of taking care of your twin sister, Arthur,” Diane admonished him,
eyes – identical to Arthur’s in every way – flashing up at him. “Why did you do it?” she questioned him, eyes big and lips curled downward sadly. “Were you jealous of me, Arthur? Did you think mommy and daddy loved me more?”

“I didn’t kill you, Diane,” he argued with horror at the accusation. The mere thought that he, as a ten year old boy, could be the type of person to kill his twin sister – his best friend – out of some petty jealousy. Diane had been gifted and had obviously garnered a lot of attention from their parents. She could have been anything she set her mind to if she had been given the chance to step out of childhood; a doctor, an astronaut, an engineer, a president. It didn’t matter. She would be able to do it. Arthur had even spared a few rare moments when he first joined dream work to consider what it would have been like if Diane had not died and had joined him in the field. She probably would have had the skills to be any specific dream work profession that tickled her fancy; hell, she could probably switch from an extractor to an architect to a forger all in one day if it was necessary.

Arthur had never been jealous though. Never. Diane had the skills and the personality that required extra attention to develop them, while Arthur would develop just as effectively by his own devices. It hadn’t bothered him that Diane was always the first priority, because Arthur was Diane’s first priority. They had not simply been siblings, or twins. They had been best friends, confederates to one another’s secrets, partners in crime and learning. There wasn’t a day that went by after her death where Arthur didn’t wish he had her back by his side so that they could continue to take on the world together. No one would stand in their way – no one would have a hope or prayer for being able to.

“I didn’t kill you, Diane,” he repeated, desperate when he saw that she looked unimpressed.

“You did,” she disagreed, sounding bored as she pulled her nails from his skin and wiped his blood away blandly.

“I didn’t!” he yelled, pain and heartbreak mixing together in an unbearable cocktail. “It wasn’t the first time we had been to the pond. I just thought it would be fun for us to sneak out at night and go for a swim by ourselves. You weren’t supposed to slip...”

The memory flashed in his mind then, the moon high in the sky as he snuck out of bed and shook Diane awake. What Arthur? She had asked him blurrily, swatting his pestering hand away. Sleepy.

Stop being sleepy, he had demanded, poking her in her side again until she sat up in bed angrily. Let’s go out.
Out? She had asked curiously, nervously. *We can’t. It’s night.*

So? Arthur had whispered mischievously. *We’re ten now! Old!* Their birthday had just been a few nights ago. *We can go.*

Where? Diane sat up more in bed, interested now.

*The water,* he suggested. He and Diane had never grown bored of the man-made pond built in the centre of the spacious suburban neighbourhood their parents had chosen for them to grow up in. They would wake up and demand they be taken, spend all day in the water, and then rave when it was time to go home in the evening. They had always proclaimed that someday they would go without their parents.

Diane’s eyes flashed at the thought and she was out of bed in a flash. They both scrambled out of their sleeping clothes and into their bathing suits, placing clothes overtop in case they got caught; Arthur in shorts and a shirt, and Diane in her favourite sundress – a present for her tenth birthday. Then they snuck out of the house while imagining themselves as super secret spies. Once they were outside and the warm summer breeze brushed against their exposed skin, they were dashing the block and a half of open backyards to the edge of the pond. There was a bit of a dip in the landscape surrounding the pond, which usually dragged rainfall into the collection of water.

They had both stopped at the top of the slope of grass, looking at the pond in front of them. Arthur’s heart was flying with nerves and excitement, disbelieving that they were doing this – that they had gotten away with it. The water was still, only a few ripples disturbing the image on the water’s surface with the breeze. It looked as though the water was a mirror of onyx, dark except for the reflection of the moon overhead.

Arthur suddenly got cold feet, and not just from the blades of glass slipping between his bare toes. *We should get the floaties,* he proposed nervously. He was elated that they had snuck out together and come here just like they had promised. But now he was terrified of getting into that water at night where he couldn’t see the bottom, where his parents were not a shout away.

*No way, you baby,* Diane had teased, smacking him on the arm playfully.

She took two hesitant steps towards the pond as Arthur took two determined steps back towards the house. *Wait, Di,* he had pleaded. *I’ll be back.* He had turned and dashed back towards the house, which really wasn’t that far of a distance to go. The neighbourhood was eerily silent as he stopped in his backyard and snatched the floaties his parents always sent them into the water with from the back porch. He rushed back as quickly as his legs could manage, feeling an unexplainable
fear building in him while he was apart from Diane.

He skidded to a stop at the top of the slope leading down into the pond and looked around. Diane was nowhere to be seen. Di? He had called out hesitantly, scared of making too much noise and waking the neighbours up. Diane? He tried again, hearing no response. This isn’t funny, Di! He hissed, feeling his stomach twisting into knots. Where are you? He called.

Arthur had shifted his weight from one foot to the other, fidgeting. But then his foot caught on the blades of grass on the slope, which were slippery from a rainfall he had forgotten about. With a yelp, the floaties fell to the ground and Arthur began tumbling down the hill towards the pond. It was nauseating, how dizzying he was becoming as the earth and sky spun around him, and it was all he could to do grip the grass and dig his nails into the wet earth below. Soil got under his nails as they caught on grass roots and earth, and Arthur slid to a stop.

He was breathing hard, surprised and scared as he dragged himself into a sitting position. His limbs were shaking and the majority of his body was covered in slimy, cool mud. Arthur was breathing quickly as he looked around frantically. Diane! This time he didn’t try to calm or quiet his voice; he needed an adult here now. There was no response. He crawled onto the large rock they normally used for jumping off and leaned over as far as he dared, glancing over the still water frantically.

Arthur felt something wet under his palm and sat back on his legs to view his hand. With the moon bathing him in a silvery light, he could see that his palm had been smeared red with blood. Arthur had gasped and wailed as he recklessly leaned over the rock to dunk his hand underwater, panicked at the sight of blood. But as his fingers dipped below the surface, water cold against his skin in the middle of the night, frigid, stiff fingers brushed against his own. He yanked his hand back in horror and scampered away with a scream, back to the safety of the grass.

He remembered looking around anxiously for an adult to come and fix things, to tell him that everything would be alright. But no one was coming, despite his loud cries. He had quieted himself, built up a false courage, and slipped back to the water’s edge. Arthur peered over the rock’s edge fearfully, took two deep breaths, and then reached his hand down to clasp around a cold hand. He hoisted the weight up, feeling his stomach revolt when a pale wrist with a charm bracelet he knew far too well appeared over the disturbed surface of the water.

The hand dropped back below the water immediately when he let go with another, choked off scream. He was already clamouring off the rock and into the water though, careful not to slip himself as he rushed to haul Diane’s limp body out of the water and onto the shore. He was panting by the time he was done, and seeing his sister cold and limp on the grass finally had his stomach winning over his willpower. Arthur threw up in the reeds along the bank before he hurried to his twin’s side.
Diane! He remembered screaming, so loudly that it echoed throughout the neighbourhood. A neighbour’s dog began barking and howling nearby. *Diane, please! Wake up!* Arthur sobbed as he shook her unresponsive form. *No more sleeping!* In the distance he heard confused voices as the owner of the dog finally responded to the racket. When Arthur’s shaking fingers brushed his sister’s hair out of her face, he sobbed until his stomach hurt when more blood coated his fingers. *I can’t be without you!* He pleaded. He begged. He prayed to everything he had comprehension of for Diane to open her eyes. But she didn’t.

*Hey, get away from her!* An adult’s voice finally sounded over the quiet neighbourhood, the owner chasing his dog down to the scene. The man – the one whose house always smelt odd when he babysat them – was forced to shove Arthur out of the way as he began trying to get Diane to respond. When that didn’t work he pulled out a phone and called someone – Arthur hoped someone who could help.

That left them in the silence alone, him and his neighbour and his already-dead twin sister Diane, to wait for an ambulance. The last thing he remembered, before it had all skewed together into tears and yelling and blame, was his neighbour turning to him with hard eyes. *What did you do?*


Arthur was barely aware of where he was when he finally fell out of his memories. Every tilt of his head had his vision rolling. His body still hurt, but he was almost too tired and too far gone to notice it any longer. Each breath was a challenge – one he was quickly losing the motivation to meet. “I’m sorry,” was all he could think to say; his tongue felt dry and swollen, caught in his throat as his eyes stung with new tears.

“You saying you’re sorry doesn’t solve anything,” Diane reprimanded him. “Saying you’re sorry didn’t keep me from slipping and hitting my head on that rock. It hurt you know, more than this probably does,” his little ten year old twin sister dug her nails into his thigh again, and this time he didn’t fight her. He didn’t have the energy to fight. Arthur also found it difficult to remember a reason why she didn’t have every right to return some pain. “It felt like my skull had shattered, and then I was under the cold water in the dark. It didn’t take me long before I couldn’t hold my breath, especially in my panic. Do you know what it feels like to breathe water into your lungs?”

“No.” Arthur was not positive whether he was answering her question or begging for her to stop.

“Every vein in your body burns and your lungs constrict,” Diane explained as nonchalantly as if she were teaching a class in high school. “Your entire body panics as a pressure builds in your head without oxygen. You tell yourself that the next breath will be air, but it isn’t. You tell yourself that your best friend brother will come to save you and pull you to safety, but he doesn’t. The last thing
I felt, Arthur,” she hummed again, looking sad, “was my disappointment in having a brother like you.”

“I would have saved you if I could, Diane,” he promised with his whole heart. “You were never supposed to die. It was just supposed to be another fun story we could laugh about the next day.”

“Who will believe you, do you think?” She asked him seriously. “Eames? Will your ‘true love’ believe you when you swear that you didn’t mean to murder your twin sister?” Diane sneered, sounding bitter now. “Personally, I doubt it. After all, no one else believed you. Mommy and daddy didn’t believe you.”

“I’m different now,” Arthur hedged, terrified by the thought that Eames would turn on him – blame him – just like everyone else. It had been the reason why the Point Man had never told anyone before. He couldn’t bear the thought of one of the few people he cared about in this world – allowed himself to care about after everything – believing he had killed Diane. The thought of Eames, especially, tore at his heart. The man had been so understanding of everything else about Arthur – every quirk and oddity. But would the Forger ever be ready to hear this story? Would he ever be able to look at Arthur the same way again after he knew?

“Do you think locking away your mischievous side did anything? Becoming organized and responsible and distant and indifferent? You’re no better now than you were then,” she yelled angrily, as if baffled by Arthur’s determination. “Except now you’ve moved onto a new target,” Diane accused. “Dragging Eames, the one you say you love, down here to die, Arthur? Really?”

“I didn’t--”

“Stop lying, Arthur!” Diane huffed. “Realize that the only good you can do for anyone is to hurry up and get the hell out of their lives before you ruin their futures as well.” And then, suddenly, in the blink of an eye, Diane had aged almost twenty years to match his own age. Her dark, nearly black hair was down her back, brushed out but slightly curled at the ends. Her skin was pale but as gorgeous as porcelain, not a blemish on her face or painted red lips. There were a few lines etched into her face, but they were laughter lines rather than stress lines. Her frame was slight and lithe and her clothing was casual but uniquely chosen. Diane’s eyes were still identical to his though as they narrowed, glaring at him and pinning him in place. “This is what I could have been if you hadn’t stolen my future from me.”

“Diane, I--” he didn’t know what to say. He was flabbergasted upon seeing Diane all grown up, just as he knew she would turn out; so similar to him and yet so entirely different. Arthur could also feel his heart give a tiny twist of self-torture before it shattered to pieces. This is what his twin sister could have become if he had been a better brother. All this and more.
“Save it, Arthur,” Diane snapped, spinning on her heel without another glance backwards as she headed for the door. She did look back at him once as she pulled the door open, regarding him hatefully. “You are no brother of mine,” was all she finally said before slipping out of sight to leave him alone with his misery.

“Diane!” He yelled, voice catching in his throat hoarsely. He cleared his throat, forced himself to swallow, and took a deep breath. “Diane!” The Point Man honestly wasn’t sure how long he spent calling out his sister’s name before his voice finally cracked and he fell silent. Seeing Diane again as she was the last time Arthur had seen her alive – never expecting to see her or hear her again – had both warmed and broken his heart. More than ever he wanted things to be different, for his past self to just stay in bed and behave. For Arthur to not leave Diane alone. For him to get back in time to save her. For Arthur to be the one who died instead.

However, seeing Diane grown up, matching Arthur’s age and looking just as she would if she had not died that night, had ruined him. He knew without a doubt that the image and memory of her as an adult – so assured, confident and mature while also keeping a hidden flare of secretive mischievousness – would be burned into the forefront of his thoughts and vision until the day he died. Or, in this case, maybe the hour he died.

That thought brought him back to the realization that he was chained to the floor and ceiling, bones and skin broken, suffering severe blood loss as well as dehydration, starvation and exhaustion. New blood was trickling down his arms now, partially from when he had attempted to pull the metal free to follow Diane, and partially due to the fact that he couldn't keep his weight on his legs anymore. It was unnerving, being in the room alone for the first time in who knew how long. The silence was almost a physical form in the room, oppressively crowding in around him as he was left to his own destructive thoughts.

A part of the Point Man knew that Louis was not finished with him, that the enemy forger would be back for another round to get information out of him. He was also distantly aware of the fact that it had not been Tyson, Cobb, his parents or Diane standing in front of him, saying those terrible things to him. Arthur was so desperate to believe that there could be a Diane out there who was alive – a twin sister who hated him but had gotten a chance to live – that he was willing to let himself slip into denial.

His guilt and memories kept him company as his shoulders and wrists slowly dislocated, as his mind and body slowly faded further and further away from conscious awareness. He had no recollection or understanding of how long he hung there, held up only by the chains at this point, when a noise outside the door caught his attention. At first it was very distant and he thought it might be someone chatting quietly out in the staircase. Then he thought that maybe one of Louis’s projections had dropped a gun by accident and was getting scolded for his mistake.
The sound grew though, the noise first drifting up the stairwell and then spilling into the hallway and guard room towards him. There were weapons clashing, gunshots being fired, sharp orders, muffled screams, bodies hitting the ground hard; it was every sound of a vicious, violent battle. Arthur raised his head slightly to regard the only door attached to the guard room curiously, feeling his stomach twist into knots. He desperately wished that it was not Eames, come here to be killed.

There was more noise, a few wet yells, and then silence. The Point Man craned his neck to one side and focused his hearing as much as he could, trying to determine what had happened. There was no indication of any life on the other side of the door at first, but then he heard hesitant steps head for the door. The doorknob creaked ominously when it was turned and then Arthur let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Eames.”

The Forger was covered in blood, his shirt ruined, but the man did not seem to be terribly injured personally. The man’s soft, vibrant eyes sought him immediately at his voice. Eames’s eyes widened in horror and the next moment he was standing in front of Arthur, cupping his face tenderly as he carefully wiped away blood and tears with the pads of his thumb. “Oh darling, darling,” Eames whispered in a string, tears beading at the corners of his eyes and sliding down his face when pushed away by the man’s long lashes. “What did he--” his voice broke, “What did that bloody bastard do to you?”

Arthur leaned into the touch as much as he could, seeking a comfort he knew only Eames could give him in a moment like this. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” he chanted, nuzzling that large, warm hand. “It doesn’t matter. It’s over now.”

“Shh, darling,” Eames hushed him, brushing fingers into his hair softly. “Calm down; you’re hurting your wrists, love.” It was only at his teammate’s words that Arthur realized he had been straining against his cuffs, pulling the narrow metal against his cut and blistered skin again as he subconsciously reached to embrace Eames. The Point Man fell still, slumped against his bindings as the Forger continued to pet his hair softly. His eyes drifted closed and he sighed, never feeling such a mix of pain and pleasure before in his life. It was the best he could hope for though, after everything they had been through. “What is all this about?” Eames questioned quietly, making sure not to startle him. “What did Louis want?”

“He wanted to know about Inception,” Arthur admitted, attempting to slow his breathing down to a more manageable pace. “He wanted to know about you.”

“You suffered through all of this to keep me safe?” Eames whispered, sounding equally horrified, disapproving, and adoring. A grateful kiss landed on Arthur’s forehead and the Point Man hummed his agreement. “Darling, you’re so stupid.” It sounded like the Forger was on the verge of tears, voice heavy and guilty. “You should have told him everything; nothing was worth this pain.”

“It wasn’t that important,” Arthur disagreed, shaking his head and raising it again with all the energy
he had left. He felt each vertebrae stack in his spine slowly, skin raw and tight from the whippings as he straightened as much as he could. “He wanted me to tell him that--”

Arthur’s voice cut out when he blinked his eyes open to steal another look at Eames. What he saw had all of the remaining blood in his body freeze in his veins and heart. All he managed was a choked off scream before Louis took his last step behind the Forger, brought his knife up, and slit his lover’s throat. He didn’t know how the enemy forger had managed to get into the room and close enough without making noise, but suddenly everything was over in the Point Man’s mind.

Suddenly absolutely nothing in the world mattered.

Arthur was close enough that he saw Eames’s eyes dim after they had widened in shock, pupils blown and irises still focused lovingly on Arthur. He was able to feel Eames’s last, startled gasp of breath fan over his face, comforting and warm. He felt the Forger’s hot blood spill onto his shirt as Eames buckled under himself and crumpled to the ground in a pile at Arthur’s feet. The Point Man’s thoughts and vision narrowed to that one image, of Eames, his love, in a heap on the ground, dead. A startled sob left his lips, and then another, and then he screamed Eames’s name until his throat was raw.
Part XII. Eames

Eames glanced over his shoulder before slipping into an alley on the outskirts of Arthur’s former security perimeter. The fog had been nipping at his heels during his whole race from the northern part of the city towards the downtown core. He had been unable to stop and catch his breath with the fog always a few blocks behind him, even though his motivation to reach Arthur wiped away any desire for rest. He knew he had to hurry though, couldn’t afford to pause and waste even one second, since it appeared Arthur was fading fast and the fog would be swarming around the Forger if he remained stationary too long.

He glanced out of the alley and was surprised to see only two enemy projections patrolling around the entrance doors to the large skyscraper. Eames wondered if there were more projections hidden out of view, ready to catch him in the back as soon as he looked away, but it was impossible to tell from where he was located. Taking a deep breath and feeling brazen and reckless, he focused on forging the appearance and mannerisms of Louis’s projections.

The outfit reeked of military Special Forces, as did the clean shaven look with short cropped hair. Eames checked his weapon quickly, hidden away in the shadows of the alley’s mouth – definitely military. The Forger knew how to forge military. Once he was certain that his persona was done perfectly with no holes or discrepancies, he wrapped his hand loosely around the butt of his gun in the same manner the patrolling projections clutched their own firearms, and stepped out into the open.

For just one breath he hesitated, half expecting the sharp numbing sensation of bullets burying themselves beneath his skin. Nothing happened though, the world remaining relatively still and undisturbed outside of the large downtown building. With no other choice in the matter, Eames adopted a brisk walking pace towards the doors and the patrol, forcing himself not to glance back worriedly at the fog he knew must have encroached upon another city block during the time he had wasted perfecting his forgery.

As much as he wished to dispose of the enemy projections as they glanced over him suspiciously before nodding him towards the door, Eames reigned himself in. Even though he was pretty sure he would be able to dispose of a few projections without alerting Louis to any issues, he was unsure of the amount he could get away with. There would probably be some point during his ascent of the building where he would need to kill a few projections in order to get them out of his way. He needed to remain hidden from Louis’s attention for as long as he could manage it, even though that probably meant more suffering for Arthur, and shooting projections of the enemy’s subconscious wasn’t the best method of achieving this.
He felt a simmering hatred in his muscles as he forced himself to walk by more projections in the now brightly lit lobby, detesting the fact that he couldn’t return some much deserved pain to his and Arthur’s shared enemy. Intermixed with that was a sharp twist of guilt in his gut - only able to dread and imagine what his Point Man was being put through in Louis’s hands - and nervous relief. Each shift of a projection had him on edge and jittery but trying to hide it. He didn't know why this was so easy for him to sneak through without being discovered – Louis should be skilled enough to recognize an imposter. He half expected the projections to turn on him the moment he was too far into the building for any chance of escape, but an attack never came. The realization that Louis must be extremely focused on something to miss him like this only had him moving through the building at a quicker pace.

He hated them more and more as he stepped further into the lobby area of the building. Eames had already know that Arthur’s subconscious had been ravaged by the war – he could see the effects in every cracked inch of pavement, every dead tree, every crumbling building and statue. Even the sky had been blotted out by this point, the fog doing a much more thorough job than the clouds, which had allowed a few stray rays of starlight to slip through and give Eames some hope.

But the building he was stepping into now had always felt like Arthur to him from the moment he had arrived down in the dream. Sleek and elegant but never overdone. Conservative in what was revealed, but a few telling aspects of the architecture and style to shed a little light on the elusive Point Man. Equally gorgeous and deadly, poised and formed to draw attention and distract while Arthur moved in for the kill. Now though...Eames swallowed thickly as he walked through the lobby. Now the building – Arthur – looked decrepit and forgotten, nearly abandoned after the violence it had endured.

The boards and fabric thrown over the windows for some privacy had been torn away, lying in useless heaps below each cracked or shattered window. The formerly smooth floor was now ragged with spider-webbing cracks, as if an earthquake had recently struck. There were similar cracks in the plaster above his head when he glanced up slightly, as well as a few holes where light fixtures had fallen free and come crashing to the floor. Eames stepped over the chain and wiring of a particularly large chandelier near the middle of the lobby as he continued to make his way purposefully for the door leading to the stairwell.

Projections continued to watch him pass with mild curiosity from where they were leaning satisfactorily against the wall or lazing on the balcony – as if the battle had already been won. Eames clenched his teeth until there was a spark of pain that slipped up into his head, spurring on an already developed headache. He hated each and every one of the projections he saw. He hated them all. He wanted them writhing on the ground, sobbing, screaming, begging for mercy when Eames would never give them such a thing. He wanted them to feel the pain they had been associated in dealing out. It killed him to maintain his straight path towards the door; determination fuelled with worry for Arthur had his boiling desire to wreck his havoc on the enemy dream worker himself. The projections would feel the pain as their maker died.

Even though there were a distressing number of projections in the lobby, Eames could not
recognize any that may belong to Arthur. He wasn’t sure whether to be fearful of this realization, knowing it probably meant that the other man was incapable of supporting any more projections of his subconscious, or to be relieved. At least Louis and his projections would have no one else to torture for information. And Eames just had to hope that Arthur’s ability to withstand torture could last just another few minutes, his stamina and resolve already gaining more than respect from the Forger.

All of the light fixtures that were still hanging onto the ceiling, looking like plants grappling in one last desperate attempt to stay attached to their chosen spot, were turned on. A few of them were flickering, but the effect was the same either way. The entire shiny flooring was lit up and reflecting the light back, exposing every nook and cranny of the large expanse of the lobby. It made Eames relieved that he had chosen the stealth option to forge and sneak in, and the determination to keep his role up. If he had decided to seek his violent revenge immediately, killing projections as he went, it was likely that he would have been mowed down with bullets long before Louis was even aware of his presence or intervention. He was only so fast at running and without any dark shadows to slip away into, he would have been dead in seconds.

With his heart racing, Eames finally made it to the other end of the lobby – the trek feeling like an eternity – and slipped through the doors into the large room beyond. The staircase was mercifully still intact, though he could hear the material beneath his feet groan in protest as Eames began making his way up the flights of stairs. He tried to move as quickly as he could without looking suspicious, guessing that he was already growing out of place since no other projections seemed to be very mobile at the moment. Nonetheless, none of the projections he saw lounging as dark specks far above shot down at him as he approached.

He was about halfway up the staircase when there was a distant, sharp scream of pain that echoed down the open room. Eames’s heart went into his throat, making it hard to breathe and swallow as he paused and glanced up nervously. That had been Arthur. He knew it. The Forger picked up his pace as he began sprinting up the stairs, even as he heard the soft, ominous sound of crystal cracking. It almost sounded like an ice cube dropped in warm water, nearly screaming as it snapped and fractured.

He only had about five flights of stairs to go when everything went quiet. The moment seemed to swell around him, as if the whole world was taking a pause to breathe. And then he heard the ceiling plaster above him groan and snap. Eames barely had a chance to dodge back against the wall before the glorious chandelier, metal framework and all, tumbled down the open space in the middle of the circling staircase. It was preceded by a light rain of shattered shards of crystal, a few of which remained littering the stairs while the rest fell over twenty stories down. He winced as everything came clattering to the carpeted floor below, but no projections seemed to react to the noise or destruction, remaining distracted.

Eames glanced over the railing at the remainder of the chandelier sadly, seeing the remnants of the last piece of Arthur’s splendid architecture. The frame was bent and broken out of shape, and most of the carpet was sparkling up at him dully, covered in a layer of ruined crystal. With an angry
huff, Eames began jogging up the last few flights of steps, taking the stairs two at a time. It was very dark in the large room now, the sun-like chandelier extinguished like a weak candle flame. All that lit his path as he came to the top balcony was a few pitiful sparks skirting away from the torn electrical wiring of the chandelier.

By the time he made it to the top floor of the building, Eames was forced to grab onto the railing and take a few deep gulps of air. His feet and ankles were aching, his legs and arms were trembling with fatigue, and his headache was growing blinding as his body struggled to drag in enough oxygen to support himself. A new wave of adrenaline shot through him though at the realization that he had been running all across this ruined city, up and down these bloody flights of stairs, and now Arthur was just a hallway and small room away from him. The realization allowed him to push his exhaustion and fear at what state he might find the Point Man in aside, and with one more steadying breath Eames pushed himself away from the railing.

The entire floor was still filled with its decoy doors, projections guarding them to maintain their role, but Eames did not waste time on those. Arthur’s projection had shown Eames the correct path, and he wasn’t about to waste anymore time. As he approached the door though, he found that there was a projection standing guard that looked far more militarized and alert than the rest of the enemy’s projections he had seen. Eames wondered if this projection was similar to George as he stepped closer and the man turned to regard him critically. “No unauthorized entry beyond this point,” the man barked.

“I have to see Louis,” he explained, maintaining his forgery to the best of his ability. It was difficult – it almost felt as though his facade would fall away as his muscles vibrated with exhaustion and nerves.

“No unauthorized entry beyond this point,” the projection repeated, harsher this time.

Eames felt the distinct prickling as his hair raised on end, feeling the eyes of other curious and suspicious projections land on his back. “I have important information,” he reasoned, praying silently that this would not turn into a gun fight. He was grossly outnumbered, and it would be terribly sad to get this close to Arthur only to fail now.

“What information?” the man asked, looking like a war-weathered general with a buzz cut and the stiff stance of someone accustomed to authority.

The Forger hesitated for just a moment, a million different answers – a million different lies – running through his head. He knew that he had to make the right choice in what he said, or else things were going to get really ugly. A few of the projections had begun fidgeting behind him in anticipation, perhaps standing or taking a few preparatory steps forward. Eames didn’t waste time looking back to check, but he could hear the shuffle of boots on carpet, and the click of weapons
being risen from resting position. He decided that the truth was his best bet and mentally reminded himself where to reach for his guns if this went badly. “I have information from the Extractor Amelina.”

He saw a distinct twitch in the man’s jaw as he clenched his teeth and then relaxed. Eames remained standing at the ready, as any good soldier would do in the presence of their commanding officer, and tried not to show his unease as the man looked at him closer. He was sure that his forgery was perfect; he looked, sounded and acted like every other projection of Louis’s that he had encountered. But this was not a normal projection – this one clearly had some consciousness to him. Would he be able to tell him apart from the mass just by looking? What if there was some mental link between dreamer and projection he would be unable to tap into?

Eames could tell that the man was still suspicious of him, looking him over for a long time. He barely breathed, as though he thought the man might not notice him if he stopped expelling carbon dioxide. The projections behind him had fallen still though, waiting for the final verdict. It felt like time was slowing to a crawl, and then to a stop as the projection-general standing in front of the door finally leaned back and reached for his hip. Eames was just about to reach for his own hip to snatch up his gun when he heard the jingle of keys. He forced himself to remain still, body nearly swaying with suppressed instinct as the man inserted a key into the lock in the door and pushed it open. “He’s occupied. Wait in the guard room.”

The Forger nodded and stepped through the door as if nothing was wrong, as if he had not just slipped so deep into enemy territory that he would never be able to get out alive. He waited until the door slid closed behind him, locking again, before he allowed himself to release a tiny breath of air. He felt dizzy with relief as he took quick steps through the empty hallway, footfalls muffled on the carpet. The thought of the fog flickered through his mind quickly, putting him on edge now that he was in a room that had no windows for him to discern how much time he had left.

The guard room was quiet when he stepped in carefully, ready for a surprise attack that never came. There were seven of Louis’s projections in the room, four on one bench and three on the opposite bench. All of their equipment was either hung up or resting on the ground, unprepared, and the projections stared at each other or the floor somewhat listlessly. Eames could hear sounds in the room beyond, muffled voices, but couldn’t make out any specific details. When he took a second glance at the projections, he realized with a start that it looked as though they were focused on a telly or radio show, listening in on the show happening next door.

Even though he wanted to burst through the last door standing in his way, guns blazing, Eames settled down on the empty section of bench heavily. He pushed his hair out of his eyes, sweaty and matted with blood. He needed an opening. If he rushed towards the door now, there was no doubt in his mind that Louis’s projections were conscious enough to shoot him down in order to protect their dreamer. However, if he shot down the projections here, Eames worried that Louis would be aware of him due to the close proximity. It was likely that the enemy dream worker would kill Arthur before coming to deal with Eames, and by that point it wouldn’t matter what happened. He needed to get Louis away from Arthur.
He was forced to sit with his hands clasped together and pressed between his knees, staring at the ground as he listened to the muffled proceedings in the next room. There was a stinging at the corner of his eyes and deep in his nose with his desire to cry, which had him scrunching up his face, but otherwise he did not acknowledge the sensation. He was the worst person in the world. Maybe Amelina had been right, about one thing at least. *Is this really what you’re offering Arthur?* Her words echoed in his mind. *The obligation to stay with you until it ends up killing him?* Eames did his best to drown out the words, telling himself that it wasn’t true, that he was capable of giving Arthur a proper relationship. He was only sitting out here to keep the Point Man alive, not due to choice or defeat. Either way, no matter what he told himself silently, the guilt didn’t vanish.

The Forger was distracted from his destructive thoughts when he heard Arthur’s voice for the first time in what felt like an eternity. The pain he heard in the man’s tone had him halfway to standing before he caught himself and sat back down angrily. *I would have saved you if I could, Diane,* Arthur yelled desperately, continuing to talk in a mumbled voice which Eames couldn’t discern. He hated himself for the curiosity that bubbled up inside him, that name Amelina had thrown in his face catching his attention. Who was this Diane, and why was Arthur talking to her? Had the Point Man gone delusional between the exhaustion, dehydration, and pain?

But then a female voice spoke up, voice as dangerous and sharp as an edge of broken glass. *Who will believe you, do you think?* She asked, voice low and deadly. *Eames?* The tone was mocking before the girl’s voice dropped lower, out of his hearing range. Eames fidgeted as subtly as he could manage on the bench, spine ramrod straight now. There was another few breathless moments on Eames’s end as he heard more muttering, and then the woman’s voice became somewhat clear again as she grew louder with her accusations. *Dragging Eames, the one you say you love, down here to die, Arthur? Really?*

*I didn’t--!* Arthur’s voice was so desperate, so heartbroken at the accusation.

*Stop lying, Arthur!* The woman snapped. *Realize that the only good you can do for anyone is to hurry up and get the hell out of their lives before you ruin their futures as well.*

Eames’s nails dug into the skin on the palms of his hands with his fury. They dug in until they stung and his vision was white with rage. Who was this woman, this Diane? How dare she say something like that to Arthur? And where the hell was Louis? It was only when things grew quiet in the other room again that he forced himself to think beyond his anger and desire to wrap Arthur up in his arms and never let him go. Diane could be a projection, but it seemed unlikely that Arthur had enough strength to manifest one as conscious as this anymore. And Louis had to be in there as well, which meant that...

*Diane!* Arthur’s voice rang out, desperate and betrayed. It sent shivers up Eames’s spine. *Diane!*
The name continued to repeat in the room beyond the door until the Point Man fell silent. Eames didn’t have time to consider that further as the door slid open and closed again, a young woman probably in her late twenties stepped out into the guard room.

The Forger raked his eyes over the woman critically even as she melted away to reveal Louis’s form. Eames swallowed hard, feeling the uncomfortable pressure of an air bubble sinking down to his stomach with how quickly he had inhaled. Louis was a forger. Eames had begun to wonder when he considered Diane, but he had wished and prayed that he was mistaken. He scrambled to his feet along with the enemy dream worker’s seven projections, standing at attention even though Louis was already halfway towards the hallway. The man looked nauseatingly satisfied with himself as he glanced over them lazily – cocky and already assured of his victory. Eames’s one remaining advantage.

“Stay quiet, all of you,” Louis ordered softly as he stopped in front of the door leading to the hallway, glancing back at them quickly. “And no matter what happens after this moment, don’t leave this room and don’t shoot anyone.”

And with those peculiar orders, Louis had slipped out of sight before Eames had managed to grapple for his gun. He was half tempted to follow the other forger, murder as his intent, but hung back. What was the man planning? If he was out here, clearly planning some new elaborate plan, then it meant that Arthur had still managed to hold out on the information that his enemies had come looking for. Eames was half tempted to just shoot all of the projections in the head and rush in to free Arthur before Louis’s next plan came to fruition. But before he had managed to take two steps, not yet drawing the attention of the other projections since they were shuffling in a bored manner, he heard gunfire and shouting very distantly.

He immediately froze and fell back in line at the sound of a battle beginning, most likely in the lobby and spilling into the stairwell. What was going on? Eames was the only enemy left alive in this dreamscape, besides Arthur who was clearly immobile for whatever reason, so who was fighting? He heard some loud talking at the top of the staircase, drifting into the guard room and no doubt to Arthur’s ears, the fighting not yet loud enough for the Point Man to make out. The yelling seemed to be drawing closer though, voice getting louder and harsher, scolding as the individual seemed to step into the hallway.

Eames braced himself, touching the reassuring metal of his gun for a moment to confirm it was still there. He didn’t know what to expect as the sounds of battle drew closer, racing up the stairs and towards the hallway. It seems ludicrous for Louis to wage a war using his own projections, no doubt forcing them to kill one another off, and Eames could not guess what the man was planning to do with the sounds he knew Arthur could hear at this point. There were gunshots, yelling, screams, and the distinctly heavy thud of a lifeless body hitting the ground.

As the sounds grew nearer, Eames braced himself for what was to come. A moment later the door
burst open into the guard room and the Forger could only blink in disbelief as *Eames* rushed into the room and shot the four projections on the bench opposite him in the head. It happened in quick succession, the four projections only getting out a few betrayed yells before they were dead on the floor. Eames – the *real* Eames – watched himself as the enemy forger spun to consider them coldly before putting a finger to his lips in a quieting gesture. Louis’s previous orders must still be in effect because even though the three other projections shifted nervously, they did not reach for their weapons.

Eames was dumbfounded and unsettled to watch Louis wearing his form. It wasn’t perfect, but it was close enough to make him uncomfortable. He hated how hard and aloof his eyes looked, the frown lines creasing his forehead, and the way the enemy forger stood lazily, completely uncaring of the fact that his shirt was soaked through with blood. Eames felt physically ill at seeing his mirror image look so ruthless and violent, and he prayed that he would personally never look like that...after he killed Louis, of course; that was a special exception.

“Just in case Arthur has any energy left to manifest any final projections, I want you four to guard the door,” Louis informed them so quietly that Eames had to lean closer to hear him. “Stay quiet otherwise.”

Louis-as-Eames stepped hesitantly towards the door then, acting as well as any professional, and pushed the door open carefully. “*Eames*,” Eames heard Arthur’s broken voice whisper when the enemy forger slid into view, and he felt his heart leap in his chest at the sound, at the *love* in that voice.

He wished to rush in behind Louis and end this now, but he had to take advantage of his enemy’s mistake. Eames remembered a saying once that you should never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake, and Eames had been sure to bite his tongue as Louis handed him the perfect opportunity to finally end this. He could barely believe his luck that the enemy dream worker’s plan, mixed with his confidence, had offered such a perfect window for Eames to retaliate. Not only had Louis killed off all of his projections in the building – it was definitely too quiet in the hallway and staircase for projections to not be dead – he had killed off four of the seven projections Eames would have to deal with.

Without moving, Eames focused his attention on his gun, carefully adding a silencer to the end of the barrel. He considered the other three projections out of the corner of his eye as he slid his hand down slowly, taking a sturdy hold of the butt of his gun. It was lucky that he only had three projections to deal with, rather than seven, but this was still going to be difficult. He had to make sure there was no unnecessary noise. Throwing his mind back to when he and Arthur had been sitting across the desk from one another, Eames relishing in the closeness of the Point Man even as he worked, he recalled all of the recorded details of Louis.

He pulled on his forgery as quickly and effortlessly as he could manage, feeling the strain on his
mind and body as he did so. And then, before the projection beside him could even blink, he pulled out his gun and shot the closest man in the temple. Eames caught the projection and lowered him to the floor with one arm even as he levelled the barrel at the next projection. She glanced at him quickly as her companion crumpled to the carpet beside her, but all she managed was to widen her eyes before Eames had snapped back the trigger again and rushed forward to lower her down.

“Louis?” the last projection whispered in confusion as the third bullet was released with a muffled snap with the silencer and Eames caught the final projection.

Eames was breathing hard when he was finished, pulling himself back into a standing position with the aid of the benches. His knees were shaking violently with exhaustion, making it difficult to maintain his balance. The Forger sat on the bench for a moment, sliding his gun back into his holster with trembling hands. It was almost disgusting how desensitized he had become to death and blood, the three projections piled at his feet, but nothing beyond Arthur was even registering anymore. And after he waited a few moments to confirm that Louis hadn’t actually noticed his projections’ deaths despite the proximity, Eames stood up with determination. It was time to save Arthur.

The knife he materialized into his hand was small and light but sharp, blade gleaming beneath the overhead light fixture that hadn’t been ruining in the chaos. As much as using a gun would make things easier by cutting down on the distance he had to travel to end Louis, he knew he couldn’t risk it; he was a good shot, but he was unwilling to take a shot like that, with his hands shaking, with Arthur no doubt standing right beside the enemy forger. So it was the knife he was stuck with as he quietly stepped towards the door and pushed it open slowly.

He was thankful for Arthur’s desire to have everything well maintained, none of the hinges creaking when he pushed the door open slowly. He took a quick glance around the room as he slid the door closed again, holding the knob so that the metal would not slide together when the door fell back into place. Louis had his back turned to Eames and Arthur seemed to have his eyes closed as the enemy forger leaned forward and kissed the Point Man on the forehead. Eames swallowed down a snarl and took fast, measured steps across the room on the balls of his feet. He was grateful again that none of the floorboards creaked under his weight as he carefully stepped behind Louis, knowing he didn’t have long before the dream worker turned or Arthur opened his eyes.

And sure enough, just as Eames came into position behind Louis, Arthur blinked his eyes open. “He wanted me to tell you that—” The Point Man fell silent and Eames realized with a start that Arthur had just been about to divulge the information to ‘him’ that Louis had been searching for.

Although he hated what he was about to do, what it would do to Arthur, Eames had no choice. Louis would see the look of horror falling over Arthur’s face and turn, and the Forger had neither the time nor energy to move back to his own form. So, with a silent apology to Arthur, he positioned the knife and drew it deeply across Louis’s throat. The action had him gagging violently as he felt the resistance of skin and muscle before the blade bit in and dug deep. It was easier to kill someone with a gun – it was impersonal and distant – but committing murder like this was sickening and almost more than he could stomach.
It wasn’t made easier as Arthur sobbed, the sound almost taking the man by surprise, as Louis collapsed to the ground. Eames dropped the knife to the ground and frantically wiped the hot blood from his hands onto his pants, dropping Louis’s form almost as quickly as the enemy dream worker’s forgery fell with his death. He was expecting – hoping – that Arthur would see the change, but the man was screaming Eames’s name again and again with his eyes clenched closed. The sound chilled Eames to the bone, even though it was his own name. He even checked himself over quickly, the lamenting, devastated tone of the Point Man almost making him question whether he truly was alive or dead.

Arthur’s voice gave away quickly though, raw from yelling, talking and dehydration. Eames stepped over the dead body and gripped the Point Man’s shoulders, shaking him as much as he dared with the chains yanking the man’s arms upward at an uncomfortable angle. “Darling, darling look at me!” he begged loudly. “It’s me, Eames. The real Eames!”

“Get away from me!” Arthur yelled as loudly as he could, which was actually heartbreakingly pathetic as the man’s voice cracked and cut out part way through. The hatred was still audible in his every word, every breath, but Arthur simply couldn’t yell the way he wanted to anymore. “Just get away! I don’t care anymore!” The Point Man’s heels dug into the carpet as he leaned away from Eames as far as he could, eyes still clenched closed so tightly it was probably giving the man a headache. Arthur was sobbing so raggedly, barely drawing in enough air, that he coughed and gagged, only to start sobbing harder.

Eames, worried about what Arthur would do to himself if he was allowed to continue, stepped forward again and gripped the man’s too-narrow face between his palms forcefully. He grimaced when he smeared blood across those pale cheeks. “Look at me, Arthur,” he demanded, voice hard and desperate. “Please.” Arthur shook his head between his palms and tried to pull away again, but Eames held on tightly. He could feel the man’s hot tears slide along his fingers as gravity continued to pull them downward. Finally Arthur blinked his eyes open and regarded Eames blankly, probably not allowing himself to hope. “Now look at him,” he tilted Arthur’s face down towards the floor. “That’s Louis. He was forging me but his form dropped when he died. This is me, darling. It’s Eames,” he whispered again.

The Point Man stared at the dead forger on the ground for a long time, falling silent except for a few sad sniffles and exhausted sobs. Then, eventually, Arthur drew his eyes up to regard him cautiously. Eames waited as patiently as he could, watching Arthur’s red and puffy eyes as they blinked owlishly. He could feel the man’s entire body trembling where his palms were pressed against Arthur’s skin, and it was quite clear that his darling was completely and utterly broken.

Arthur swallowed hard, Adam’s apple bobbling painfully, and then those dry lips parted. “Eames...”

“Yes, my love,” he breathed, brushing the pad of his thumbs soothingly across those sharp, elegant cheekbones. “It’s me. This is finally over,” he promised.
“Eames,” Arthur breathed his name like a prayer, warm breath fanning over Eames like a caress. And then, as if some switch had been flicked on, Arthur began yanking at his bonds frantically. He was sobbing hard again, panting between each wet cry, and the dream worker leaned towards Eames this time, clearly trying to touch him. “God, Eames...”

“Shh, darling, stop,” Eames pleaded, trying to catch Arthur’s attention again. It was no good though; Arthur seemed almost deaf to his words as he tried to escape from his bonds and get closer to Eames. “You’re ruining your wrists, Arthur, stop it,” he insisted, watching with despair as the metal cuffs dug deeply and tore through the Point Man’s skin. Blood began trickling down those pale, strained arms, and Eames knew that Arthur was beyond being calmed.

He dropped to his knees, releasing his hold on Arthur and trying to ignore the man’s keen of protest at his disappearance. The chains rattled louder, as did Arthur’s whines of pain and anguish. Eames dug through Louis’s clothing frantically until his fingers clasped the cool, shaped metal of a key. He pulled it out quickly and undid the two cuffs around Arthur’s ankles before standing stiffly again. It was hard to get the key into the lock with how violently Arthur was fighting for release now, but he finally got the man to still just enough by whispering whatever came to mind into his ear.

When the first chain cuff fell away, Arthur wound his arm around Eames’s shoulders, trying to keep his weight somewhat balanced and off his clearly broken left leg. Eames shivered, sickened at the unpleasant feeling of Arthur’s hot blood trickling from the man’s torn up wrist, under Eames’s shirt and down his back. Trying to ignore the sensation he clamoured for the second metal cuff, worried with how many veins and tendons had been severed as the Point Man fought the unyielding metal.

As he got the second cuff undone, the chain jingling slightly as it swung freely, Arthur barely managed to swing his freed arm around Eames’s shoulders before literally collapsing into his arms. The man’s legs had given out beneath his weight, unaccustomed to holding up his own weight by this point and probably unable to do so even if he tried. Eames dropped the key to the ground and wrapped his own arms around Arthur’s trembling form, tears sliding down his cheeks at the relief that he had his love in his arms again. Arthur had begun sobbing again, loud with relief, and Eames did his best to scoop the man up into his arms and transport him the short distance over to the forgotten couch.

This time when they settled on the couch, it was so different from when Eames had first arrived in the dreamscape. He had been so confident then, so sure that he and Arthur could deal with the three enemy dream workers in a flash and get back to reality without any serious issues. He remembered what it had been like to relax back into the cushions with Arthur resting against him contently, as if they really had nothing to worry about beyond a little sleep deprivation and dehydration on Arthur’s part. Now when Eames settled against the cushions he didn’t relax, and Arthur was anything but content as he curled close. The Forger had been so naive, and that had
only been a few days ago.

Arthur was curled up in his lap now, right knee digging into Eames’s hip while his left leg dangled over the edge of the couch at an odd and useless angle. The Point Man’s broken left wrist was also cradled in the man’s lap between them, though his right arm was around Eames’s shoulders as if it was the only thing holding Arthur up from crumpling in on himself. The Forger shivered as he felt the man’s fingers dig into the short hairs at the base of his skull as Arthur sobbed violently enough to shake both of them with the force.

Eames felt completely uneasy and terrified as Arthur tucked his head beneath Eames’s chin, soft hair tickling his neck, and cried until fat, salty tears began soaking through the Forger’s shirt. He had never seen Arthur cry before, whether they had failed at a job, someone he knew died, or he was injured – never. The Point Man was the one who was always calm and stoic, distant from his emotions no matter what the situation was. Eames would turn to him for reassurance, knowing Arthur would easily give him a comforting look without meaning to – it was just part of his disposition and confidence. Everything will be alright, those looks would say, I’m here. Nothing can go wrong.

Now Arthur was trembling in his arms until Eames could barely hold on, body ruined and exhausted and his mind even more so. Arthur was unable to act like everything would be alright to comfort Eames, because in that moment nothing was alright. Eames wanted to comfort the man, to take over the role of reassuring and comforting, but he didn’t know what to say. How could he promise Arthur that everything would be alright once they woke up in reality? There was no knowing how deeply this would affect the Point Man after this encounter.

He had never seen Arthur so small in his life before. The man was nearly his height in reality, and even though the man was lithe, no one would ever mistake Arthur as skinny or small with the way he carried himself. Now though, the normally confident dream worker was as small as he could possibly be – both physically and figuratively. He was curled up into a ball in Eames’s lap, shrinking away from a world that had treated him so cruelly. But it also felt like the man was mentally curling in on himself, locking away everything that hurt and trying to block out the world around him.

Suddenly, as Eames worried over Arthur’s state and wallowed in his own guilt of not being able to help, the room fell deathly silent. It was eerie, Eames still attempting to adjust to the mere thought that Arthur was crying, let alone the heart wrenching sound of it, when the Point Man stopped without any indication as to why. For a split second, the Forger felt his heart seize up at the thought that Arthur had died before the barriers had fallen. But then he managed to start breathing again when he felt the man dragging in shallow breaths against him, still trembling. He had never thought he could hate anything more than the sound of Arthur crying, but this was so much worse.

“Arthur. Love,” he whispered as softly as he could manage, trying not to startle the man hidden
away in his embrace. Arthur began quivering more violently, as if something was building up inside him that couldn’t be contained. The Point Man gave a tiny whine of protest when this uncontrolled movement began jostling his broken bones. “You don’t need to hide anything around me, alright? I want to know you and help you.”

There was another long pause of tense silence and then the other man gripped Eames tighter, curled further in on himself, and began crying anew. Arthur’s breathing was loud and quick as he dragged it in through his mouth, his nose long since plugged up. Warm tears continued to trickle down Eames’s front until those eventually stopped, Arthur’s body too dehydrated to continue producing tears. That did not stop the Point Man from continuing to dry sob though, shoulders shaking as he keened Eames’s name over and over like a mantra, like a lament that nothing would ever be okay again.

Eames attempted to wrap Arthur closer in his embrace but could find no good place to put his arms. He wrapped one around the Point Man’s back but received a desperate hiss when he came into contact with the cuts there. He inspected them fearfully as he saw most of that pale skin torn to shreds, no doubt by some brutal whip, across the man’s back. There were a few cuts on Arthur’s chest as well, though they were more superficial. The deep gouge from a knife on the dream worker’s right leg, which Eames had previously missed, was slowly soaking blood into Eames’s pant leg.

He felt his heart break at the thought that there was no inch of Arthur’s skin that had not been devastated by Louis’s cruelty, except for a small strip of skin across those narrow shoulders. Eames wrapped one arm across that small offering and held the other man as closely as he dared, desperate to help Arthur and make this all go away. It felt wonderful to have Arthur close again – to know that he was still alive and that they would be able to get back to reality – but it was a bittersweet victory.

That thought had him glancing around the room quickly though, assessing the dreamscape around him. The desk he and Arthur had sat at a few days earlier, ready to take on what they had assumed to be a normal job, was barren. He had been worried that Louis might have stolen some information from there while torturing the Point Man, but it had been stripped clean before the enemy forger had gotten anything. The maps, the folders, even the photo of him, Arthur, and the Inception team was missing.

After that he noticed the window, and cursed quietly. In all of the confusion and his determination to get to Arthur, Eames had momentarily forgotten why he had needed to rush – he had just known that he had to get to Arthur as soon as possible before Louis destroyed him. But when he attempted to glance out at the cityscape outside the window, he was met with a white blanket of fog consuming the buildings across the street. He had no doubt in his mind that the fog was probably surrounding the base of the building and working up towards them as they sat there. They were out of time.
“Arthur, sweetheart,” he whispered, catching the man’s attention as Arthur’s crying slowly faded away to a quiet sniffle. “I want to help you through this, and I will do absolutely everything you need me to do. But we need to leave right now; the fog is getting close.”

Arthur didn’t bother looking towards the window, instead keeping his head tucked under Eames’s chin as he hid away from the world he wasn’t yet ready to deal with. “I’ll drop the barriers and send you home,” the Point Man spoke against his chest, voice soft but firm.

There was something in the man’s tone that had Eames on edge, unsure. “Promise me you’ll follow me to reality right after, darling,” he tilted Arthur back slightly so that he could regard the man’s tearstained face. “Promise me that no matter what you saw or was told down here, you’ll come back with me. I want to help you through this, no matter what it entails. I need you by my side, Arthur. Promise me.”

Arthur blinked up at him tiredly for a long moment before nodding, exhausted. “I promise.” The Point Man reached for the gun in its holster on Eames’s hip with unsteady hands, slipping it free slowly. It rested in his lap between them, dark metal gleaming dangerously. Then he closed his eyes, face going lax, and Eames could feel the barriers falling away; it was like an air pressure he had been unaware of suddenly dissipating. He watched Arthur adoringly, hand cupping a cheek carefully again. But as he leaned in for a quick kiss, Arthur mumbled a ‘thank you, Eames’ before the deafening crack of a gunshot overcame Eames’s senses.

The next moment he was blinking his eyes open and standing up from the hospital chair, nearly falling over again since his legs were unaccustomed to holding his weight. He gripped the edge of Arthur’s bed tightly to hold himself up, noting that Nikolas, Amelina, and Louis were all vacant from the room now. He refocused his attention on Arthur’s face, desperately anticipating the moment he would get to see those brown eyes look up at him in reality again. “Oh thank god,” Cobb’s voice suddenly broken his concentration and he glanced over at the Extractor, who had been settled in his chair in the corner of the room.

“They’ve been taken for testing and special care; all three of them have had their memories entirely wiped,” Cobb explained quickly, clearly watching Eames for any indication of what was going on, of how he was doing.

“My memory is fine,” he assured the man. “Arthur dropped the barriers before sending me up. He went through more than anyone in the world should ever be forced to endure,” he warned the Extractor, needing him to be prepared to support and comfort Arthur along with Eames. “But he promised he’d come back up with me. He should be awake any moment now,” he spoke a little
louder, hoping Arthur could hear his impatience.

Cobb nodded his understanding, looking relieved. But before either dream worker could say another word, a sound echoed through the barren hospital room that had Eames’s heart seizing up as if frozen solid. Eames’s gaze whipped back to Arthur, terrified as he gripped the man’s hands tighter. It didn’t draw any response. The machines that Arthur was attached to, had been attached to for days, were giving out an ominous, defeated tone that swarmed Eames’s brain and dulled his thoughts. Arthur’s vitals had flat-lined.
Part XIII. Arthur

Arthur tilted the gun slightly to look it over as Eames’s dead form crumpled and fell off the couch. It felt as though he had knocked the air out of his own lungs, knowing he was to blame for the Forger’s dead form on the carpet. After he had watched Eames’s throat get slit, the man’s beautiful eyes fade and body give out from beneath his weight, Arthur had felt as though there was nothing else in the world he could survive. It felt like his heart had decided to protest his continued existence, constricting painfully with what felt like needles stabbing him. It hadn’t mattered that it had actually been Louis forged into the persona of the man he loved, it had hurt all the same.

And now he had just killed Eames again. If he had ignored Louis’s statements before, telling him that he could bring nothing but death to those he cared about, it was impossible to deny now. After all, Arthur had drawn Eames down into this dangerous dreamscape to save him from his own stupidity and mistakes. The Point Man was not even fully aware of what the other man had gone through in order to save Arthur and get him to this point where he could get back to safety; they hadn’t had the time to discuss it as the fog swarmed nearer. But Arthur had no doubt in his mind that Eames had suffered terribly while down here, physically, mentally and emotionally.

How had Arthur repaid the man who had come down here to risk his life just to save him? By shooting him in the head. True, he had managed to drop the barriers before Eames died, ensuring that the man would get back to reality safely and with all of his memories perfectly intact. Arthur owed him that much at least. But after days of forging in dangerous territory, dehydration and sleep deprivation, on top of everything else the three enemy dream workers had done to him while Eames was in their area of the dream, Arthur had rewarded his saviour with a precise bullet between the eyes.

He twisted the gun again, running the pad of his thumb weakly over the edge of the silencer barrel, metal cold against his feverish skin. Arthur didn’t pull the trigger though, to return back to reality with Eames like he had promised. In fact, Arthur allowed his shaking hand to slide away, back into his lap and away from the gun. He knew he had promised Eames and hated to betray the man, but maybe this was what he had to do to truly help Eames. The man wouldn’t see this as a favour at first – would probably curse Arthur’s name to the sky when he didn’t uphold his promise – but it would be the right thing to do in the end.

Eames cared about Arthur more than he had ever expected was possible; that much was obvious. Between the man’s words, behaviour, actions, and selfless determination to do whatever it took in order to get Arthur back to safety, there was no way the man was lying about his feelings. But Arthur couldn’t indulge in that, in all of the fantasies that accompanied his fluttering heart at the thought that someone actually cared about him. Louis was right, beyond simply telling Arthur whatever it was he thought would get the Point Man to break. Every person Arthur had ever cared
about and grown close to had experienced more suffering than anyone deserved.

Tyson had adopted him as a friend when no one else had dared to. Arthur’s gift in return was to wipe the teen’s memories and force him to begin life anew with everyone’s heavy gazes watching his progress.

Arthur’s parents had raised and supported him, loving him as every parent should love their child. Arthur showed his gratitude by getting their daughter killed and then running away from home, leaving them with nothing but shattered hopes and memories, and a broken home.

Diane had been his other half, the person he could always rely on and trust while everyone else shunned him as being ‘odd’ and ‘distant’. Because of him, Diane had never gotten the chance to experience her life past her tenth birthday. She never got the opportunity to become everything she was capable of being, of being the amazing individual Arthur knew she would have become.

Cobb had adopted him as a friend and brother after everything in Arthur’s past, uncaring if he was quiet and aloof. Arthur had not been responsible directly for Dom’s hardships; Mallorie had done enough damage on her own. But he had failed to pick up the pieces no matter how desperately he scrambled, how avidly he ignored the pain when those pieces cut him deeply at Dom’s lack of response or improvement and eventual rejection. It had been like trying to collect jagged pieces of a mirror that could no long reflect the life he had grown accustomed to.

It had taken Dom to push Arthur away in order to save himself and return to his children and some semblance of happiness. Arthur knew that Eames was far too stubborn and set in his choices to push him away, no matter how aware he was that it would be better for the Forger to do so. Arthur had also taken Dom’s experience to know that this was probably the best way to break things off with Eames before they began. He knew it was cowardly; he would never dare attempt to argue otherwise. But Arthur knew what he had to do.

If he died down here in the dream, allowed the fog to consume him before he ever reached reality, he hoped that Eames would be able to eventually move on and start a new – better – life without the poisonous weight of Arthur on his shoulders and heart. He knew that the man would fight him if Arthur went back to reality and told him that they couldn’t continue. Eames was a fighter – which Arthur admired him for – and would never stop pursuing him. But if Arthur slipped away now, never blinking his eyes open again, it could be considered an unfortunate accident. Eames had seen the terrible shape Arthur was in before being sent back to reality – when Arthur paused a moment to think about it, he was actually sure that another few minutes and he would be dead anyway, no lying required – so hopefully he would surmise that Arthur had simply not gotten out in time, or had been too weak to do so.

Eames would feel guilty – Arthur knew he would. But it would not be the same all-consuming guilt
that Dom had felt about Mal, because there truly was nothing else Eames could have done. It could not have been Arthur who would die first, lest it trapped Eames in his subconscious when he woke up. As long as Eames could not fully blame himself for Arthur’s death – no matter how fervently he would try – the man would eventually be able to let the thoughts and memories of Arthur fade away and continue on with his life.

He knew Eames would never be able to make the decision for himself, so Arthur had to do the right thing and make the right decision for the one he loved. He had to ensure that Eames got away from him and did not become anymore deeply entwined with him before it killed him. And it seemed inevitable, when looking at Arthur’s past, that Eames would eventually experience suffering if he stayed with him. Arthur had ruined enough lives – this had to end now.

With his mind made up, Arthur rolled himself off the couch and limped his way over to the balcony for a few final breaths of fresh air. It seemed terribly disappointing to die in a blood soaked office building. The gun he had slipped from Eames’s holster hung loosely in his left hand as he took slow, agonizing steps towards the nearby balcony. His left leg protested angrily every time he attempted to shift his weight onto that foot, threatening to buckle each time Arthur ignored it and took another step forward. He could feel the bones shifting and causing new internal bleeding as he continued to move but deemed it unimportant – he would be dead soon anyway; the utility of his leg was trivial.

His right leg was managing slightly better, but not by much. Arthur’s body was exhausted and weak after it had lost so much blood, and his leg trembled with the exertion to the point where he was worried he might fall over and not be able to get standing again. He knew that this was the only way for him to get to the balcony though; he was almost positive his shoulders were dislocated from being yanked upwards with his weight below them for so long. And if his wrists weren’t broken, they were a mere twist away.

When Arthur neared the balcony sliding door, he was distracted by the sound of glass crunching below his feet. He glanced down with dazed curiosity only to see a smashed picture frame below his right foot, glass broken and wooden frame snapped to splinters. Swaying on his feet, Arthur considered it for a few long moments before focusing on his centre of balance and leaning over. He had to grab onto the balcony door handle in order to pull himself upright again once he had gotten a few unbroken fingers around both the gun and the edge of the frame. His abused back screamed its agony when he stretched the torn skin there.

Once his detour was complete, Arthur used all of his weight to slide the glass door open just enough for him to slip through. He pushed it closed again and shivered as a cold wind hit him at this high altitude and swept his hair around. Though he attempted to sit down carefully, Arthur eventually just collapsed to the concrete ground, hissing in pain when his back slammed against the metal rods of the railing. He was able to relax shortly after that though, knowing he had nowhere else to move to until the world eventually faded away in a dark finality.
After he had settled into his final resting place and the pain throughout his body faded to a dull throbbing, Arthur set the gun on the concrete beside him and refocused his attention on the picture frame. The cardboard flap used to keep the frame up had been bent and broken, either when he had stepped on it or sometime before. Arthur had never noticed the picture frame so he was unsure of when it had appeared. As he flipped it over, spilling splinters of glass into his lap, Arthur was quite grateful that Louis had never found it during the time he was torturing him. The picture, untouched despite everything that had happened down in the dreamscape, showed his entire Inception team – exactly what Nikolas, Amelina and Louis had come down here to learn.

Arthur looked over each familiar face for a long moment, sad to note that he would never see them again in real life. His gaze hovered on Eames the longest though, realizing that his subconscious had created the photograph with Eames wrapping one arm securely around Arthur’s shoulder. It was a heartbreaking window into what Arthur had naively hoped for when this whole battle began, praying that they might get out of this alive together and begin a life like what was depicted in the photo. He and Eames were close, intimately so, and Arthur in the photo had a smile on his face that seemed nearly foreign to him as he studied it.

He felt his resolve slipping away beneath his feet like wet sand on the beach. Arthur drew one finger over Eames’s face in the photo, accidentally smearing some drying blood across the mini Forger. And then, before he could fall any further into his selfish desires, Arthur chucked the picture frame over the railing of the balcony. He glanced over the edge to watch the photo of his idealized future fall away, but it never struck the ground below. Instead it got swallowed up in the rising fog, which was hugging the building just a few floors below him by this point.

With an angry huff, Arthur leaned back against the railing hard and swiped away the few stray tears that had slipped from his eyes. Why was it that he had finally found someone in his life who was willing to look beyond his past and mistakes, to love him just the way he was despite all his faults, only to have him fall away? It seemed incredibly unfair that Arthur could either return to reality and Eames to experience everything he had always wished for, just to know he was being selfish and ruining his love’s life, or to sacrifice himself just before he got that blissful taste of love.

It didn’t seem like such a terrible sacrifice though, he thought dimly as the fog licked the floor below him. Arthur was completely and irreversibly broken. His body had been ruined in every way possible. He knew that if he returned to reality, he would hold these wounds with him and that they would weigh him down. There was no way they couldn’t. If someone were to take him into a hospital now, it was likely that the doctors would shake their heads and whisper sad apologies. Arthur also knew that however bad his physical wounds were, his mental ones were far more scarring. Even if a doctor were able to set his leg, fix his arms and patch up his back, there would be no hope of healing his mind.

The state of his mind had been shoddy before all of this began and now every mistake of his past was at the forefront of his memories, tearing him to pieces slowly and painfully. Arthur doubted his capability of moving past everything he had done, everything he had been running away from for years. Even if a small portion of his brain whispered hopefully that he would be able to pull
through with Eames by his side, he worried that if he returned to reality now, he would be nothing but a shade of his former self – a disappointment to Eames who had fallen in love with a different Arthur. So, in order to avoid such inevitable heartbreak, it seemed right to end it now, while his body was pulling him towards the darkness.

It was at this thought that he noticed the fog slipping over the last few inches of the building beside him, floating lazily around him and leaving only the balcony for him to sit on. Arthur silently contemplated what would happen to him if he did not kill himself with the gun, which was still settled temptingly by his hand. If the world became entirely fog, as it was already headed towards, what would happen? Would he float there forever, conscious and stuck in a rather dull version of limbo, or would he fall silently and forever like the picture frame he had previously discarded?

He hoped, wearily, that he would just die permanently. He couldn’t survive an eternity as he was, unable to move, let alone think properly. His fingers curled around the handle of the gun again before he truly thought about it, tucking the unyielding metal carefully against his cut stomach. If he didn’t immediately die when the fog stole away the last of his balcony – a quarter of the concrete faded already – Arthur needed some other method of ending it all.

There was a darkness looming in the distance beyond the fog, reminding him of all those late nights he would leave the warehouse when working on Inception with the team. He would flick the light switches down one by one and the shadowy darkness would slowly consume the entire building, inching toward him until he flicked off the last light and slipped out into the night. Only now there was no door to close against the darkness, nowhere for him to escape to as the darkness edged closer.

Arthur was scared. He was willing to admit that, if only to himself as half of the balcony disappeared. The Point Man yanked his legs back towards him as a few curious tendrils of fog twined around his feet, cringing as a new pain flared up through his body. He wanted this all to be over, but he didn’t want it to end this way. He had been running for years, away from his past but towards Eames. He wanted Eames’s arms around him again as they had been on the couch. He wanted the brilliant, adoring Forger to tell him how much he cared and that everything would be alright.

His breath was picking up as his heart raced, holding the metal of the gun a little tighter now. Arthur clenched his eyes closed as he fought his own instincts and desires, trying to remind himself why he was doing this. He heard thunder in the distance and blinked his eyes open to see lightning just as he felt a sharp tug upwards. But Arthur gripped the metal of the railing beside him with everything that he had, ignoring the way his wrist burned sharply. The sensation of the doctors back in reality trying to pull him back was tempting and so difficult to fight off, but he closed his eyes again and focused on staying on the fading balcony. He couldn’t give in, couldn’t return to reality, to a world full of people he had disappointed and betrayed.
You promised! A voice echoed across the endless expanse of fogged dreamscape. Arthur looked around so frantically for the speaker of that voice that he felt part of his neck go numb when he pulled a nerve. It was Eames. He knew it was. I want to help you through this! The man’s voice sounded so desperate, so heartbroken as he implored Arthur to make a different type of sacrifice and return to reality – to sacrifice the easy way out and struggle through his issues to achieve the happy ending he had always wished for...with Eames. I love you.

Arthur blinked his eyes open and looked at the sky, biting his lip as he slowly flicked the safety off his gun. The only part of the balcony that was remaining was the concrete and railing that Arthur was touching, and the majority of the fog had turned midnight black around him. He didn’t know what would happen if he got back to reality, how he would deal with his destroyed body and move past this encounter. But he knew that Eames would be there by his side, and he loved Arthur. Maybe...maybe if he worked really hard and finally faced his past, rather than running away, they might be able to have everything they ever wanted together.

The cold metal of the gun’s barrel and the damp chill of the fog around his ankles were the last things he felt in the dreamscape before he was blinking his eyes open to see a white room and a swarm of people around him. He blinked frantically, confused and bewildered by the number of people in white surrounding him, speaking over one another loudly and working or checking machines around him. Arthur looked around, panicked when he couldn’t see Eames – had he imagined the voice?

He tried to shout the Forger’s name but gagged on the tube that was down his throat. One of the nurses on the left of his bed quickly worked on calming him down enough to extract the plastic tube and allow him to breathe on his own accord. The moment that the tube was gone, Arthur took a deep gasp of air, “Eames?” he yelled, desperate for a familiar face. It was disorienting, looking up at a sea of strangers as machines beeped around him.

“Darling,” Eames breathed loudly as the Forger shoved through the circle of nurses to Arthur’s bedside. Eames gripped him carefully, one warm and comforting palm on each of his cheeks before the man leaned down and sealed his lips carefully over his own. Arthur blinked for a moment and didn’t respond, not due to lack of interest but out of sheer astonishment that he was back in reality, that he was okay, that Eames was okay and kissing him! The other man detached their lips for a moment and began peppering kisses along Arthur’s face, mumbling the same three words again and again as he kissed every inch of skin he could reach. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Arthur laughed for a moment, nearly hysterical with his giddy relief and surprise. Then he brought a hand up to cup Eames’s cheek, brushing the pads of his fingers along shaggy stubble. He slipped his hand around to the back of the man’s neck then, stilling him just long enough to whisper back his own “I love you” before sealing their lips together once again.
The kiss did not last long, but it was perfection. They were both desperate to demonstrate their feelings for the other, lips sliding together at a quick pace. But it was soft and loving and tender, both of them exploring one another’s mouths greedily while also taking cautious care. Arthur only pulled away when he felt liquid on his face and blinked up to see Eames crying above him, a few of the man’s tears pattering to Arthur’s pale skin before rolling away. It was only then that he realized how pink and puffy the man’s eyes were, joined by the dark bruises smudged beneath crystal eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, love,” Eames buried his face in the crook of Arthur’s neck and gave a tired sort of sob before falling silent, nuzzling his skin with the tip of his nose.

“Thank you for not giving up on me,” Arthur whispered gratefully against Eames’s hair.

The sound of a throat being cleared awkwardly finally caught their attention a moment later, and Eames pulled away very reluctantly. The Forger still remained by Arthur’s side though, his left hand entwined with Arthur’s right one. It was then that he came to realize that all of the nurses had disappeared, leaving only an unfamiliar doctor standing at the foot of his bed. Arthur also spotted Dom by the window, sitting in a chair and looking generally anxious, but he couldn’t think of anything to say in that moment and instead focused on the doctor as the man began to speak. “Hello, my name is Dr. Maxwell.”

“Hello,” Arthur nodded, wincing at how rough his voice was due to disuse. He wasn’t sure what to say to this doctor, knowing he was safe with Dom and Eames there but still feeling befuddled at his sudden return to a reality where his life was not at risk.

“I know you must be exhausted,” the man began, setting down Arthur’s chart and giving him his full attention. “I’ll let you get back to sleep but first I need to ask you a few questions to assess your memory.” Arthur nodded his understanding while watching the doctor slip out a folder of information from beneath the clipboard and his charts at the foot of his hospital bed. He swallowed apprehensively, realizing that Dr. Maxwell probably had the information Arthur had set into the system that would get emailed out if he was ever admitted for a serious condition into the hospital. “We will also have to give you a physical and discuss what happened down in your subconscious, but I feel that you need rest more than anything else right now.”

“Alright,” Arthur nodded again, trying to hide how his stomach twisted nervously at the man’s words. If the three enemy dream workers had woken up without any of their memory, what had happened to them? Would Arthur get blamed for their condition? Would he have to run again? Arthur’s thoughts were cut off abruptly when Eames squeezed his hand comfortingly, his presence a stable base for Arthur to regain his bearings.

“Can you tell me what your name is?” Dr. Maxwell asked innocently.
Arthur was aware of Dom stiffening across the room. He was even more conscious of Eames gripping his hand a little tighter, the man’s body stiff beside the bed but trying to hide it. “Arthur Tilmont,” Arthur stated. His voice wavered only slightly as his mouth formed the last name he had not spoken in years. The doctor nodded and checked something off before continuing down a list – birth date, parents, hometown, attended high school – but none of his answers hung in the air the way his name had.

He could tell that the other two dream workers were trying to act oblivious and not make a big deal out of it, but they were practically vibrating with curiosity around him. Whether they thought this was simply another alias, or realized that he had just divulged his true name didn’t really matter. Arthur felt off balance either way. When working in an illegal profession, your true identity was the most important thing to hide away. Arthur may have felt comfortable telling Eames his real name someday, but certainly not in a hospital with Dom there to hear as well.

Nonetheless, the questions continued until Dr. Maxwell finally nodded, seemingly satisfied with all of his answers. “Well Arthur, it seems you are very lucky and that your memory is intact. I’ll let you get some rest and will be back in the morning for some further tests.”

Again, all Arthur felt he could do was nod as the man bid farewell to the room’s occupants and headed for the door. The Point Man was grateful when Dr. Maxwell left the room with the folder full of facts about Arthur’s true identity tucked neatly under one arm. Once the doctor was gone, he waited for the inevitable questions. None came. Instead, he received two distraught dream workers at his bedside, fussing until Arthur didn’t know what to do with himself beyond sending them both annoyed glares for their over-protectiveness.

“I’m so glad you’re alright, Arthur,” Dom spoke seriously, blue eyes blinking down at him. The Extractor looked exhausted and high strung. You can’t be trusted to do anything right, can you? Can’t be trusted a moment lest you betray everyone and flee to save your own sorry ass. Cobb’s – no, Louis’s – voice echoed in his mind and Arthur flinched away as the man reached to touch him on the shoulder. Cobb pulled his hand back as if burned, looking confused and hurt. “Arthur?”

“I—I’m sorry, Dom,” Arthur apologized honestly, not just for pulling away but for everything he had done to ruin the man’s life up to this moment. He couldn’t meet the man’s eyes though, looking away towards Eames, who had dragged a chair up on the other side of his bed. The Forger met his eyes, gazing back at him with understanding but sadness.

“No, Arthur,” Cobb whispered, leaning back slightly to give him some space even though the bed itself was relatively large. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I have used you and taken advantage of you for so long without appreciating what a wonderful friend you have been. And then I just deserted you without a word. This is all my fault.”
Arthur glanced back in surprise when he heard the man’s voice break, just in time to see a few tears brim up in those normally bright eyes and overflow down the man’s cheeks. “It’s not your fault,” he muttered, trying to sound strong but realizing that his voice was growing weaker. He could physically feel his body shutting down as exhaustion began curling around his mind.

“We’ll talk more later, Arthur,” Dom promised, wiping away a few stray tears distractedly. “You need to get some sleep.” Arthur rolled his eyes but nodded, eyelids growing heavy. His body really was exhausted, which was somewhat surprising. He had expected since he had been asleep for so long that he would not need to sleep for days. But it seemed that since his mind had been so active and his subconscious had experienced so much pain while it worked to keep him alive, he still required some recuperation time.

On top of that, Arthur was not entirely disappointed to have the conversation with Dom postponed. He had been unsure of his feelings towards the man before all of this, abandoned and rejected, and then Louis had added on the guilt making him realize – believe? – that he had already ruined the Extractor’s life long before this. Arthur didn’t know how to act around the man anymore, whether he should call him friend or brother anymore, and was relieved to have some time alone with his own thoughts before having to answer those silent questions.

“Do you want me to call the team and let them know what happened?” Cobb asked him hesitantly, fidgeting with his phone as he spoke. “Or would you rather this be left between the three of us?”

Arthur glanced over at Dom before looking back at Eames. “We aren’t exactly a team anymore...” he muttered somewhat bitterly. He didn’t speak his question, though he assumed it was relatively obvious. Why would they care?

“The whole team cares about you, you moron,” Eames murmured teasingly as he brushed a few strands of hair off Arthur’s face. “I’m sure they would like to know what happened and to know that you are safe,” he added, though his tone was neutral, rather than persuasive.

The Point Man weathered his lip for a moment, simply enjoying the feeling of Eames’s fingers carding through his hair and across his exposed patches of skin. “Alright, but just tell them the basics,” he eventually agreed. Dom nodded and wished him well before excusing himself from the room to make his phone calls and get some food.

Arthur watched the blond haired man disappear before refocusing on Eames, who now seemed to be a permanent fixture by his side. Arthur wasn’t complaining. “How are you feeling, darling?” Eames asked him softly, ceaseless in his caresses.
He would have laughed at the question if he hadn’t been aware of Eames’s underlying questions. How much pain was he in, despite being in reality, after the physical torture? How mentally exhausted was he after maintaining a ruined dreamscape and the barriers for so long? How stable were his thoughts after the emotional manipulation? Why had Arthur not immediately returned to reality? Did Eames still have to worry about Arthur changing his mind about working for their future together? Since Arthur was not regretting his choice, was not considering taking the easy way out anymore, he answered honestly.

“Everything hurts, Eames,” he admitted, something of a whine in the back of his throat. Even though he was back in reality and all of his wounds had been down in the dreamscape, pain was in the mind and his body was still feeling the residue of his torture. Every muscle and joint was stiff and aching with more than mere disuse. His back still stung as if the cuts that had been whipped into his skin were only half healed, scabs likely to be torn again. There was a twinge in his shoulders and shoulder blades as if a few nerves had been caught when they had dislocated. His wrists still throbbed and were weak. It felt like the bones in his left leg had healed without being set, out of order, unable to support him, and ready to dig in more damage.

“I’m so tired. More tired than if I just hadn’t slept in a few days.” It felt like his very subconscious had been worn to the verge of exhaustion. Arthur doubted he would be able to support even one projection or the simplest of dreamscapes if he went under in that moment. “It’s tiring just to think.” His thoughts were running rampant, as they had been doing since he had first fallen down into the dream and realized he had three enemy dream workers trying to steal precious information from him. But now his thoughts would occasionally get derailed or forgotten, only to have a new one replace it when his exhaustion flared up. “And everything Louis said to me down there, forged...I can’t get it out of my head.”

Arthur shook his head and forced himself not to cry, tired of crying and looking weak. That didn’t stop his eyes from stinging with a few rebel unshed tears. It felt like someone had shoved a handful of glass down his throat as he tried to swallow. He told Eames all of this, every ache of his body and every thought and emotion flitting through his head. He had to or else he would go insane. He didn’t want to burden Eames further, but the man seemed more than willing to listen and share the suffering; Arthur needed that because he felt that the burden was too heavy for one person to bear.

“You should get some sleep, pet,” Eames suggested, one of his hands clasping Arthur’s while the other had moved down to massage his back calmingly. “The pain will eventually pass, and we’ll work on those thoughts and feelings when you have the energy, alright?” The Forger promised with a reassuring smile. “I’m not going anywhere and I meant it when I said I wanted to help you through this no matter what that entailed. I don’t care how long it takes, or what you need. I’m just...” Eames, the master of emotions and words for his job, choked up. “I’m just so glad you’re here with me and giving me that disdainful look for being so emotional.”

Arthur’s lips quirked up at the man’s attempt to lighten the moment, but it did little good. Both of
them were exhausted, traumatized and scarred; they hadn’t even had the time to discuss or deal with what Eames had experienced down in the dreamscape. He watched the other man swallow hard, Adam’s apple bobbing tellingly, and pulled him closer. Their lips met again, chaste this time as they were overwhelmed with emotion. “I don’t regret my decision to come back to reality and you, Eames,” he stated strongly, relishing in the sensation of the man’s breath brushing over his face. “And we’re going to deal with what happened down there to both of us.”

Eames nodded and brushed another grateful kiss along Arthur’s lips before settling back in his chair. “Now get some sleep, love; you can barely keep your eyes open. I’ll be here when you wake up,” he promised, hands back to hold Arthur’s own and rubbing his back soothingly.

It didn’t take long for Arthur to relax enough to drift away to sleep. Eames was beside him and would be there when he woke up. Arthur was back in reality and his enemies didn’t even know who they were anymore, let alone who he was. There was nothing else for the Point Man to worry over. He allowed his eyes to slide closed, his last sight of Eames watching him with a fond smile, Arthur on his side facing the man. He wasn’t sure he had ever appreciated falling asleep this much before, savouring the way everything around him dimmed and his thoughts quietened.

However, it felt like only seconds later when images began flashing in front of his eyes. Nikolas, Amelina, Louis. Tyson at school, in the hospital, in the news and then down in the office building, blaming him for all of his hardships. Cobb narrowing his eyes in disgust. The look on his parents’ faces when they had first seen Diane dead, the way they had looked at him every moment after that. His mother’s reassuring voice before Arthur’s head was yanked back by his hair. His father’s look of sad satisfaction over causing him pain and finally gaining revenge for his murdered daughter. Diane’s disappointed look as those big brown eyes, identical to his own, blinked up at him. The image of Diane as she could have been if Arthur hadn’t failed her...

“Arthur, wake up!” Eames’s voice permeated the darkness surrounding him as the images looped around him. He felt a sharp tug as the Forger shook his shoulder and Arthur bolted awake, sweating, trembling, and hyperventilating. “Shh, darling, try to slow your breathing,” Eames instructed, standing over Arthur while holding him down to the bed as if he had been flailing. If he had been moving, that stopped as soon as Arthur was fully conscious, his body too exhausted to move on his own. He tried to listen to Eames and to focus on the feeling of the other man’s chest rising and falling as an indication of how he should be breathing once Eames had pressed Arthur’s palm to his chest.

It was so hard though; the images kept flashing across his vision even when his eyes were awake and watching reality pass by. He could tell he was failing at the panicked look on his companion’s face and by the frantic beeping of the machine beside him, but that just made him more upset. Dark spots began to dance across his eyes, which he tried to blink away as he began trying to count out his breaths. At first his body just grew panicked at what it felt was a lack of oxygen, but then he began drawing in deeper breaths that filled his lungs. “That’s it, love. You’re okay. It’s alright,” Eames was whispering encouragingly to him, and Arthur didn’t care if it was more for him or for the Forger himself.
After a few long, struggling minutes, Arthur’s breathing and heart rate had returned to normal. The adrenaline left his body as quickly as it had arrived, leaving him jittery and worn out. Eames looked pale as he leaned over him, brushing sweaty hair aside. “What can I do to help, sweetheart?” he questioned quietly, looking pale in the moonlight. “What do you need?”

“You,” Arthur keened, grappling at Eames arms where he could reach and pulling the other man closer. He didn’t realize he was crying until Eames was brushing his tears away with the pad of his thumb, Arthur’s body no longer dehydrated thanks to the IV in his arm. “I need you, Eames,” he pleaded, hating himself for his weakness but finding himself unable to care enough to stop. He waited until Eames had crawled onto the bed and under the sheets with him to begin sobbing; clutching at fabric and skin as if Eames might just be a figment of his imagination and fade away.

“You have me, Arthur,” Eames assured him, “Forever.” Eames allowed him to cry for a long time without complaint, slowly soothing him into a calmer state with those wonderfully skilled hands as they worked into his hair and across his aching skin and muscles. Once or twice Arthur attempted to apologize for this embarrassing moment of weakness, but his partner had simply hushed him and kissed him affectionately on the forehead.

“How long was I asleep?” Arthur asked miserably once he had calmed down, clearing his throat of phlegm and wincing at the headache he had spawned with his tears.

“A little under an hour,” Eames explained sadly. They both knew how important it was for both of them to get sleep.

Arthur sighed in agitation. “How am I supposed to get sleep when I’m terrified of my own subconscious?” he questioned dejectedly, throat pinched painfully as he fought down new tears of frustration. “I keep seeing everyone’s faces when I close my eyes...” His stomach churned sickeningly at the thought of having to confront all of those looks again, all of those people he had failed. He had returned to reality knowing he could no longer run from his past and had to confront it all. But he had been hoping for a few days to recover first.

He began rolling himself over onto his other side, facing the window and with his back turned to Eames. Then he did his best to shuffle back into a more comfortable position, groaning under his breath as nerves and muscles gave a twinge of distaste. Luckily, Eames seemed to realize what he wanted and scooted forward the last few inches, spooning Arthur warmly. He felt his back, still feeling like it had recently been whipped, slot against Eames’s chest and steal soothing heat, dulling the pain. His ass aligned with Eames’s hips and it was intimate but not sexual in that moment, both of them just pulling closer. He tried to twine their legs together but hissed when weight was put on his left leg so they abandoned that silently. That didn’t stop Eames from winding an arm over his waist to hook their right hands together.
Arthur could feel Eames nuzzle against his neck, dropping a few open-mouthed kisses along his neck and jaw line before burying his face back into the crook where Arthur’s neck met his shoulder. Arthur was using his left hand to hold his head at a comfortable angle, so Eames promptly slid his fingers back into Arthur’s hair, massaging his scalp and chasing away his headache. “Let me be strong for you, my love,” Eames requested, sounding adoring and content. Arthur hummed his agreement and nestled back into his companion’s heat a little more before allowing his eyes to drift closed, feeling utterly safe and cherished.

This time the darkness that surrounded him was quiet and welcoming.
Part XIV: Cobb

Chapter Notes

Warnings: I feel obligated to say that Arthur is pretty out of character in this chapter. However, I also feel that this is justified based on the rest of the story. And I don't feel that he is unrealistically out of character, if that makes sense.

Part XIV. Cobb

Cobb stepped into the hospital room slowly, concerned about walking in on his two former team members and interrupting something. The room was dark and silent when the door clicked shut behind him though, except for the methodological beeping of the machine Arthur was hooked up to. Feeling like an intruder on a private moment, Cobb made his way as quietly as he could towards his chair and makeshift bed. Although he could have gotten accommodations at a nearby hotel while Arthur was under, he had been unwilling to be far from the man’s bedside in case something happened.

The Extractor took his seat unhurriedly, muscles protesting the return of the uncomfortable chair moulding his back, arms and legs to its unyielding shape. He slipped his mobile phone back into his jacket pocket idly as he glanced over the mass of blankets that was Arthur’s hospital bed. He could see the Point Man’s soft black hair, tousled affectionately, and his relaxed face. Cobb could also see the Forger’s light brown hair sticking out noticeably from the crook of Arthur’s neck. Even though the rest of the dream workers’ forms were covered by the hotel blankets, Cobb thought he could make out the distinctive shape of an arm wound securely around Arthur’s waist.

He couldn’t stop the small amused smile that curled his lips upwards as Cobb glanced down at his hands, which were resting in his lap. He pulled his phone back up and began fidgeting with it to keep his hands busy as a whirlwind of thoughts cropped up at the sight of Eames curled protectively around Arthur while they both slept peacefully for the first time in days – or, if Cobb was right about their feelings before this incident, since they had parted ways after Inception. He was grateful that the two had finally gotten over their stubbornness and fears and admitted their feelings for one another; it saved the rest of the team from the avid desire to lock them in a room together until they figured it out. It was also relieving to know that both of his friends and teammates were back in reality and safe, and knowing that they would do everything in their power to keep one another safe.

Things had changed so much since he had first met Arthur, a young, unattached man just out of university. He had clearly been running from something, whether that something was physical or in his mind, but Arthur had been too distant and skilled at what he did to warrant any questions he
didn’t feel like answering. Dom still remembers watching Arthur from afar, wondering how he had had the misfortune of getting this...this *kid* as a mark. And then Arthur had swiftly and efficiently taught the Extractor to never judge a person by their appearance. Dom had taken him under his wing – with a little struggling here and there - and introduced him to dream work, gave the kid something to direct his talents on while also providing a means of escapism that wouldn’t have Arthur running away into dangerous territory.

He had done his best to be a friend and brother to the new dream worker despite the fact that Arthur seemed to do everything in his power to show he was fine on his own. He had eventually warmed up to Cobb in his own way, but everything had changed when Mal had committed suicide. Arthur had done his best to pick up the pieces and help him move on, and that was when Dom had really started to make his mistakes.

After Mal was gone he hadn’t known what to do with himself. The only thing keeping him stable and focused was Arthur, doing his best to help the Extractor return to his children. It had been wonderful in a way – Arthur was very protective of those who gained his trust despite looking as friendly as a thorn bush – but also heartbreaking; it just reminded him of what he had lost. His reliance on the man had grown though, as had his contempt and bitterness for that reliance. When Cobb had finally returned to his children, how had he repaid Arthur? By cutting him out of his life. What a fantastic coward he had turned out to be.

There was also a pinch of jealousy in his heart as he watched the two sleeping dream workers. Memories of Mallorie, of their years together as a couple and then with their children began swarming back en mass. A part of him hated it all, wondering why he had lost the love of his life and Arthur had just managed to find his other half to create their bizarrely unique whole. But Dom forced himself to swallow all of these sad, angry thoughts down. It would not solve anything, and he knew that both Arthur and Eames deserved it – deserved *each other*, finally. Cobb could watch their love bloom and be happy for them, because at least he still had his children back – thanks to Arthur, yet again.

The thought of his children had him flipping his phone open, but when he took note of the electronic clock on his phone’s main screen, he flipped it closed again. His children and Melissa were all undoubtedly asleep at this late hour. He slipped his mobile back into his pocket to ensure it wasn’t broken, promising himself that he would have his children in his arms again soon, and settled back in his chair. A few minutes passed with the lulling sounds of even breathing and measured beeps as he searched for a comfortable position on the chair. But as soon as he found it, his eyes were slipping closed to take advantage of as much sleep as he could get before the bustle of a new day arrived in a few hours.

When he was woken a few hours later, he blamed the sun sneaking through the windows and into his eyes as it peaked over the roofs of a few buildings in the near distance. He rubbed sleep from his eyes as he stretched out his cramped muscles, yawning tiredly. As he settled back down, hoping maybe for another hour or two of sleep before Dr. Maxwell would no doubt come back in and demand Arthur and Eames undergo their tests, he paused for a moment. He had not been quiet
when he first woke up so he knew Eames was aware of him, but that did not seem to be stopping
the man from leaning up on his left elbow and petting Arthur’s mussed hair with his right. Eames
was smiling lovingly down at Arthur each time the Point Man gave tiny sighs of happiness and
snuggled closer to him in response to the touches.

They looked perfect together, moulded against one another as if they had been made to fit despite
all of their odd quirks and issues. The sunlight filtering in through the window helped as well,
lighting up Eames’s eyes while bathing Arthur’s skin with a healthy glow Dom hadn’t seen in far
too long. Eames met his gaze overtop of Arthur and Dom did his best not to glance away, guilty for
having been caught. But the Forger just sent him a proud, slightly possessive smile and returned
his gaze to Arthur’s sleeping form, face softening immediately.

The moment didn’t last long, Eames still yawning near constantly. Dom watched as Eames
eventually reinserted himself against Arthur’s back, threaded the fingers of his right hand between
Arthur’s again, and lay back down against the mattress. It wasn’t long before he could hear the
other man’s breathing even out and slowly match Arthur’s pace – they were nearly in sync with one
another in sleep. With a small smile of his own, Cobb managed to doze again once the sun was out
of his eyes.

The next time he woke up, Dom felt much more rested than he had since he had received the phone
call from Dr. Maxwell. Some of his anxiety over his friends’ safety had finally begun to slip away
now that he knew they were both in reality and – more or less – intact. He saw no sign of the
doctor when he glanced around the room, which looked very large now that three of the beds had
been removed, but the sound of whispers still caught his attention. He groaned in confusion and sat
up fully in his chair, looking for the source of the noise.

Arthur was lying on his back now, glaring up with pursed lips at Eames, who had resumed leaning
on his left arm while on his side, looking down at Arthur’s face with a similar look of challenging
determination. “And I’m telling you, pet, that changing out of the hospital pyjamas and into a suit
is pointless. You’re going to be here for at least one more night while they check you over and
wait for the test results. Sleeping in a suit will not be comfortable and you probably shouldn’t
move more than you have to anyway.”

“You slept in...those,” Arthur raked his gaze with disdain down Eames’s form and back up to his
unshaven face, looking aghast at the thought of calling the attire a suit.

“I never said I was comfortable,” Eames reminded the man, looking slightly exasperated.

“You should take the pyjamas and I’ll change into a suit,” Arthur retaliated, stubborn as ever. Dom
knew that the frequency of clashes between the two dream workers would not diminish now
that they had come together as a couple. In fact, they would probably begin arguing more. They
were both stubborn and determined, but they also knew how to fight; he wasn’t concerned about them because he knew they were skilled at arguing in a way that riled them up but delivered results. The issues only arrived when a couple argued in circles without ever coming across a solution. That, and Dom knew Arthur and Eames respected one another greatly, both as professionals and individuals, so he was sure they would not fall into destructive fighting.

“Why are you so set on getting back into a suit?” the question was paired with a small shiver from Arthur when Eames brushed his lips and rough stubble against the Point Man’s ear. “Maybe I like you like this, looking comfy and at ease.”

“After everything...” Dom heard Arthur trail off for a moment, clearing his throat. “I need something that I had before all of this began. Some staple that will help me feel like myself so that I can be at ease as I deal with this. That,” he continued, “and I refuse to trot around the hospital to my tests in something as horrendous as what they deem suitable for patients here.”

“I like them,” Eames teased mercilessly. He raised his free hand that had previously been tracing leisured designs across Arthur’s skin through the fabric of the hospital shirt, plucking at the fabric while feigning curiosity. “I think the blue stripes suit you.” There was a moment of silence where Dom couldn’t quite see what was going on, but then he heard Eames coo down at Arthur. “Aww, darling, you’re blushing!”

“Shut up!” Arthur snapped with a groan, purposefully rolling away to look away from the Forger with only a quiet grunt of pain at the exertion. “I’m not some kitten for you to cuddle and tease after it got scared by a shadow.”

“It’s not my fault you purr, love,” Eames chuckled as he followed the other man’s retreat, sprawling his body over Arthur’s as much as he dared.

“I do not...purr,” the protests from Arthur’s mouth trailed away for a moment, losing their bite when Eames began nuzzling his neck and petting his hair again. There was another long, expectant moment of silence, and then a blissed-out sigh escaped from Arthur’s lips.

Feeling like an intruder once again and knowing he would be unable to escape without the two dream workers realizing he was now awake, Dom cleared his throat somewhat apologetically. Arthur’s eyes flashed open to pinpoint the source of the sound, elbowing Eames away slightly as he leaned up on his hands for a better look. Despite what Arthur argued, the man truly had the reflexes of a feline, and was nearly as skittish. It was almost disconcerting having those sharp brown eyes rest on him, assessing him for threats for the briefest flash of a second. The look was only broken when Arthur gave a small whine of pain and settled back onto the mattress, massaging his wrists with a wince. Cobb was disappointed to note that even though Arthur had not looked at him as an enemy, the man had definitely not completely relaxed.
“Here, doll,” Eames had pulled himself into a half seated position now, leaning back against the section of the mattress you could adjust to a certain angle. “Let me.”

Eames reached for Arthur’s wrists but got his hands slapped away before he could do much good. Dom was thankful that the glare Eames received had not been sent towards him as Arthur silently pulled himself up into his own seated position. It was clear that the lithe man was still in some form of pain even though he had been out of the dreamscape for at least half a day now. He wondered whether it was psychosomatic or if the enemy dream workers had actually managed to scar some part of Arthur’s subconscious that would keep the pain there. He hoped that it would fade with time, and not just because he knew Arthur would go insane if he was confined to a bed for long; Arthur had spent most of his life running, so staying idle was never met with approval.

“It’s fine,” Arthur hedged, “They don’t actually hurt that much.”

“Bullshit,” Eames huffed as he made another careful grab for the Point Man’s narrow wrists. Arthur narrowed his eyes in annoyance but didn’t speak again as he watched Eames begin massaging one and then the other wrist skilfully. “After what Louis did...” Cobb’s interest peaked with the angry scoff from the Forger as he focused his attention on Arthur’s skin. “I know you’re accustomed to being independent and taking care of yourself, darling,” Eames spoke calmly, ceaseless in his movements. “But I wish you’d let me help you. There’s no sense getting embarrassed when it’s just us here with you; everyone needs help sometimes.”

“Exactly, Arthur,” Dom cut in quickly, trying not to sound like they were trying to gang up on the other man but wanting Arthur to finally let go of the barriers he had in place to keep everyone else far away. “We’re both here to help you and we won’t think any less of you if it takes some time for you to recover from this.”

Arthur looked over at him but dropped his gaze to the blankets when Dom attempted to meet his gaze. It seemed like the other man was incapable of holding his eyes at the moment, which was bizarre in itself. In the past, if Cobb had screwed up, he could be sure Arthur would confront him about it. “Speaking of helping,” Arthur spoke the word as if it left an unappealing taste on his tongue. “Tell me everything. How long have we been asleep? What happened to the others?”

Two sets of curious eyes landed on him then, hardened by the experiences that the two had just endured together. He informed both of them what Dr. Maxwell had told him when he had first called and arrived at the hospital, explaining quickly since Eames had already been told the same information and Arthur looked restless and impatient. Eames had continued massaging Arthur’s wrists while he listened, while Arthur seemed to have entirely forgotten about the contact once he was focusing on Dom’s words. Unfortunately, it seemed like the physical contact and massages were doing a lot less to soothe the man now that Arthur was fully conscious and aware of the
“The hospital found the key card for your hotel in your jacket pocket and the hotel had your stuff sent here once they were contacted,” he continued to explain. Arthur seemed somewhat pleased to hear that all of his personal effects were with Dr. Maxwell, most likely to be relinquished when the doctor returned today for testing. But the news still did very little to brighten the storm cloud that Arthur’s face had become as Dom continued to relay information to the two dream workers; pale skin seemed to almost go translucent and deep frown lines caught shadows as the sun rose higher into the sky. “You were under for nearly three days, which is lucky since they weren’t expecting you to last much longer under the strain. How...” he trailed off, wondering how to word his questions about the dreamscape, “How long was it for you?”

Arthur was sitting as still as a statue, eyebrows furrowed in thought as he stared down at his lap while Cobb spoke. His awareness of the reality around him seemed to be fading slightly, quieting the man considerably. Arthur was a relatively silent individual when he was acting normal, always lost in his thoughts and withdrawing himself from those around him, but this was a new type of silence. Just by looking at him, it seemed clear that there was some sort of weight resting on the man’s shoulders, holding and binding him down. Arthur seemed listless in his silence, lacking the determination and goals that had always driven him forward. It was almost as though Arthur was lost so deeply in his own thoughts that he didn’t know how to connect to Dom and Eames anymore. Like his experience down in the dreamscape had caged him in a dark corner of his subconscious where light simply couldn’t shine.

“A little over a week,” Arthur finally spoke, seemingly unaware of how long it had taken him to answer Dom’s question. The Extractor did not miss the worried sidelong glance Eames sent his new partner, no doubt sensing a similar weight pulling Arthur into a downward spiral. “What happened to the others?” the question was forcefully calm, though there was an angry edge to the words.

“Well, they all woke up, Louis just a short time before Eames, with their memories completely wiped,” he explained, unsure of how to break the news. Arthur was radiating hatred and guilt in equal amounts, right leg tucked closer to him while his left one remained straight out on the bed. “Dr. Maxwell and the nurses panicked when Nikolas woke up in that condition but they were slightly more prepared to deal with the results when Amelina and Louis woke up later.” He did his best to recall how the medical staff had responded to the bizarre memory loss, and how they had cast increasingly hopeless glances at Arthur and Eames when the others had woken up in that state. “They were almost positive you two wouldn’t wake up, at least not with your memory, by the time the others had woken up. From what I know, they got taken for some tests to assess their condition, get a brain scan, and see a psychiatrist.”

Arthur nodded slowly, as if this was all old news. “If they haven’t yet, the doctors will soon realize they’ll need to begin teaching the dream workers anew as though they were infants. Nikolas should be fine...” the man’s voice was quiet and thoughtful, calculated as he worked through whatever was running through his head. “He’s still young enough for the knowledge to take. I don’t know
how Amelina and Louis will manage though...their brains are past their prime for learning...”

“Don’t blame yourself, love,” Eames chimed in a moment later, once Arthur had drifted back into his thoughts and was giving no clear indication of re-emerging anytime soon.

“I don’t,” Arthur spoke through clenched teeth, gently tugging his hands away from Eames to rub his temples tiredly. But then the man’s face fell into his palms, heels digging in against his cheekbones. It looked like Arthur was just resting, but Dom had a sinking suspicion with the man’s curled white knuckles that he was pressing hard enough for it to hurt.

“It was us or them, darling,” Eames spoke again, wrapping an arm delicately around narrow shoulders. Dom felt useless as he imposed upon the moment, frozen as he relived his guilt over altering Mal’s mind while watching the Point Man struggle.

“That doesn’t make it right, Eames!” Arthur snapped, voice harsh in the quiet hospital room.

The large man recoiled slightly as Arthur shrugged his arm away. Eames took a deep breath, probably searching for patience. “I didn’t say it was right, Arthur,” he heard the other man attempt to reason, “but they were the ones who attacked you. It’s your right to fight for your own life.”

“But I went down into that dream ready to steal information from Louis’s mind,” Arthur retaliated, body tensing up noticeably on the bed. “How is that any better? Any more ethical? Because I get paid, rather than calling it an accident?” Arthur was practically snarling now, more livid than Dom had ever seen him. He could tell the dream worker was on the verge of breaking, the air around him practically vibrating with upset tension. He could see his own surprise and confusion echoed in Eames’ face, both of them wondering if this was hinting at Arthur quitting dream work. The Point Man was the best at what he did and loved his job; would he really give it up?

“Arthur,” he spoke as soothingly as he could manage, pushing himself out of his chair slowly. He approached the bed carefully as Arthur’s attention whirled on him, eyes razor sharp and furious. “I understand what you’re feeling after what I did to Mal, seriously,” he pressed when the other man gave a sceptical look.

“I am no longer your prodigy, fit for moulding only to be cast aside when I fail to meet your version of perfection, Dominic,” the way his name spilled off the man’s tongue had him flinching backwards. Before he or Eames could react to that, the words and tone so completely out of character for the man he thought he had known so well, Arthur was hoisting himself up and over the edge of the bed after precisely ripping out his IV. Just as quickly as Arthur had pulled himself over the edge of the mattress, his left leg crumpled beneath his new weight and the man went
down with a frustrated curse. “Stupid fucking leg,” Arthur continued to swear under his breath as he grappled for the bed frame to hoist himself back up, sending Dom a deadly glare when he moved to help. “Just leave me alone! Both of you! I can do this on my own!”

By this point, Eames had rushed out of bed to crouch by Arthur’s side, toppling backwards onto his ass when he was shoved away from helping. He admired the man’s clear love and adoration when Eames simply picked himself back up and shuffled closer to Arthur on his knees. By this point Arthur had given up on trying to get himself back up and had abandoned himself to the cold floor. Dom guessed Arthur would have managed to stand and walk on his left leg if he had not rushed it, but now the weight and angle necessary to get up would be too much. The Point man was not crying; he simply had his forehead resting on his right knee, which was tucked up against his chest.

“That means I adore you, and trust you, and will do everything in my power to make you happy and safe. I understand that you are used to running and relying only on yourself, even if I don’t know all of the reasons for that yet. But I want to know. I want to understand. And then I want to help you move on.” Cobb was utterly astounded at Eames’s words. He had always known the man had a soft spot for Arthur, always bringing him coffee and sweets despite the lack of necessity or reciprocation. But he had never imagined the man leaving himself so vulnerable as he opened himself up to Arthur and gave up everything just to make his companion content.

“I want to move on,” Arthur sighed, finally leaning into the touch of the Forger’s deft fingers on his skin and sparking all the right nerve endings. “I want to confront my past. I want to.”

“You said you love me too, Arthur.” Dom blinked and glanced between his two teammates at those words, again shocked. Arthur, the aloof, poised, independent Point Man had openly admitted love towards the previous ‘bane of his existence’? He had never quite held the hope that Arthur would figure out what it was he actually wanted – recognize his true feelings for the British man. “Did that change between the dream and reality? Was I dreaming?”

“No, Eames,” Arthur shook his head quickly, hair falling into disarray. “I love you. I’ve loved you since...” those dark eyes blinked and narrowed for a moment. “I don’t know how long. But it’s not...
Eames nodded and leaned closer, keeping his balance with one hand on the bed frame while the other tilted Arthur’s face to the side so that their lips could brush. Once again, Dom felt like a trespasser but couldn’t leave; now that Arthur was beginning to calm down again with Eames’s sweet touches, he really had to speak his mind. “Then will you let me be there for you, love?” the request was tentative, ready to retreat and try again at a later moment if there was an ill response. “You are already dealing with so much, Arthur. Just let that shame and guilt about appearing weak in front of me fall away, because I’m the person you can be entirely open around.”

“I don’t understand, Eames,” Arthur confessed, dropping his gaze to the tiled floor. “Why?”

Arthur’s eyes were drawn up again to meet Eames with the fingers beneath his chin. “You’re not really living up to your intelligence,” the man quipped, trying to bring more humour back into the sombre atmosphere. “I love all of you, which includes those weaknesses, oddities and quirks that make you who you are.”

It was like magic. There was no other way to describe what Cobb had just witnessed. The exchange of words and promises had been far more mushy and sentimental than Arthur would normally endure. It was so hard to explain how you felt about someone and justify your reasoning for wanting to help someone without going over the top and making the confession seem corny. In any other situation, he would have been mocking Eames’s romanticized words and Arthur would most likely have stalked away, embarrassed by this point. But this time it was perfect – exactly what needed to be said. The weight he had seen weighing down the other man, curling his shoulders, neck and back forward, seemed to suddenly lighten. It was as though Eames had carefully extracted one of many blocks of weight that would need to be dealt with over the next while with great care. It was clear that both of his teammates were aware of the improvement as well, no further words on the topic necessary for the understanding between Arthur and Eames to be clarified. They knew.

“Arthur,” Cobb began as strongly as he could manage, knowing he had to say what was on his mind even though he didn’t wish to spoil the moment. Both dream workers glanced over at him when he crouched down by Arthur’s right side in order to leave room for Eames, who had begun massaging Arthur’s left shin and ankle. Arthur finally met his gaze for a more normal length of time. “After Mal died because I altered her mind, I did a lot of thinking about our profession because it is anything but ethical. At first I could only hate myself for my choices and blame myself. I still do,” he admitted quietly. “But then I began to realize that dream work did not always have to be bad; we could use it to help people. Remember that woman in Athens who had been raped? We found her attacker and helped her confront her fears and nightmares.”

“That still doesn’t give us the right to decide what is right and wrong,” Arthur countered, voice more level now. He seemed to be mellowing out as Eames massaged his left calf as gently as he
could manage. “Tyson...I don’t know if I ruined his life or liberated him, gave him a second chance. Who am I to decide?”

“Tyson?” Eames prompted encouragingly, looking confused and unsure despite a flash of recognition in those eyes focused on Arthur’s own brown ones.

“The first person I did this to,” Dom listened as Arthur retold the story, words laced with a biting guilt. “At first I thought I had done the right thing in the end when I read the news clippings about him being adopted into a better family and being given a second chance. But then Louis forged him and told me that I had no right in deciding what was right for the teen. He said I had actually put him in a worse position the second time around.”

“But Louis was saying these things,” he stated cautiously, trying to grasp what had truly happened down there in the dreamscape from the few snippets he gathered with Arthur’s talking. “He was just saying whatever would upset you most, I assume.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Arthur shook his head sadly, meeting his gaze again. “He was right; I don’t have the right to determine what is best for someone. What if that woman in Athens would have been better off if we had not submerged her back into her deepest fear and reintroduced those thoughts to her?”

“Darling,” Eames spoke under his breath, drawing Arthur’s eyes to him slowly. “You’re the best Point Man in the world; the most apt man I know. Once we get out of this hospital, why don’t you do some research on Tyson for yourself? Not just the news clippings this time, but truly confront your past the way I know you wish to – the way I know you can.” Dom watched somewhat protectively as Eames skimmed his lips over Arthur’s jaw for a moment; it wasn’t sexual, but rather managed to cause Arthur’s anxiety to melt further away from his initial outburst. He knew he didn’t have the right to be protective of Arthur after hurting him and treating him so poorly, but he couldn’t help it. Though he doubted he had anything to worry about with Eames by Arthur’s side.

He watched Arthur curiously as the man shivered and relaxed at the contact, silent as he considered the Forger’s words. And then he gave a mental sigh of relief when Arthur nodded strongly, chocolate eyes still caught up with Eames’s eyes, which never strayed. “Beyond what my past self was too scared to know, and beyond what my enemy suggested to my subconscious. I need to know...And then I need to promise myself never to use those barriers again.”

The desire to ask more about the dreamscape seemed heavy and unbearable, chipping away at his resolve. Finally, with all of the random bits of information regarding the encounter, Dom felt his resolve crumble. “What happened down there?” he asked both dream workers, not entirely sure if they had been together for the whole time or whether they had been forced to split up.
Arthur began retelling what he had experienced during his duration in the dreamscape, pausing occasionally or drifting through horrible descriptions in a monotone as though he were reading a dull script. It was quite clear that even though Eames had managed to draw out Arthur’s trust in him, Cobb was still on probation. He could understand the man’s hesitance to divulge the secrets of his tortured subconscious to him, who had disappointed and abandoned Arthur far more times than deserved forgiveness. He could tell that there were some aspects of the encounter that Arthur did not even wish to tell Eames, curling in on himself further as though he wished to disappear.

He could see the look of fury and heartbreak he knew was on his face reflected in Eames’s face, jaw clenched and lips downturned. Arthur was meticulous in his description of how he arrived down in the dream, what had happened when the three enemy dream workers had turned on him, and how he had begun to plan his retaliation. This was what he was skilled at – planning, strategizing, and sharing these details in a cohesive manner – and Dom had no doubt that Arthur was approaching this section of his story as though he were reading his notes on a previous job, detached and callous.

However, when the planning stages of the encounter passed into the more painful and emotional moments of the dream, Arthur’s explanations began to taper off. There were some holes in the story where it was clear Eames had been in a different section of the dreamscape, but the Point Man did not pause long enough to give the other man a chance to speak. It was likely that Arthur might just lose his motivation and drive to speak if he was interrupted, which he and Eames carefully worked around. When Arthur explained how it had affected him when the dream workers had tortured and extracted information from his projections and how tiring it had been to maintain the projections, Cobb wanted to gather his friend up into his arms. Eames beat him to it though, wrapping his arms around Arthur’s shoulders and pulling him against his side.

He nearly cried when Arthur admitted that Nikolas, Amelina and Louis had attacked him in order to gain knowledge about how to complete inception and his team members during that job. The dream worker described the experience as though he were explaining a surgery gone wrong, detail almost medical as he described the more gruesome forms of torture. Beyond the fact of hearing that his friend had suffered such physical pain, it was difficult to swallow the knowledge that Arthur had experienced this in order to keep others – keep them - safe. This was not just an issue of Arthur choosing to work with the wrong people because he had been dealing with his past and feelings poorly. Dom had no doubt that the three enemy dream workers had specifically caught the Point Man’s attention, dancing around him at a distance until they thought they had a viable chance of success.

Arthur had suffered – been broken – to keep his former team members, the people who had abandoned him even if they hadn’t realized what they were doing, safe. Cobb himself could understand how he and his other team members had made the mistake, heartlessly assuming that Arthur was distant and independent naturally and would not be hurt when they moved on with their lives and left him behind. He had thought Arthur would be happy to have Dom stop relying on him for information and support, that he was doing the man a favour when he cut Arthur out of his and his children’s life. It was only now as he sat and watched the man struggle with the attack on his
subconscious that he began feeling nauseous as his stomach twisted into guilty knots; he finally realized how truly wrong he had been. And not only had Arthur experienced more pain than Dom thought possible, Arthur had won over Louis; he had never broken and compromised his former team members.

He found it hard to swallow as Arthur admitted Louis’s final attempt to extract the information from him. Dom knew Arthur wasn’t telling him everything, but he found himself either unable or unwilling to push for more information. Despite his curiosity, he did not want to push the man over the edge again or overstep his bounds. But beyond that, Cobb truly did not know whether he would be capable of handling knowledge of the full scope of Arthur’s torture; he wouldn’t know how to respond or deal with that information. “...he forged Tyson and Eames...and you, Dom...” Arthur admitted, glancing up at him nervously.

“Me...” Dom whispered, almost disbelieving, not wanting to believe the other man’s words. “What...what did Louis say as me?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Cobb,” Arthur tried to brush the topic away, already appearing as though he regretted his decision to tell him that the enemy forger had used his persona to hurt Arthur.

“Of course it matters!” he ground out through clenched teeth, still aware of the invisible barrier between himself and Arthur. What had Louis said to cause this, or would this same avoidance have been apparent without this encounter if the two dream workers had simply visited one another? He watched as Arthur bit his lip, internally debating with himself. Then the man, suddenly looking much younger than him, muttered something dejected under his breath. Eames’s eyes widened at the words, close enough to hear, and Dom felt his heart clench painfully. “What was that?”

“You—I mean Louis said that I couldn’t be trusted to do anything right, not to betray the team and flee when things went wrong.” Dom was halfway to speaking, ready to remind Arthur that those words were obviously incorrect, but Arthur spoke over him with a hard voice. “You said you made the right choice in cutting me out of your life to protect your children. You...you said...” Arthur was physically and emotionally withdrawing from them now, curling in on himself as his face became edged with pained frown lines. “No one could ever love me. I was poison.”

“That’s bullshit, Arthur!” he snapped angrily, a new hatred boiling up inside him at the mere thought of Louis. Arthur might still be feeling guilt for what happened to the man, but Dom wasn’t entirely sure he wouldn’t slit the man’s throat in his sleep later that day after what he had heard. Unfortunately, he forgot himself in the moment with the knowledge, raising his voice and moving towards Arthur to embrace him or...something; he didn’t even know what he could do to help his friend get past those words. With a choked off sob, Arthur scrambled away from him as best he could, jostling the bed frame loudly. Dom immediately froze, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender, and dropped the volume of his voice. His horror was evident in his words as they fell off
his tongue even though he didn’t want to know the answer. “Did he hurt you as me?”

The way Arthur was curled up was answer enough. The man’s back was bowed forward over the rest of his body with his right arm holding his right knee close for protection. At the same time, Arthur’s left arm was wrapped awkwardly around his side and spread across as much of his back as he could manage, fighting off further phantom attacks. Dom watched as violent tremors flowed over Arthur’s form, devastated at the vision before him. What had Louis done? “Eames,” Arthur’s voice broke on the name as he struggled for air, blinking away tears. Dom hated that the Point Man had not only experienced this once, but was now being forced to relive the torture. “Am I bleeding?”

The Forger was there in a flash, covering the few inches of space Arthur had created between them before giving up on movement. “Where, darling? Your back?” Cobb put a few extra inches between himself and Arthur, not wanting to cause anymore flashbacks. The realization that he legitimately terrified Arthur was heartbreaking, and he couldn’t help but wonder if this could have been avoided if he had stayed in the business, or at least stayed in touch with Arthur to potentially steer him away from these enemy dream workers. While these destructive thoughts swirled around his head, he watched as Arthur nodded weakly and Eames carefully pulled the back of his shirt up slightly to check for any manifested damage. “There’s nothing physically here, Arthur.”

“Don’t touch it,” Arthur flinched away when Eames attempted to skim his fingers across the smooth expanse of exposed skin. “God, it hurts.”

“What can I do, love? What can I do?” Eames kept asking again and again, frantic with his concern but trying to turn it into something productive. But Arthur was merely shaking his head and pulling away further, muttering ‘nothing, nothing, nothing’ again and again under his breath, sounding forsaken.

After what felt like an eternity, feeling like he himself was experiencing Arthur’s pain as the man expressed it so openly, Arthur finally began to calm somewhat. He didn’t pull away anymore when Eames brushed cautionary fingers over bare skin, aiming to massage away the pain as he had been doing before. And Arthur, for all of his intelligence, began apologizing to him. “It’s not your fault, Dom. Please don’t blame yourself. I’m sorry, I’m sorry for everything...”

“The fault is mine, Arthur. Mine and Nikolas, Amelina and Louis’s,” Cobb refuted immediately, inching closer again as the other man’s exhausted eyes turned on him. “You have always been my friend and the closest thing I’ve ever had to a brother. I care about you dearly but I have made so many mistakes. I am the one who should be apologizing, Arthur,” he continued to edge closer when he did not receive any adverse reactions to his increased proximity. “And I do apologize with my whole heart.”
Arthur was blinking at him in confusion, probably too lost in his memories of his torture to comprehend such conflicting messages. “You’re having one of your dense moments, darling,” Eames kissed Arthur’s neck comfortingly, the only skin he could really reach at Arthur’s odd angle of sitting, turned away from both of them slightly. The words were not mocking or insulting; Eames was just trying to help Arthur return to his former self — the Arthur who would be able to assess Louis’s words critically and scoff, brushing them off with a bored eye roll.

“I distanced myself from you after Inception because I hated myself, Arthur,” Dom admitted, feeling a small ounce of relief at finally speaking the words aloud. “I was so jealous of you for being so strong, and so angry at myself for not being able to take care of myself. I have always trusted you Arthur, more than you know, and I value your determination to stick by a friend’s side until the bitter end.” He took a deep breath, seeing a flicker of awareness in those eyes as Arthur finally took his words in consciously. Dom just hoped he could say the right words. “James and Phillipa adore you, and there is no one I would trust with them more than you. I know you enough to know you would do everything in your power to protect them as though they were your own. You aren’t poison, Arthur,” he shook his head, a few tears spilling from his eyes when he clenched his eyes closed at the thought of Arthur even thinking that about himself. “And it seems quite obvious that you are anything but unlovable,” he gave a pointed gesture to Eames, who was nuzzling Arthur’s neck to enhance his words.

And just like that, it was as though another weight – heavier than the first – seemed to fall away from Arthur. The man was still very stiff with a phantom pain Cobb hoped would soon pass, but his back and shoulders straightened despite that. Confidence began soaking back into the man’s eyes and face, his face no longer pinched with pain or self hatred as he considered and accepted Dom’s words. The Extractor breathed an internal sigh of relief, unsure of what they would have done if Arthur had not accepted his words. Arthur took his own deep breath of air, sighing loudly as he constantly seemed to banish more tension and weight from his mind and body.

Their timing couldn’t have been better since Dr. Maxwell breezed into the room a minute later, calling out their names in confusion when he found an empty bed and couldn’t see the three dream workers behind the bed frame. Eames met his gaze for a moment, relief between them that the doctor had not arrived when Arthur was having his breakdown – before the man was ready and able to move onto his testing and other aspects of recovery. “We’re down here,” Arthur spoke up before either he or Eames could speak up.

“Why would you all be sitting down there?” Dr. Maxwell questioned them with a raised eyebrow as he came around the foot of the hospital bed. When they came into view, Arthur was the first of the three to begin moving towards standing. Dom scrambled to his feet to aid the Point Man, earning himself a reassuringly familiar glare as Arthur’s independence shone through in its healthy form once again. Eames, by comparison, remained seated on the cold floor as a silent and stable base for Arthur to use if he wished. Arthur looked unimpressed with his own struggling but did take the Forger’s aid silently by pushing himself up and balancing himself with Eames’s shoulder.

“I stood up from the hospital bed and my left leg collapsed beneath my weight,” Arthur informed
the doctor meticulously as though he was another doctor discussing a nameless patient. “I grew rather emotional and Mr. Eames and Mr. Cobb were helping me through my moment of weakness.” Dom watched with quiet amusement as Arthur smoothed out the shirt of his pyjamas as though he were dressed in the most expensive suit currently in fashion. Despite Arthur’s previous argument, he knew for certain that Arthur’s confidence had never depended on his attire.

Luckily, Dr. Maxwell seemed to recognize Arthur’s form of coping as he approached his own struggles and weaknesses like a job, with professional interest, aims and focus. Rather than treating him as a patient or as someone who need to be handled with care, the doctor responded to Arthur as an equal, as someone whose experiences and thoughts were as valid regarding his condition as the doctor’s views. “How are you feeling beyond that?”

By this time, Dom and Eames had picked themselves off the floor and stretched out their cramped muscles. Even as they shifted their weight in search of a more comfortable position, Arthur fell still; his steadying grip on the bed frame was the only visible indication of Arthur’s discomfort and pain. “I seem to be experiencing some psychosomatic pain in the places I was wounded while dreaming; however I seem unable to overcome this despite my awareness.” Cobb would have been amused by the clinical tone if he wasn’t so impressed by Arthur’s own self awareness and ability to distance himself from his own pain in search of a solution. “I found it difficult to fall asleep until Mr. Eames helped me,” Arthur continued to explain without looking too bashful. “I get flashbacks and I feel rather paranoid, anxious and emotionally distressed.”

“Allright,” Dr. Maxwell nodded, adding a few notes to the chart attached to the foot of his bed. “Well first things first, we’ll need to walk you through a physical and get your brain scanned. It seems that you are having no issues regarding memory – on the contrary, actually,” the man waved his hand to indicate Arthur’s flashbacks while he continued to jot down notes. “But I’m still concerned about long term effects. After that, I would like to speak with you privately about your experience and possibly have you seen by a therapist if you agree.”

Arthur visibly hesitated for just a moment before he nodded. “We’ll see about the therapist,” he remained uncommitted, still not even moving to shift his weight or stretch out a muscle.

Dr. Maxwell seemed to consider arguing the point but decided otherwise. Instead, the doctor nodded again and slid the medical chart under his arm. “Mr. Eames,” he turned his attention onto the Forger, who had been standing close behind Arthur in a protective manner. Once the attention was on him though, he seemed to shrink behind Arthur’s form, drawing comfort while before he had been giving it. “You will be going through a similar schedule of testing today as well. My head nurse will be overseeing your physical and brain scan, but then I will be speaking with you personally about your own experience.” Dom watched in amusement as Arthur suddenly became the protector in the couple, his weakness momentarily set aside. “Since this is such an issues regarding confidentiality, I do not wish to bring anyone else into the situation.”
Dom nodded in agreement in time with Arthur and Eames. He was thankful that they had been lucky enough for Arthur to receive a doctor who was aware of, and understood the requirements of doctor-patient confidentiality. There still might be some issues if someone wished to point fingers and blame about the current condition of Nikolas, Amelina and Louis. But at least it seemed unlikely that he and his two team members would be forced to run or enforce their privacy after being discovered with connections to an active, illegal PASIV device. “That sounds appropriate,” he spoke for the group, knowing without speaking that the others agreed.

“Excellent. Well, shall we, Mr. Tilmont?” Dr. Maxwell motioned towards the door. “Mr. Eames, my head nurse will be here to work with you shortly,” the man informed the Forger, who looked visibly agitated at being split from Arthur so soon after they had both made it back to reality safely. Dom understood the feeling, similarly concerned and protective of Arthur going off on his own so soon. It didn’t help that Arthur’s limp with his left leg was terribly obvious; Arthur’s thin face tightened in disappointment as he forced himself to begin walking towards the door without the aid of the bed frame or anyone’s offered arm.

Once Arthur disappeared through the hospital door behind Dr. Maxwell, only sending one quick glance back towards him and Eames, the room fell silent. Eames began pacing back and forth beside the vacant hospital bed like a caged animal, clearly distressed and trying to calm himself down. It was endearing to see Eames so attached to Arthur; the person he had been infatuated with for at least a year was finally his and now the Forger was acting like a teenager in his first relationship. There was more to it than that between them of course; both Eames and Arthur were adults involved in a dangerous profession. They both understood the costs and benefits of a relationship and respected one another. But it was still somewhat adorable to see that novelty and desire for physical closeness blossoming in front of his eyes.

In order to calm the man down, Dom asked Eames to explain what else had happened down in the dreamscape since Arthur had never given him a chance to explain his experiences. At first it seemed an effective means of distracting Eames from his pacing. Unfortunately, as the man began describing what he had seen when confronting Nikolas and Amelina in the dreamscape, as well as what he had briefly seen of Louis’s methods, both of them began getting agitated again. The mere thought of one of Arthur’s projections being strung up for public torture, the trauma Eames no doubt experienced at being forced to hurt and kill the projection. The thought of an enemy extractor tearing apart Arthur’s subconscious in hopes of finding some flicker of memory useful for Louis’s torture. Eames’s own vulnerability to the extraction and the fact that he had to kill three individuals in a very personal, close manner. The Forger had not been physically injured, but Dom was amazed at how well he was holding up despite the psychological trauma. He guessed Eames was holding himself together and forcing himself to deal with everything in order to keep Arthur safe; it helped that he could remind himself that he had done everything to save the man he loved, and that it had been a successful feat.

He did his best to calm Eames down, only partially succeeding by reminding the man that Arthur was safe and would be back soon. Soon after that, when Eames had abandoned pacing to sit tiredly on the edge of Arthur’s bed, Dr. Maxwell’s head nurse entered the room. “Mr. Eames?” the young man checked the medical chart in his hand briefly before glancing between the two dream workers,
looking for some response.

“That would be me,” Eames raised a hand before rubbing his face, clearly exhausted, and stood from the bed. “Let’s get these tests over with,” the man suggested, heading for the door after giving a farewell nod in Cobb’s direction. “I could really use some food and sleep after this is finished.”

The door closed behind Eames and the head nurse a moment later, leaving Dom alone to his thoughts. He was not sure how long the testing would take, though he guessed it would be quite extensive before Dr. Maxwell was confident about their apparently luck in escaping the dream with their memory intact. Eames’s mention of food had his stomach churning eagerly at the thought and he headed down to the hospital’s cafeteria before anything else. The food was expensive and not all that appealing to look at, but each bite tasted wonderful to him now that he could finally sit back and relax; Arthur and Eames were safe.

It did not take him long to finish his food since there was no one at the table to converse with. Instead, he was left with his thoughts to mull over everything Arthur and Eames had told him about the encounter in the dreamscape. There was a lot of anger running through his head, interlaced with confusion and a never-ending string of questions. Would Arthur quit dream work after this? Would Eames quit with him? Would Arthur ever manage to get past his torture down in the dream or would the pain haunt him? Would he ever be able to overcome the other guilt piling on top of his shoulders? Would Eames be able to help him through that?

Finding no answers in his lukewarm coffee, Dom chucked the last dregs and the cup before heading outside. He highly doubted that Arthur and Eames would have their testing and questioning done after only an hour, which made it the opportune moment for him to finally get some fresh air. The sun was still high in the sky and the breeze was warm on his skin as Cobb stepped out of the hospital and meandered over to one of the benches set on a small expanse of grass beside the hospital building. The beautiful warm weather seemed juxtaposed to his stormy thoughts and Dom couldn’t help but feel a little bitter at the sky. He knew he was supposed to be overjoyed and grateful that his two friends were alive and safe – and he was, without a doubt – but the simple thought that they had ever experienced such pain in the first place, that their safety had ever been something to question, had him displeased with the weather. It seemed rude of the sun to be shining so brightly when people were suffering and dying in the hospital behind him.

Before he fell too far into his darker thoughts, Cobb pulled out his phone and flipped it open. There were a few unanswered texts from Ariadne asking whether she should fly in to New York that day or that second, as well as a few added thoughts from Yusuf and Saito after his phone conversations with them earlier. Dom responded back to Ariadne, telling her that she should probably wait for Arthur’s confirmation that he was ready for visitors before she flew in. He still had no idea how willing Arthur was to converse with other team members considering how out of character he was already behaving as he dealt with his trauma.
Once that was complete he selected Melissa’s number and brought the phone up to his ear. There were a few sets of long rings before the phone connected and Melissa spoke cheerfully. “Hello?”

“Hi Melissa,” Dom greeted happily, forcing some of the exhaustion and worry from his tone. “How are things? I just called to speak with James and Phillipa briefly.”

“Things are fine,” Melissa promised, a smile audible in her words. “But unfortunately Phillipa and James are in school right now.”

There was a long pause of silence across the phone as Dom blinked, watching the scenery around him. “It’s a weekday...” he stated questioningly.

He could hear Melissa chuckle lightly through the phone. “Yes, it’s Wednesday. Don’t worry about it; that often happens when you are stuck in a hospital and worrying over someone for days on end. How is your friend, by the way?”

He couldn’t believe that he had actually lost track of the days. He was normally so skilled at keeping track of time; it was a requirement when you manipulated your own perception of time so often for work. It took him a minute to register the question. “Oh, he’s great actually. He’s awake. He’s getting some tests done but that was actually why I was calling; I should be home in a few days.”

“Oh that’s wonderful to hear!” Melissa responded, sounding pleased.

Her words suddenly had Dom smiling as well, reminding him what was truly important. Yes, he still wanted to hurt the three enemy dream workers for what they had done to his friend, but they had already received their own form of punishment. What was important was the fact that Arthur and Eames were both awake, aware, had their memories, and seemed to possess the devotion to one another and motivation to themselves to overcome this encounter and come out stronger in the end. “Yes,” Dom breathed, clutching the phone a little tighter when his eyes started to sting with unshed tears. His relief and gratitude just seemed to wash over him then, and he found it hard not to let the tears spill down his face. “Yes, it is wonderful.”

They spoke for another few minutes after that, Melissa updating him on how James and Phillipa had been doing in his absence. The conversation eventually ended with him promising to text her when he knew when he’d be returning home, and a rather emotional goodbye. Cobb decided to remain on the bench for another little while, soaking in the sun and breathing in the refreshing breeze before stepping back into the sterile hospital. He eventually ended up pulling out the cheap paperback he had purchased at the hospital gift shop to keep himself sane, beginning the last
“chapter when Eames slipped back into the room unaccompanied. “How did it go?” Dom asked curiously, dropping the book back into his bag without bothering with a bookmark.

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry about running unless Arthur’s discussion went much different from mine,” Eames stepped into the room as a professional Forger, assessing threats to his team and companion. “They can’t prove anything in the first place and they only seemed to be interested in understanding what happened to try to find some solution for the bastards’ conditions.”

“I meant health-wise, Eames,” Cobb reminded the man, feeling as though he was suddenly back in the leadership role on a job, checking in with his team members.

“Oh,” Eames blinked. “Right.” He ran his fingers through his hair abashed. “I got a clean bill of health. Or at least as healthy as I can expect after everything I’ve ingested,” Eames chuckled lightly, shrugging. “I didn’t experience any real physical pain down in the dream so nothing is manifesting. The rest of what I had to do wasn’t exactly enjoyable,” Eames added, “But I’ve experienced it before and know how to get myself through it. Right now I’m just sleep deprived and a little dehydrated.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the door being pushed open. Both dream workers turned in time to see Arthur stride into the room, pace and posture unhindered by the remaining limp in his left leg. Dom saw that he was still sporting the hospital pyjamas and looking very unimpressed with that, especially considering the fact that the bag held in his right hand was most likely his personal effects from the hotel. “If you refuse to keep the IV for another night, you’ll have to make sure you drink a glass of water at least once an hour,” Dr. Maxwell pressed as Arthur came to stand by Eames and dumped his bag on his bed. “Your body is still recovering from dehydration and there’s no sense in making that worse just to be stubborn.”

“That’s fine, doctor,” Arthur spoke in a level tone, not yet acknowledging Dom or Eames beyond a quick moment of eye contact. “I understand your demand for me to drink water, catch up on sleep, eat healthy, and exercise daily to loosen muscles. I already do that every day,” the Point Man drawled, and Cobb had no reason to believe he was lying. “What I disagree with is the necessity for me to be seen by a therapist.”

“I require that you attend the trial session tomorrow afternoon for assessment, Mr. Tilmont,” Dr. Maxwell warned precisely, probably unaccustomed to having his authority challenged or brought into question. “After that we can discuss the possibility or necessity of further sessions. Now get some rest and I’ll be back tomorrow at eleven in the morning so we can discuss your results. Oh, Mr. Eames,” the man stopped in his tracks on his way towards the door, taking note of the state of the room. “Will you be requiring another bed?” he asked courteously.

“I’m sure it can be put to better use, doctor,” Eames waved the offer away and Dom caught the
sidelong wink he sent towards Arthur, who sent a silencing glare back. Without another word, Dr. Maxwell nodded his understanding and purposefully glanced away to slip out into the busy hospital corridors. As soon as it was just the three of them in the room together, he watched as Eames crossed the short distance to wrap his arms loosely around Arthur’s shoulders. “How did it go, darling?”

Cobb watched as Arthur slid away from Eames’s loose embrace carefully before stepping over to the bed and unzipping his bag. It was clear that Arthur was still in his defensive mindset, viewing everything as a job to be assessed and completed, every individual as a team member with their own strengths and weaknesses. He hoped that Eames would not take it personally, knowing the Forger needed Arthur’s comfort as much as Arthur needed Eames’s even though they were both too stubborn to outwardly admit it.

“I am the epitome of health,” Arthur proclaimed as he slipped his laptop out of his bag, doing a quick scan of the rest of the contents, taking inventory, before zipping it up again. Seeming to note that everything was in order, Arthur slid back onto the hospital bed with as little vocal protest as he could manage. Dom watched, exasperated as his friend did not take precautions to avoid causing himself further pain. “In fact, except for the psychosomatic pain and the anxiety and slight depression, I’m beyond healthy,” the other man continued to state as he settled back against the raised back of the mattress and powered up his laptop. “My cognitive abilities and memory surpassed normal levels.”

“Arthur,” Eames drew even with Arthur’s left elbow, towering over the man as he stood by the bed.

“Eames,” Arthur retaliated blankly, as if unaware of any reason for further discussion. His gaze did not leave the laptop screen as he typed in his passkey.

He could see the Forger cupping a palm beneath Arthur’s jaw, turning and tilting that emotionless face upward. When Eames leaned closer Arthur fell partially out of view behind the bulkier man, but Dom could still see the rather sweet, chaste kiss being planted on Arthur’s thin lips. Eames pulled away a moment later, leaving the other man to blink dazedly and lean up for another kiss. The affectionate smile on Eames’s face when he saw the movement and dipped down for a deeper kiss was priceless. It had Cobb’s heart bursting with enough happiness to overwhelm the sting of jealously.

He was just considering sneaking for the door when the kiss ended with a protesting groan from both men, even though they both seemed to pull away at the same moment. Arthur was blushing profusely, sending Dom a nervous glance before looking back up to Eames, biting his bottom lip uncertainly. Eames, in comparison, was leaning forward again, but this time to speak softly and seriously into his companion’s ear. “You are not a mark with case files to be analyzed before a job, love,” no doubt commenting on Arthur’s behaviour during the day.
“You’re right,” Dom was surprised to hear Arthur admit, looking at least partially relieved over the slight change in subject from the topic of kissing. “I will never overcome this if I don’t approach it as myself. I need to face my past in order to surpass it.”

“Right,” Eames beamed, dropping another quick peck of lips to Arthur’s forehead and causing the skin to wrinkle into a frown there. “And I’ll be there every step of the way to remind you how human you truly are, and are allowed to act. And first item on the agenda...” his proclamation was interrupted by the distinct sound of a stomach growling as it demanded food, “Is dinner.”

After another lingering kiss, Eames rifled through the bag he had left Dom in charge of guarding to pull out his wallet before disappearing in search of the hospital cafeteria. The room was permeated by silence and the clatter of Arthur’s fast typing on his keyboard for a few minutes and Dom was dumbfounded by the lightning-fast transformation the Point Man kept shifting through. He was not even sure if Arthur was consciously aware of what he was doing, but he was seamlessly shifting between professional Point Man and emotionally expressive boyfriend depending on Eames’s proximity. It was stunning to see Eames’s presence tear away and melt the professional persona Cobb had grown so accustomed to he had come to assume it was Arthur’s norm; he had been mistaken. Seeing Arthur openly express himself – everything from his adoration of Eames to his vulnerabilities and annoyances – was like a rare gift of enlightenment.

“I spoke with our old teammates,” he heard himself speaking, suddenly curious to see if Arthur would drop his mask for Dom as well.

“Oh?” Arthur raised a questioning eyebrow but never paused in his typing, eyes still fixated on the glowing laptop screen as the sun began to dip lower in the sky.

For a moment, Dom would describe himself as miffed. He had known Arthur for longer than Eames and, despite his mistakes, certainly annoyed the Point Man to a lesser extent. Why was he still being limited to Arthur’s professional mask? It might have had something to do with Arthur’s feelings for his companion, or what they had experienced and sacrificed for one another down in the dreamscape. Maybe it was because of Dom’s mistakes or simply the fact that Arthur knew this was the mask he had grown to expect from the Point Man. Either way, he realized that he didn’t truly mind Arthur still being somewhat distant for him; or at the very least couldn’t fault him for that. He was just pleased that Arthur had found someone he could share his deeper self with, someone who would not only accept that very private aspect of Arthur, but would cherish it as the gift it was.

“Yusuf sends his regards and demand you call him at your first available moment,” he explained lightly, feeling the same awkwardness he had experienced when calling their old teammates on Arthur’s behalf. “Saito informed me that you should check your bank accounts,” he repeated from
the previous phone conversation, mystified and suspicious of the words. Likewise, Arthur glanced over at him in confusion before focusing on his laptop again, eyebrows furrowed as he made a few pointed clicks. He watched with curiosity when those eyebrows extended into Arthur’s hairline as the man’s eyes widened. But rather than receiving an explanation, Arthur simply clicked a few more times and glanced back at him expectantly. “Ariadne was going to fly in but I told her you’d call her when you felt up to a visit. She’s gone very long-distance-mother-hen on you, I’m afraid.”

Arthur gave a tiny snort of laughter, one corner of those narrow lips quirkling upward. “I’m six years older than her.”

Dom laughed as well. “Like that would ever stop her.”

He watched as Arthur ran his fingers through messy black locks of hair – Cobb more than slightly surprised that the other man had not yet hunted down some hair gel by this point. He was somewhat confused when he saw Arthur’s smile falter and fall, morphing to sadness and then determination. “I’ll give her a call when I’m ready; I feel I shouldn’t have let us all grow so distant over the last year, though at the time I did not handle things well.”

“It’s never too late, Arthur,” Cobb reminded the other man, trying to maintain his attention as Arthur began glancing back at whatever was currently on his computer screen. “And on that note, you and Eames are both welcome to come to my place once you are released from the hospital. The kids would love to see you.”

Arthur glanced over at him with mild surprise, this time looking somewhat shy as he momentarily abandoned his laptop. “Thank you, Dom, but I think I need to take care of myself first this time. I’m sorry. There is somewhere else I have to visit before I can put this encounter behind me.”

“I understand,” he spoke quickly, trying to reassure Arthur that he was not mad at the Point Man for rejecting his offer.

Arthur nodded his thanks and took a minute to look out the window, a considering glint in those dark eyes. “When are you planning to leave for home?”

“I’m not sure,” he shrugged. “I plan on staying until your test results come back confirming everything is alright. After that, I was just planning on waiting to see if you would come home with me or in case you needed anything.”
He could hear the other man hum in thought for a moment, like the gentle hum of a running computer. “You should leave tomorrow. I’ll have the test results back by then and I’m sure James and Phillipa miss you terribly,” Arthur reasoned. Dom noted that his friend did not sound detached or angry – Arthur was not trying to get rid of him. The Point Man was just considering his own future plans and mystery travelling he had mentioned, as well as mentally calculating how many days he had been away from his children. Despite acting like a selfish egoist when working, Arthur truly was almost too altruistic for his own good.

“I may,” Dom admitted, unwilling to deny how much he missed having his children in his arms. “Though I wouldn’t want to leave pre-emptively only to have something happen, even if I would just be a phone call away.”

“Do as you wish,” Arthur reasoned, somehow managing to sound comfortably knowledgeable in his words. “But keep in mind that I will be getting out here as quickly as I can manage and there will not be much for you to do here.” Arthur began typing again but paused. “Just think on it.”

From then on, the room fell into a contemplative, comfortable silence as Dom internally debated on going home before busying himself with booking a flight for the afternoon after Arthur’s test results were due back. Eames returned shortly afterwards with Styrofoam bowls of soup and noodles, a salad, and a few bottles of water tucked precariously under an arm. There were three of everything, surprising Cobb, and they all ate in companionate silence.

It wasn’t long after the food was finished before Dom pulled out his paperback to finish the last chapter and Eames sprawled out on his proclaimed side of the bed. Arthur remained seated on the mattress for a while, still typing away, but the Extractor’s attention was drawn by a pause in keystrokes and a mock-annoyed huff of air. He glanced up to see that Eames had stolen Arthur’s right hand away from the keyboard and begun peppering kisses along that pale expanse of skin between yawns, focusing greatly on the wrist area. Arthur eventually gave up on work and packed away his laptop before adjusting the mattress flat and curling up under the blankets beside his companion.

It seemed like no time at all before Dom could hear quiet snores and even breathing coming from the bed, both dream workers still terribly exhausted from their encounter. He was not far behind though, feeling his eyelids droop waringly as he skimmed the last few pages of his book. Knowing he only had one more day of dealing with the uncomfortable sleeping accommodations, Cobb abandoned his book and found a washroom before curling up in his chair to follow his teammates into sleep, silently thankful that it was summer.

The next day passed in a blur, all three of them sleeping until Dr. Maxwell burst in with Arthur’s and Eames’s test results. Just as they had both proclaimed the day before, they were both generally healthy. Their brain scans also showed no anomalies, leaving them all with a cautionary belief that they would not experience any latent consequences. Cobb was pleased to hear the good news from
the doctor himself, rather than someone who might be influenced by wishful thinking, but he had to leave to get to the airport before Arthur was forced to endure his preliminary therapy session.

“Arthur,” he spoke quietly to draw the man’s attention as Eames and Dr. Maxwell debated some methods of helping Arthur work through the psychosomatic pain, the Point Man eavesdropping shamelessly. His friend turned to him curiously, giving Dom his full attention. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes,” he confessed guiltily, stomach twisting into painful knots as his words dragged up various memories. “I’m really sorry, and I’m just thankful that I have the opportunity to try to rectify them now.”

Arthur nodded, an understanding in those eyes that few could ever manage after so much trauma and disappointment. “I’ll call you after I get everything sorted.” Arthur offered his hand but Cobb pulled the man into his arms for a quick hug instead. The Point Man stiffened in his arms automatically, shifting away from him slightly to avoid physical contact on certain areas of his back, but Dom was relieved to feel Arthur reciprocate with an awkward but well-meaning hug. “Thank you for watching over me and Eames.”

“Anytime,” he promised as they pulled away from one another. Cobb had then wished farewell to Eames, thanked Dr. Maxwell, and rushed into the nearest taxi for the airport. He had been running late and just barely caught his flight, having hesitated at the thought of abandoning Arthur again after such a traumatic experience. But he hoped he had managed to part on better terms this time around, and that this would not be a permanent separation. He was also confident with his knowledge that Arthur would be more than alright with Eames by his side.

He was grateful that the flight was only a few hours in duration and that he was moving back across time zones, meaning that he still had a few hours of sunlight once he landed even though it felt like evening to him. Once he had a taxi, Cobb went directly to Melissa’s place, having texted ahead to let her know that he would be arriving shortly after dinnertime. Even though it would only take him a few minutes to rush over to his own house to drop off his stuff after the taxi arrived, he couldn’t help but dash directly up to Melissa’s door, dropping his travel bag onto the porch without a care.

When he knocked and heard eager feet rushing towards the door, he couldn’t help but grin in anticipation. He was already on his knees by the time the door got yanked open, arms spread to collect his two children as James and Phillipa squealed happily and rushed into his embrace. After just a few short days away from his children for the first time after being reunited with them, and after witnessing two of his closest friends nearly die, Dom found it impossible to let go of his children even when they began leaning away to talk excitedly over one another. Even though he thought he had seen the worst that the world could be during his time in dream work, Cobb had finally been forced to truly see the worst of humanity. He had been forced to recognize that it could happen to those he cared about.
He remembered his fear for Arthur and then Eames when they both went down under into the dream – the debilitating terror after Nikolas, Amelina and then Louis had all woken up in turn without their memories. Dom remembered his concern for Arthur when he saw the man limping and flinching away from a phantom pain, and the overwhelming relief that had washed over him when his teammates had woken up mostly in tact – supporting one another – and had their test results come back safe.

He was only aware of the fact that he was crying when James and Phillipa each reached forward with warm, delicate fingers to brush away the tears from his cheeks. “Why are you crying, daddy?” Phillipa asked him, looking sad at his tears. “You came home.”

“I did come home,” he nodded, sniffling because he was unwilling to release his hold on his two children quite yet. When he had left for New York and Arthur’s bedside, he had been besieged by the challenges of raising two children on his own; it had seemed impossible and very unfair. But now the thought of getting to make food for his children, to share his knowledge and help them with their homework, and to tuck them into bed each night seemed like a privilege – a blessing. And after what he had seen Arthur suffer through and sacrifice to keep his old team of friends safe, as well as what Eames had risked to save his beloved, Dom doubted he could ever find another reason to complain when things got a little difficult. “And I’m so glad to be home. I love you guys so much.”

“Love you,” James pulled close again for another hug, twining his little arms around Cobb’s neck. “Uncle Arthur?” he asked curiously, blinking up at him after leaning backwards, partially dragging Dom’s body forward with his arms still twined around the Extractor’s neck.

“Uncle Arthur is good,” Dom simplified with a relieved smile, knowing James and Phillipa were still too young to entirely understand what had been at stake if he tried to delve further into Arthur’s experience and current condition.

“We wished for him to get better every night. We wanted to help you help Uncle Arthur,” Phillipa admitted with a shy smile, also stepping forward into his embrace again. “We love you, daddy.”

“I’m sure your wishes helped Arthur a lot. Thank you both for helping him,” Dom kissed each of them on the forehead before pulling them close again. Hugging his two children close was like an addicting drug he would never grow tired of. It was after a long moment of holding them close, cherishing the sensation of them breathing in his hold as their hearts fluttered, when he realized Melissa was standing in the doorframe with a bright smile as she held James and Phillipa’s tiny travel bags. “Thank you so much for everything, Melissa,” he thanked his neighbour as he finally straightened from his crouching position.

“Anytime, Dominic,” Melissa graced him with a brilliant smile, offering up the children’s bags
when he reached for them.

“Let’s go home!” Phillipa shouted excitedly, smiling lovingly and proudly up at him.

“Home!” James agreed with a loud giggle, small hand clutching loosely at Dom’s pant leg as those big blue eyes looked up at him, sparkling in the late afternoon sunlight.

Cobb reached down and lifted his own bag, sliding the straps for all three bags over his right shoulder before sending one final grateful nod at Melissa. Then he glanced down at James and Phillipa, almost disbelieving in his luck, and took one of their hands in each of his own. “Yes, let’s go home."

Chapter End Notes

This isn't the end of the story. It's just the end of Cobb's story.
Part XV. Arthur

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XV. Arthur

Arthur forced himself not to tap a finger against the polished wood armrest of his chair, knowing therapists often looked for non-verbal ticks and behaviours to indicate their client’s feelings. He felt a little sorry for this middle aged woman who sat a few feet away from him on another chair, a notepad in hand. She seemed quite friendly and fairly competent at her job; Arthur was sure that many people would be willing to open up to her just because of her soft baby face and encouraging smile. But Arthur was not many people, and he felt bad that she had been paired with him as a potential client.

He had done a lot of reading on the entire field of psychology. It was extremely useful for his profession, having to understand how a mark’s and client’s mind worked. He had to know how to best approach the job, get the desired information, and manipulate the dreamscape for the best results. If he attempted to use fear on a mark, it would be just as likely for it to work as it would be for the mark to clam up and never speak again; Arthur had to understand the psychology of the mark, the client, and each individual team member to pull together the right research and plan the job.

But beyond that, Arthur had always had a strong interest in psychology and understanding how the human mind worked. Whether the focus was on emotions, communication, dreams, or anything else, he had no preference. This had aided him greatly over the years, able to overcome or at least understand his fears and weaknesses. But this strong background in the subject would do nothing to help the counsellor sitting across the room from him. Arthur knew what questions to expect and what answers would get him sent him home happily, and which answers would get him roped into further sessions of therapy. He knew what the woman was trained to look for, and how to manipulate his facial expressions and body movements to display whatever he wanted her to read from non-verbal cues.

She would get nothing out of Arthur that he did not wish to divulge.

“Hello, my name is Nancy. How are you feeling today, Arthur?” she asked, having just finished skimming over the file notes Dr. Maxwell had passed onto her about him. The Point Man did not react to the first name, knowing they liked to make these sorts of sessions more personal.

Bored. “Fine, thank you,” he gave a small, controlled smile, lacing his fingers together smoothly in his lap.
“I see here in the notes that you did not wish to attend this session,” she read off the notes before glancing up over the top rim of her glasses at him curiously, waiting for a reaction.

*Obviously not.* “I did not think it would be necessary,” he admitted, shrugging lightly.

“Well I hope I can change your mind and that this helps you deal with a few things,” the counsellor gave yet another encouraging smile. Arthur returned it with slightly less intensity and nodded. *Unlikely.* “So would you like to tell me why you are here?” she offered openly, trying to draw him into giving away more than he meant to.

Arthur knew what Nancy had read in the case file on him. He had asked Dr. Maxwell to read his own file, reading over the notes before promptly powering his laptop up as soon as he got back to his room. After that, he carefully hacked into the hospital’s database and read the uncensored files under his file, noting that the doctor had cut out a few things he had no doubt expected Arthur to have a fuss over. It was handy to have those pages of notes in his mind now, knowing how much he could admit about the PASIV and his experience without giving new information away.

“My subconscious was attacked by three dream workers when I was placed under the power of a PASIV device.” *No sense in letting you know my profession,* he added silently, hiding his smirk.

“Tell me more about that,” Nancy scribbled down a few notes before looking back up at him, tapping her pencil against the metal binding at the top of the notepad. “What specifically happened while you were asleep?”

*Sleep deprivation, starvation, dehydration, stress, anxiety, depression, fear, pain, torture...* “It was an exhausting experience more than anything else,” he began carefully, following the same script he had mentally created yesterday when forced to speak with Dr. Maxwell about his experience. “I found a hiding place to stay while the three dream workers attempted to find me and steal information from me. It felt like a week for me and I was basically stuck hiding until...well I guess the others decided to give up and took their own lives to get out,” he feigned ignorance, avoiding legal blame if anyone were to ask.

“And how did that make you feel?” Nancy asked him with concern, “Having to run and hide while three strangers tried to steal information from your subconscious?” She was digging for a response, and Arthur had to show some emotion. Just as showing too much fear and emotion could get him committed, showing no reaction at all could be equally destructive.
Terrified, hopeless...his mind supplied an impressive list of descriptive words, all of which he rejected. “It was certainly a scary experience,” he confessed, shifting his position in the chair slightly to shake off his mimicry of a statue. “I didn’t know what to do or if I’d ever survive, but I just did what I could and it worked.”

The woman nodded and jotted down a few more notes. “And I understand your friend came down with you?” Nancy checked the folder of files again, even though Arthur doubted she had forgotten such an important fact. “What was it like when he arrived? How did you feel?”

Relieved, determined, hopeful, loved... “It made the whole situation much less stressful when I knew I had a friend there helping me.” That, at least, was true. Having Eames down in the dream with him had added to his stress to some extent since Arthur began worrying about getting them both back to reality, rather than just keeping himself alive. But that had been heavily outweighed by the strength the Forger’s presence seemed to bring, calming and focusing Arthur’s mind. “We kept each other safe as we hid.”

The therapist nodded, looking a little disappointed when Arthur did not seem inclined to speak further on the matter. She stared at him for another moment in silence, increasing the expectancy for him to continue talking, and finally checked the chart again when he didn’t speak up. After that came the inevitable questions about his parents, his schooling, his profession, friends and relationships. It was hard to keep his patience as time wore on, no more interested in speaking about these topics than when Dr. Maxwell had herded him to this room an hour ago.

A few times he did allow a few truths out, a small needling sense of hope that maybe Nancy would have the answers and be able to help him. But everything she said was exactly what Arthur had already told himself – had been telling himself for years. Speaking with a therapist might be helpful for some people who struggled with introspection or finding resources, but it just left Arthur feeling drained and irritable. Soon he gave up and fell back behind his mask, desperate to just be out of the hospital and deal with things on his own. No – he reminded himself with a bubbling warmth in his stomach – not alone; he would be with Eames.

That thought made Arthur less concerned with the fact that therapy just didn’t seem to be helping him. Before, without having someone by his side, he would have felt frustrated and disappointed that yet another method for dealing with his past was failing. But now he could comfortably manoeuvre his way through the counselling session in order to move onto his own version of therapy that he knew would be far more challenging than sitting in front of a stranger and talking, but would be much more beneficial in the long run. It helped that the thought of having Eames there with him, no matter what, made the thought of confronting his past less terrifying.

After another thirty minutes of questions, Nancy had no choice but to surrender. She gave a few customary concluding lines, gave him a sheet of resources in case he needed to speak with her or another counsellor, shook his hand, and let him leave. Arthur made a beeline for the room he and
Eames had temporarily been moved to so that the larger room could be put to better use. He wanted to get out of the hospital as soon as possible before Nancy or Dr. Maxwell decided to change their minds about discharging him from their care.

“How did it go, darling?” was all Eames managed to get out when Arthur breezed into the small hospital room before Arthur stepped over to the bed his boyfriend was sprawled upon and pressed their lips together. It didn’t last long – he just wanted a reminder of how warm and soft Eames’s lips were – before he pulled away and packed up the last of his belongings into his bag. Eames chuckled and tried to pull him down onto the bed, only giving up and standing when Arthur swatted him away. “What was that for?”

“Because I could,” Arthur smirked, purposefully avoiding Eames advances.

Eames growled behind him, sending an anticipatory shiver up his spine, before nipping his ear warningly. “Always the tease.”

“Would you like me any other way?” he retorted as he slid his laptop away carefully, having already changed back into one of his casual suits before being dragged to his mandatory counselling session.

“I would like you any way, sweetheart.” The soft, pleasant tone had Arthur pausing and glancing back at the Forger, as if seeing him for the first time. “Don’t give me that look. You know I’ve liked you since Inception.”

Arthur blinked at the other man for a moment, realizing suddenly that they had never really taken the time to talk about this. Eames had flirted with him during the Inception job while Arthur avidly skirted any chance of getting involved; he had failed, obviously, but he had managed to keep his distance despite his desire for the other man. Then Eames had placed his number into Arthur’s palm and disappeared, and Arthur had never indulged in the opportunity. After that, they had been brought together in a fight for their very survival, Arthur had uttered words he had never thought would leave his lips again, thinking he would die. Eames had returned the sentiment in the moment of panicked relief when Arthur had finally woken, they had kissed, and then their attention had fallen onto making sure they would not keel over and die in their sleep.

“Eames...” he began, disturbed to find himself momentarily speechless.

“Don’t worry, pet,” Eames gave him a reassuring smile before turning away to stuff the last few items back into his travel bag, letting the Point Man off the hook. “I don’t mind waiting; we can talk about it when you’re ready.”
He watched Eames for a moment, hesitating, and then realized that he was being a coward. Arthur closed the distance between them and caught Eames’s hands with his own, stilling them and drawing the man’s attention. He could see the hope there in those beautiful eyes that caught the afternoon sun – the love and patience. “I am ready,” he promised confidently, “There’s just something else I have to deal with first.”

Eames took advantage of their clasped hands and drew Arthur’s arms up and over his broad shoulders until they were around Eames’s neck. “Lead the way, darling,” the man whispered against his lips before kissing him on the corner of his mouth – a promise of things to come. Arthur smiled at the contact, the edge of his lips quirking up under warm lips, and then pulled away regretfully.

They packed the last of their personal belongings away and left the hospital room quickly, not even sparing it a second glance as the door slid shut behind them. They stopped by Dr. Maxwell’s office for the final confirmation that they could leave the hospital and an attempted but inevitably stiff ‘thank you’ from Arthur. They would have been able to disappear easily without confirmation, but it was easier to simply avoid legal issues. The hospital bills had already been taken care of by Saito, which Arthur had discovered the night before when checking his bank statements after Dom’s suggestion. A short statement had been attached to the deposit of money – To protect my investments – but Arthur saw no reason to attempt arguing the point or try to return the money.

The doctor had looked unimpressed with them leaving so soon, clearly wanting Arthur to attend more counselling sessions. However, they were legally allowed to make their own decisions and there was no reason Dr. Maxwell had to detain them. So he gave his own farewell and best wishes before they had exited the hospital and snatched up the first taxi they caught on the road. Arthur hated hospitals with a passion and did not want to remain in one for any longer than was absolutely necessary. He didn’t care that his body still ached painfully from the torture he had suffered down in the dreamscape; he doubted anything at the hospital could prove to be a cure so he just wanted to reclaim his freedom and find his own cure.

There was no time to rejoice their freedom from the hospital as they raced for the airport before they missed their flight. Arthur had been sure to book the soonest flight possible to their next destination, knowing that if he had too much time to think about what he was about to do, he would run in the opposite direction. Eames didn’t question him as they checked in under ‘Arthur Walkens’ and received two boarding passes to southern California in return. He appreciated that, embarrassed but knowing Eames was aware that Arthur was just waiting for some excuse to bolt and never look back. He also decided not to mention how Saito’s money was buying their plane tickets. The man, beyond paying for his hospital bill, had placed a gross sum of money in one of his off-shore accounts along with his simple message. He hadn’t know what to say to that since Arthur wasn’t even sure he was going to go back into the business, and decided to keep it silent for the moment.
Security was not horrendous since they were flying midday, which Arthur was grateful for so that he was not forced to run through the sterile terminal to their gate as the loudspeaker crackled to life and began calling passengers for their flight. He felt an anxious tension course through him when he heard that announcement, feeling like he should run as he worried they might miss their flight and yet wishing desperately that they would miss it for an excuse to avoid this. However Eames just kept up his relaxed pace beside Arthur, seeming entirely unperturbed by the announcements calling passengers. Arthur hated the limp that was still persistent in his leg without any choice of his own – putting weight on it was almost unbearable as it was – but it was a little less frustrating when Eames didn’t make a big deal of it.

They made it to their gate as they were making the final call and stepped onto the plane easily, both of them accustomed to travelling. The plane was small and most of the first class section was empty as he and Eames settled down in their two chairs side by side at the front of the cabin. Arthur took the window seat and slid his laptop free of his bag, settling it in the pouch in front of him before passing his bag on to Eames to store in the overhead compartment. It was oddly familiar and comfortable having the Forger settle into the large chair next to him as the flight crew began preparing for takeoff, the man glancing over his shoulder through the window with no acknowledgement of personal boundaries.

They both remained silent as the plane was taxied to the runway and took off, watching the ground fall away through their tiny window. It was only after the seatbelt signs had been turned off and the first class flight attendant had come by for their drink orders when Eames hummed thoughtfully and shoved the armrest between their chairs out of the way. Before Arthur really knew what was going on, Eames had carefully leaned over and hooked his hand under the Point Man’s calves, rotating and hoisting his legs up until his ankles hooked perfectly against Eames’s thigh. “Eames...” he protested weakly, noticing the few other passengers in first class glancing over at them before politely looking elsewhere.

“As soon as the man’s fingers began massaging the skin beneath the fabric of his suit pants, Arthur was finished. His body had already been twisted so that his back was resting against the wall of the plane, his whole body faced towards Eames while his calves were sprawled across the man’s thighs. He thought of protesting for another moment and then another faint but determined voice flitted through his mind, ‘He’s doing this for you. Stop being stubborn and let him.’

Arthur blinked his eyes open quickly and then immediately crushed them closed again, trying to focus inward. He would never consider himself schizophrenic, even with his latest experience in the dream. But that voice had sounded slightly different from his own, and also incredibly familiar – the one that always spoke up and reminded him of when he was being stubborn to the point of stupidity. It was gone as quickly as it had arrived, fading away until the next time Arthur needed a
reminder, but it left a comforting warmth in the back of his mind – George.

With that thought in mind, Arthur smiled softly and allowed the back of his head to rest against the vibrating wall of the plane, sighing deeply. There was something incredibly therapeutic about his companion’s hands on him, massaging away his pain. It almost felt as though Eames was taking away the pain into his own body and replacing it with warmth through his affectionate touches.

He wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, Eames’s fingers occasionally wandering to either work on his right thigh or down to his ankles. All he knew was that the flight attendant had already brought him two drinks, not commenting on their position, and that this could never last long enough. It was just when Arthur felt his eyes drooping closed slightly, exhaustion still plaguing him often, that he heard Eames clear his throat quietly – trying to discern if Arthur felt like talking. The Point Man knew he could keep his eyes closed and remain silent if he wished to, knowing Eames would continue his wonderful work without complaint, but he had to stop running. So Arthur blinked his eyes open and considered the other man questioningly, trying not to look as defensive as he felt. “So...” Eames began carefully, fingers still moving but eyes meeting his almost eagerly. “Arthur Tilmont?”

Arthur narrowed his eyes and tensed beneath Eames’s fingers before he could truly consider his options. The Forger glanced up at him when he felt Arthur’s body tense, equally curious and nervous. Arthur forced himself to breathe slowly and relax the tense muscles in his body – not just to assure Eames, but also because the tightness across his body was making his residue pain flare up. He focused on those warm fingers again, which had come to rest hesitantly on his calf. “What is the last name an enemy would expect you to use?” he questioned the Forger curiously, drawing his attention. “Your real name.”

It was nerve-wracking to admit his real name to Eames, no matter what he felt for the other man. He had spent years running away and hiding from who he really was, forsaking the name that tied him to his painful childhood – to his disappointed parents and dead twin sister. But he felt the last of his fears slip away when Eames began massaging again, teasingly slipping a few fingers beneath the hem of his pants. “Then I suppose it’s only fair that I tell you my real name as well, right, love?”

The curl of those full lips, nervous, excited and affectionate, had Arthur’s heart beating quickly in his chest. “You don’t have to,” Arthur breathed, confident. “I’ve already known it for a while.” He watched as Eames glanced over at him sharply, a little startled. “Now don’t give me that look,” he chided, mimicking the other man’s tone from earlier in the day. “I am the best, after all.”

“Bullshit,” Eames whispered, trying to call his bluff. Arthur considered the other man for a moment, trying to figure out if he had overstepped his boundaries. Should he have just let Eames tell him on his own; would Eames regret this now that Arthur had cornered him into the decision? He bit his lip, noting that the Forger did look a little uncertain, but also seemed to be humming with
eager anticipation. So Arthur scooted towards the aisle slightly until his knees bent down over Eames’s thigh and then he leaned up and whispered the name in that waiting ear. When he pulled away to regard Eames’s face, looking for a reaction, he saw that those cheeks were flushed beneath newly budding stubble. His boyfriend turned to him, pupils blown a little wide and so close that his breath ruffled a few strands of Arthur’s bangs. “I should get you to start calling me that more often, darling,” Eames whispered, sounding a little flustered before those lips were on his own.

Arthur’s eyes fluttered closed immediately, hiding away the rest of the first class cabin with little care about how the other passengers were responding. Instead, he pushed himself up against Eames’s body as tightly as he could manage, arms carefully winding around the man’s shoulders with one hand burying into those soft, short hairs at the base of Eames’s neck. He could feel the other man’s hand resting on his leg cautiously, making sure they didn’t cause any further injuries as the Forger pulled him closer. Their bodies were nearly pressed together when Arthur pulled away for air, breathing hard. He knew his cheeks were red as they tingled, and he whispered that name again against moist lips, only to smile when Eames groaned and pulled him into a harsher kiss.

They were interrupted a moment later by the flight attendant clearing her throat, but the damage had already been done. Arthur pulled away, flushed, dazed, and hair no doubt in a state of disarray. Eames looked even more inappropriate, bottom lip red and swollen from where Arthur had suckled it teasingly. Arthur didn’t want to stop kissing his partner, didn’t want to move away. But he knew that if they continued much longer, he would have a bigger issue to deal with and he was not desperate enough to risk those tiny airplane bathrooms. So with one final, lingering kiss to Eames’s seeking lips, Arthur dragged himself back into his own seat; he tried to remember when he had fully ended up in the other man’s lap.

Some of the other passengers were given them scandalized or annoyed glances, while the rest looked uncaring or completely zoned out as they watched the small television screen in front of them. When he glanced back over to Eames, he saw that the other man looked close to hoisting him into his arms and dragging him to the bathroom anyway – cramped spaces and death glares be damned. Eames had already dragged Arthur’s legs back over to rest over his thighs again. In order to deter him, Arthur snatched his laptop and turned it on quickly, falling back behind his mask of professionalism. He had no other choice; Eames was far too tempting, now that Arthur was actually allowing himself to admit his feelings and desires.

It took a long time to calm down, especially with Eames attempting to slide his fingers beneath the fabric of his pants again. But Arthur swatted him away until the Forger finally gave a disheartened huff of air and leaned back against his chair, pouting. He eventually felt his body calming again, though the blood running through his veins still seemed to be pulsing with something heady that he could barely grasp. Arthur watched Eames through his lashes occasionally as the man finally decided to distract himself with a movie. He tried to hide the smile curling his lips upward as Eames hugged Arthur’s legs close absentmindedly while watching the screen; it was wonderfully natural and intimate.
With a little under two hours remaining of the flight, Arthur decided to return to the research he had been doing the day before while talking with Cobb. Since he had escaped the dreamscape, Arthur had felt heavy and rundown, like everything that had happened to him – not just the wounds and pain – was chained to him for him to drag along behind him. It was frustrating and exhausting, and at first Arthur had been unsure he’d be able to handle it. It seemed ridiculous to struggle through a week of mental and physical war, including torture, only to crumble and surrender once you escaped your enemies’ clutches. But the weight of his fears and guilt pulled him down until he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get out of bed in the morning.

He had been terrified that it would poison whatever this was budding between him and Eames, that he would question every look and touch until he eventually ran away again. But there was something about Eames’s shyly flirtatious looks at him when he thought Arthur wasn’t looking, or the way he treated each opportunity to touch Arthur like a precious gift he could never grow tired of. Just waking up and having his companion by his side had caused some of the weight to fall away, making it easier to breathe and think as he gathered his courage to continue on.

Talking to Dom had done something similar, wiping away the fears he had harboured ever since his friend had abandoned him at his first chance, only made stronger by Louis’s intervention. To some extent, he still felt like he was standing on thin ice with Cobb. He realized it would be necessary to test the ground beneath his feet to make sure it didn’t give way before he could fully trust in Dom again; but the man had extended his hand and given him the basis for steady footing. Their relationship would require more work for them to return to how things were in the past, but it was far from impossible.

Arthur hoped that learning more about Tyson would help him shuck more of this weight pulling him down. He had collected a folder full of information on the man back at the hospital when he had had access to internet, so he decided to spend the trip shifting through the various documents, articles and photographs he had scrounged up. Nothing was really helping his quest to relieve some guilt at first, every block of text discussing the conflicts and hardships the man had struggled through in order to relearn everything. There were also a few later articles discussing family and relationship issues for the man – the media still keeping half its attention on him due to his unique situation.

The Point Man was beginning to give up hope when he clicked open one of the last PDF files he had managed to salvage. He knew he could do more searches once they landed and he found a new internet source, but each passing article made him dread the search more and more. It felt like his heart was sinking into his stomach. Forcing himself to look back at the screen was challenging, unsure of how many more guilt-inducing stories he could handle. But when he did finally look down, the laptop screen painfully bright as his eyes grew weary, the news article title caught his attention.

He read through the article so quickly he had to slow down and reread it a second time once he was finished. It was only when Eames glanced over at him and squeezed his leg lightly to catch his attention that Arthur realized his cheeks were hurting with how widely he was smiling. He looked
up to meet his partner’s gaze and was confused to see Eames watching him with glazed eyes. “What?” he asked, suddenly feeling subconscious.

Eames just blinked and stared at him for another few seconds, effectively causing Arthur’s heart to begin fluttering at an embarrassing pace. “You...have dimples,” his boyfriend stated in a dazed whisper, as if sharing the newly-discovered meaning of life. Arthur’s smile dropped immediately, shy and embarrassed with the sudden attention. He couldn’t remember the last time he had smiled so broadly, almost forgetting that he used to have dimples as a child. But then he was struggling to fight his smile down as it threatened to overtake his face; Eames was staring at him like he was the sun, leaning close as though drawn to him. “You’re beautiful.”

“Eames...” he hedged uselessly, pressing his back against the wall behind him and hiding behind his laptop as best he could, bashful.

The Forger had sidled up as close as he could manage, thighs supporting Arthur’s own thighs now. Arthur felt him push the laptop down into his lap, exposing his face as Eames leaned in closer. “Absolutely gorgeous,” he breathed as he dropped one sweet kiss on each dimple affectionately. Arthur allowed the attention, radiating with warmth as Eames kissed one and then the other dimple. After that, he turned inward strategically to brush those tempting lip, pulling Eames into yet another unplanned kiss. This time they had the sense to stop before they got told off or separated, but Eames remained close as their lips broke apart. “What has you so happy, darling?”

To answer the question, Arthur flipped his laptop around so that the screen was directed towards Eames while the man settled back into his respective seat. He watched as his partner scrutinized the article title and the associated picture before skimming through the rest of the article. He knew the man was finished reading the article when Eames’s eyes sought his over the top of the laptop, a proud smile on his lips; he understood. “Despite all of his struggling, Tyson managed to find some good in it. He wanted to give others a second chance by starting a support centre for those with learning disabilities.”

“And how are you, love?” Eames asked warmly, brushing a few rebellious strands of hair away from Arthur’s face. The Point Man had been unimpressed to say the least when he had found that his hair gel was missing from his travel bag – he strongly suspected Eames’s guilt – but he couldn’t exactly remember why he had been so upset now that his hair and scalp was getting so much attention. It reminded him of that first night in the dreamscape with Eames, curled up against him and feeling like they could conquer the world as those fingers threaded through his hair. And they had conquered the world; now they had moved onto the world of Arthur’s past.

“Relieved,” he admitted as answer to Eames’s question. “There’s still a part of me that will always remember those glassy eyes as I ran away from the hospital. What I did was wrong, and I can’t take it back.” Arthur bit his lip, leaning into the touch selfishly when his boyfriend began petting his hair comfortingly. “But I feel like I can move on now, knowing that something good eventually
came from it all for Tyson.”

“Allow yourself to let it go, sweetheart,” Eames pleaded quietly.

Arthur was silent for a moment, mulling over the request. It was hard to let something like this go, to permanently fall into his past where it would no longer cause him distress. It still felt like a failure, both to him and to Tyson. But he knew there was nothing else he could do and had to move on, knowing that Tyson had already managed to overcome his suffering and bring something positive from it. Eventually Arthur nodded, not agreeing verbally but knowing Eames understood anyway. After that his companion disappeared to his own chair again after one final kiss to the forehead and Arthur felt himself curling up in the large seat, exhausted but relaxed with his newfound relief.

The next time he was conscious, Eames was shaking his shoulder lightly. He blinked his eyes open blearily, body feeling sluggish and mind feeling rundown. Despite the fact that he had not experienced any nightmares or flashbacks while he was asleep, he still felt exhausted quite frequently during the day. It felt as though he truly had experienced the week of sleepless nights and torture-filled days; not just his subconscious. Either way, he allowed Eames to marshal him into sitting in his seat properly for landing.

He felt the plane touch down on the long pavement runway as he began waking up again, a jolt of nervous energy rushing through his system when he realized where he was – what he was here to do. The sense of urgency pushed him into a standing position as soon as the seatbelt light turned off again, Eames following his lead and grabbing their bags before sneaking the Point Man out of the plane first. He could tell that Eames was curious about why they were here, as well as Arthur’s reaction to their landing. The Forger remained silent though, totting his own bag and matching Arthur’s quick pace as they made their way out of the airport and into the first town car they saw.

Both of them kept their bags by their feet in the back of the car, far too untrusting to leave their bags out of sight and out of reach in the trunk. For a moment they sat there in silence, leading the driver to glance back at them questioningly between the two front seats. Eames glanced over at him as well and captured his hand comfortingly, rubbing circles into the back of his hand with his thumb. Startled into action, Arthur gave out an address and settled back into his seat when the car’s engine started up. He gripped Eames’s hand a little harder as the sleek black car pulled away from the curb and joined the heavy traffic surrounding the airport, noticing that the other man was still watching him curiously.

Arthur took a deep breath and turned his body towards Eames more, reminding himself that the Forger had risked everything to save him and was unlikely to turn and run now. “I’ve been running from my past since I was ten...” he began hesitantly, eyes skimming over Eames’s form to read any reactions to his words. His partner remained relaxed and calm, watching him neutrally without interrupting him; simply waiting for Arthur to speak as he felt comfortable. “I--” he began and
choke on his words, mouth suddenly dry.

He yanked his hand from Eames’s grasp as though burned and looked away, purposefully watching the California landscape pass by through the window. His breathing was quick, chest rising and falling on the verge of hyperventilating, and his eyes stung with determined tears he continued to fight. He hated how weak and vulnerable the memories of his past made him feel and act, which was why he had always chosen to run instead of facing it. How long would this last? Would he ever be able to think about his parents and Diane – all of his happy memories with them – without feeling a very solid, very debilitating weight of guilt?

“Arthur,” Eames spoke softly, as though approaching a skittish animal. Arthur pulled away from his companion further against his will, pressing himself against the car door. The only thing he hated more than feeling this weak was appearing this weak in front of others, even if it was just Eames and some random car driver. “At some point you’ll need to stop fretting over how you look and focus on dealing with things.” The Point Man took a deep breath and nodded, forcing down the negative feelings roiling inside him before turning towards the Forger. “I didn’t mean by hiding away behind your professional mask, love,” Eames added sadly, snatching up his hand before he could withdraw again. “This isn’t a job, darling; this is your life.”

“I don’t know how to deal with this without breaking, Eames,” Arthur admitted dejectedly, focusing his attention to where their hands were linked, soaking in the warmth of Eames’s hand at points of contact. “I worry I’ll break and won’t be able to put the pieces back together again.”

It felt odd to vocalize his fears, his lack of confidence in his own ability to deal with something when that was his whole job in the dream field. Eames’s response was even more startling to hear. “Maybe you need to let yourself break in order to understand the individual pieces and put yourself back together again, sweetheart,” his boyfriend suggested carefully. “One of the most amazing things about being human is how many times we can be broken and yet get back up again and continue on.” Arthur remained stiff in his chair, confused by the man’s words; how would breaking apart help anything? However, Eames kept a determined hold of his limp hand and began skimming his lips across Arthur’s fingers, knuckles and palms, displaying his affection clearly. “There is no shame in moments of weakness, Arthur. And I’ll be there to help you put the pieces back together again.”

“I got my twin sister killed,” Arthur blurted out in a rush, barely breathing as his eyes widened. He watched Eames cautiously, looking for any adverse reactions to his statement; focusing on the feel of the man’s hand holding his own as he lowered it away from his mouth but continued stroking with his thumb softly.

“Diane?” Eames questioned hesitantly, and he must have seen Arthur’s reaction when his eyes widened further and then narrowed in confusion. “I’m sorry. It’s just that Amelina was trying to persuade me into giving her information by tempting me with information about your past. It
“I should have told you sooner,” Arthur offered tiredly, feeling somewhat lost now that he had finally spoken his biggest secret. He had been harbouring Diane’s death away for so long – from himself as much as those around him – that it felt equally freeing and disconcerting to let it go. However adverse the effects, it had become a part of who he was. “It probably would have saved us a lot of time and trouble...”

“Don’t worry, darling,” Eames reassured him warmly, never letting go of Arthur’s hand or twitching away like he wished to withdraw his comfort. “There’s no sense worrying about the ‘what if’s and besides...” the Forger smirked impishly and hooked his free right arm around Arthur’s shoulders to drag him against Eames’s warm, solid body. “We’ve been a little preoccupied.”

Arthur didn’t fight it when his head came to rest on Eames’s broad shoulder; in fact, he melted into the contact and squeezed the man’s large left hand gratefully. He readjusted himself until his legs were curled up on the seat beside him as his body fell more solidly against Eames’s stabling one. Then he took a few silent, deep breaths, breathing in the unique and calming scent that was his companion while his body soaked up the late afternoon sunlight streaming in through the tinted windows. And then he began his story. He didn’t care that the stranger driving the car was no doubt listening in due to boredom. He didn’t care when a few stray tears escaped as he blinked away the sunlight, allowing them to tickle his cheeks as they slid and fell away slowly. He didn’t care about those moments when he fell silent for a few moments, swallowing down the sensation of glass in his throat or taking a few deep breaths as he collected his thoughts.

All Arthur cared about was the fact that Eames never once interrupted, never withdrew his hold, never rushed him. All he cared about was sharing this with Eames, to show how much he trusted and loved the man holding him close.

By the time he was finished his story, Arthur was a shaky mess. His mouth was dry, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, his eyes were burning, his breathing was quick, his limbs were trembling, his whole body felt exhausted, and he was wondering if every wound he had received in the dreamscape had suddenly manifested across his body. However, Eames pulled him down without a word until Arthur was tangled up in the seatbelt but ended up with the back of his head resting on the Forger’s thighs, blinking up at those beautifully expressive eyes. The belt buckle was digging into his back and his arm left arm was stretched back slightly to maintain its grasp of Eames’s hand, but he couldn’t bring himself to complain. Eames was so gorgeous, adoring and understanding as he stared down at him. And as Eames’s newly freed right hand began threaded through his hair, Arthur felt...lighter.

They were silent for a long while, watching and studying one another as though they had just discovered the other. At one point Arthur shuffled off the belt buckle and reached up to cup...
Eames’s cheek awkwardly with his free palm, teasing the stubble he found there. He wondered when Eames would speak and what the man would say after hearing Arthur’s deepest, darkest secret. He would be anxious about the duration of silence between them except for the loving smile curling those lush lips at one corner, tinged only with a sadness the Point Man could understand. “I’m so sorry that had to happen to you, love,” Eames eventually offered, the best he – the best anyone – could offer after hearing such a story.

Arthur didn’t fault him for it though, for not knowing the magical words that would make all of his guilt and fear fade away forever. There really was nothing to say at this point, especially after how many years had passed. The only thing that mattered to him was the fact that Eames was still holding him close like a best friend and lover. The man was sad for his suffering, but was not considering Arthur differently for his past mistakes. “I am as well,” he agreed pointlessly, simply wanting to fill the silence. “But I’m thankful that I somehow managed to find you despite everything.”

Eames smiled down at him, smile as warming as the sun as it bathed over Arthur. The Forger snatched his hand from his cheek to plant a delicate kiss on the soft, sensitive skin of Arthur’s palm, suckling teasingly at the centre for a moment. The point of contact tingled even after the man’s lips drew away, returning Arthur’s hand to his control before Eames slipped his fingers back into the Point Man’s hair. Arthur held his hand in front of his face for a moment, inspecting it curiously before dropping it back into his lap.

He had been expecting to feel a new wave of heavy guilt wash over him after talking about Diane and his parents, as well as how he had run away and never dared to look back. He had also been anticipating a new swarm of exhaustion and fear to overtake him, dragging him back down. But as he lay sprawled across the expensive leather of the town car, California landscape whizzing by too quickly for him to focus on, sun spilling across him, and the comforting feel of Eames’s body and fingers against him, Arthur felt rejuvenated. Confessing all of this to Eames and sharing his thoughts had made him feel like he was finally making up for the guilt, finally confronting the memories he never should have abandoned out of fear. He still had to confront his parents and Diane to fully find peace with his past, but he felt tranquil and strong, like he actually had a chance at finding peace.

It wasn’t long after that when he felt the car turn off the freeway and slow to a pace suitable for a suburban area. He knew they must be getting closer but he remained lying across the seat and Eames’s lap; the other man didn’t seem to mind the close proximity and it was aiding Arthur in keeping his fears at bay. Eventually he ran out of time though, the car slowing to a stop as the driver called that they had arrived. Eames blinked down at him, silently questioning whether Arthur was ready. “A kiss for luck?” Arthur breathed hopefully, feeling childish and shy but uncaring in that moment.

Eames grinned at that and leaned down, angling Arthur up slightly by raising his thighs. As soon as he was close enough, Arthur wound his arms around his partner’s neck, fingers digging into the fabric of the man’s shirt and the hair at the back of his head. He hoisted himself up into a seated
position, unperturbed as he twisted around to meet Eames’s inviting lips, the kiss lingering and encouraging. Then he forced himself to pull away and drag their bags out onto the sidewalk while Eames handed over the necessary bills to the driver. He was ready to meet his past face to face and come out victorious.

Chapter End Notes

In regards to Eames's 'real name'. I purposefully didn't choose a name because I don't like naming other peoples' characters, and I feel like everyone will have their own 'perfect' name for Eames. So I just left it up to your individual imaginations. Actually, I kind of feel like the scene worked out well as it did :)
When the town car drove away, Eames coming to stand steadily by his side, Arthur found himself frozen. The house he was standing in front of really hadn’t changed in the slightest since he had looked upon it for the last time so many years ago. There were a few indications of aging and weathering, but it still matched his memories perfectly. The driveway was still paved and the fence surrounding most of the yard was still the ‘eggshell white’ his father had insisted was different than ‘bone white’, although the colouring had faded. The grass was green and lush, looking inviting as a sprinkler spread water over the lawn in conservative amounts.

The house itself looked like an old-fashioned stone farmhouse shoved into a spacious suburban area, the burgundy bricks catching the evening sunlight. Many of the windows across the house were pushed open for fresh air and the garage door was only halfway closed, revealing shelves of clutter and tools. The veranda hugging the front portion of the house looked brand new and Arthur could make out what appeared to be an open pail of paint sitting on the bottom step. Summer projects – as if nothing had ever happened, as if nothing had ever changed.

And there, watering the flowers as if Arthur had simply stepped back in time and off the school bus at the end of a long day, was his father. The man was certainly older – Arthur could not have expected anything else – but the gray hair looked distinguished rather than frail. The Point Man was surprised to find himself somewhat proud and eager to have a father who looked so confident, regal and yet relaxed in his older years. That was, of course, if the man accepted him back into the family, which was not guaranteed.

With an encouraging nudge from Eames, Arthur took a few measured steps off the sidewalk and down the driveway towards his father, who currently had his back turned while he focused on the flowers which had wilted in the hot summer air. He couldn’t bring himself to call out to the man – not knowing how he should address him after all this time – but he was saved from the decision when his father turned at the sound of footsteps on the sun-soaked pavement. Arthur fell still as his father’s gaze pinned him in place, unable or unwilling to move. He watched with a building sense of anticipation as his father shielded his eyes from the sun to regard him curiously. And then... “Hi, can I help you?”

Arthur’s heart began throbbing in his chest so quickly he thought it might just crack and shatter apart. *Doesn’t recognize me. Doesn’t remember me. Doesn’t know me. Doesn’t want me.* He took a hasty step backwards, ready to flee, and ended up stumbling back against Eames’s chest. He had not realized his companion had followed down the driveway behind him, bags slung over a shoulder haphazardly. Arthur was ready to turn and run, but he felt Eames’s right hand come to clasp his upper arm solidly; it was a reassuring, rather than demanding touch. “I--” Arthur managed but fell silent again, swallowing thickly.
He could see his father frowning at him in confusion, taking another few steps closer. Arthur’s breathing was picking up – why had he thought he could do this? – when his father paused again and dropped his hand back to his side, squinting at the two dream workers. There was a long drawn out moment of silence in which Arthur wasn’t quite sure he remembered how to breathe, fighting for each swallow of oxygen. And then he knew his heart had stopped working, because his father couldn’t have just said that name...But he did. And again... “Arthur? Is that...really you?”

For a moment he was tempted to shake his head in the negative and leave, claiming to have the wrong house. How easy would it be to walk away, grab a taxi and never return? Never face his parents’ disappointed faces again? So easy...too easy. And there was Eames’s hand on his arm, squeezing encouragingly. “I...yeah,” he finished uselessly, unsure of what to expect when the shock fell away from his father’s face. “It’s me.”

No matter how many times Arthur had imagined this moment, all the different reactions and expressions he had envisioned in response to his sudden return to his parents’ house, he had been wrong. His father rushed up to him without preamble and gathered him up in a tight hug, momentarily sweeping him away from Eames’s stable presence. Arthur blinked in surprise as he stood awkwardly in his father’s arms, partially returning the hug but too stunned to really do much else. They stayed like that for a long time, hot sun beating down on them, and Arthur wasn’t sure whether to feel uncomfortable or relieved.

Eventually his father pulled away just enough to regard his face, studying Arthur like a cherished, forgotten puzzle. “My boy...” the man whispered in awe, eyes the same shade as Arthur’s knew his were in the dimming sunlight. “Look at how you’ve grown. We thought...” his father choked on a sob as tears began streaming down his slightly wrinkled cheeks. The Point Man felt a new wave of guilt, knowing that it was by his intervention that his parents believed their only remaining child had died. “Nevermind, nevermind, you have to come inside,” his father offered before hustling him into the house. Arthur sent a frantic look back over his shoulder at Eames, who gave him a small smile and a nod to show that he was coming. “Honey! Come quickly!” the man yelled as he led the two dream workers into the warm but comfortable house.

“What is it?” he heard a disembodied voice call from where he knew the kitchen was located, but Arthur found himself distracted as he stepped back into his childhood home after more than a decade. Things had changed much more in the interior than on the outside, but it was still his home through and through. They were standing in the front foyer looking down a newly carpeted hallway towards the stairs leading to the second floor. He could see the edge of the living room on his right and the dining room on his left, evening sunlight filling the room and adjoined kitchen. The house even smelled of the herbs his mother had always kept in the kitchen, the heat of the sun only amplifying the scent. There were framed photographs along the wall beside him; many of them depicting their family before everything had gone wrong. Smiling faces looking back at him tauntingly, and Arthur wondered if he would ever have that back.
“You’ll never guess who just showed up on our doorstep,” his father called as hurried footsteps approached them. The door clicked closed behind him and Eames, Arthur’s father placed a solid hand on his shoulder, and Arthur felt himself tense up – trapped. No turning back now.

It did not take his mother as long as his father to recognize him – Arthur could see the flash of recognition in her honey shaded eyes – but it took her a long time to move after she had stumbled to a quick stop. Once she had crossed the foyer though and pulled him into a similar hug, Arthur knew he would not be getting away anytime soon. After his mother’s arms had encircled him, his father’s arms joined in, effectively locking him in place as his parents – and eventually Arthur himself – began crying. He felt a little ridiculous for breaking apart so easily, but a quick glance at Eames made him realize that this was the point and that the Forger did not think less of him for it.

For a minute, Arthur was left alone in the living room of his parents’ house with Eames settled comfortably beside him. He glanced over at his companion, eyes puffy and sore, and found that the Forger was already watching him in a way that could only be described as loving. “I'm so proud of you, darling,” Eames spoke softly, brushing a few drying tears away tentatively before they were interrupted. Arthur gave a grateful smile before returning his attention to his parents as they bustled back into the living room and sat on the other couch beside theirs.

“Um, before anything...” Arthur began nervously, back stiff against the couch cushions, “Eames, these are my...my parents; Ryan and Mary. And...I’d like to introduce my partner, Eames.” He didn’t know how his parents would react to the news; they had thought their son was dead until ten minutes prior, and now he was also informing them that he was gay. He hoped desperately that they would understand, but even if they didn’t, this had to come first because Eames was the one he needed and wanted by his side for life. Arthur reached over and clasped Eames’s hand demonstratively, taking his comfort in the way their hands wound together perfectly.

His parents blinked at him for a moment, looking between them and their joined hands in surprise before smiling welcomingly. Arthur immediately felt his shoulders relax slightly as Eames squeezed his hand before standing up to greet his parents. Arthur’s father extended his hand, which Eames shook, and then his mother reached up on her tip toes to give the large man a hug. “It’s...it’s a pleasure to meet you, Eames,” Mary offered with a smile before kissing Eames on the cheek and settling back down on the couch.
Eames rejoined Arthur on their own couch and was followed by a pause of awkward silence, no one knowing what to say first. Then everyone tried to speak at once and fell silent again. Everyone was eyeing everyone else, trying to determine the best course of action, and Arthur took a deep breath before blurting, “I’m sorry.”

“We thought you were dead!” Mary snapped, voice breaking as she barely contained her tears.

Arthur swallowed as he watched his mother reach for more tissues in preparation for a new wave of tears, feeling terrible for reopening these wounds for his parents. Was he being selfish here, expecting forgiveness when he deserved none? “I know; I forged those documents so that you would get my money and stop having to wonder about me. I wanted...” he took a shaky breath, “I wanted to give you closure.”


He was so tempted to fall back into the role of the Point Man, to address his weeping parents’ questions as though he were answering team members’ questions about an upcoming job. It would be easier and so much less embarrassing, but he allowed more tears to fall with Eames beside him. “I thought you hated me after...” the name caught in his throat; a name that had rarely been spoken since he was ten. “After what I did to Diane.”

“That was an accident, Arthur,” his father reminded him harshly. “You mustn’t blame yourself for what happened. It won’t solve anything and it never meant that we didn’t want you. We loved—we love you, Arthur,” Ryan held his gaze strongly, making it impossible for Arthur to look away.

“I always thought...” he mumbled weakly, unable to complete his thought. Had he really run away from home, forged his own death, and completely isolated himself from his past based on a false assumption that his teenage self had made?

Mary was suddenly off her own couch and gathering Arthur up into a hug, crying against his chest. It was a bizarre moment to have his mother’s head only reaching his chin while the last time he had seen his mother he had been looking up at her sadly. “I can’t believe you thought we—we didn’t want you,” she cried against him without restraint. “I’m so sorry, dear. We were heartbroken with losing Diane but we never... never meant for you to feel like you were unwanted.”

“I thought you blamed me,” he posed the thought questioningly to his father, who he was watching over his mother’s trembling shoulder while he held her close. “You should blame me. I--”
“You were a child, Arthur. You cannot hold this against yourself,” his father reminded him, remaining sitting probably because he wouldn’t be able to get close to Arthur with the way his mother was hanging on. “We were the ones who failed you for not keeping a closer eye on you and for not handling the situation properly. We never meant for you to feel unloved; you were anything but that.”

Arthur sniffled loudly, trying to keep himself in check and take in everything his parents were saying. There was still a loud part of his mind yelling at him that he didn’t deserve this, that they were just lying to make him feel better. His heart was also thudding in his chest, disbelieving and riddled with guilt. But there was no reason for him not to believe his parents’ words and actions; he had to dispel the blame he had placed on himself – what he thought he had seen in his parents’ eyes was actually his own reflected blame and guilt – and get past this. He was also beginning to feel overwhelmed and exhausted, body shaking as adrenaline slowly seeped from his veins.

The sound of a timer going off in the kitchen seemed to bring the discussion to a slow standstill, Mary pulling away and fiddling with Arthur’s now-soaked waistcoat. “Now I’ve gone and ruined your lovely suit,” she fussed over him for a moment, leaving Arthur somewhat unsure of what to do. On rare occasions his team members had had the nerve to fuss over him – Eames most prominently in his memories – but it had not happened often and Arthur had never responded favourably. But now...this was his mother; someone he had wanted to worry and fuss over him all those years he had been growing up alone, and now she was.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Tilmont,” Eames spoke up then, clearly trying to lighten the mood while not being disrespectful. “He has hundreds more.”

Arthur sent Eames a glare for the teasing but his mother was the one who spoke first. “Mary, dear, please,” she requested, snatching up another tissue to dab at her eyes. Arthur was somewhat astounded to watch his mother put on a similarly business-like mask as she calmed herself down by apparent sheer force of will. “Now you two take your things upstairs and come down for dinner when you’re ready.”

“Oh, we can’t impose,” Arthur refuted immediately, already uncomfortable enough without knowing how he should be reacting. These were his parents, he was their son, and yet they were all basic strangers at this point. So much must have happened here after he left, and they certainly didn’t know everything about Arthur and his profession. The thought of something as simple and familial as a dinner together with the parents and boyfriend seemed astronomically complex to negotiate and manage.

“Nonsense, honey,” Mary waved him off, already heading for the kitchen with her purposeful, professional walk.
“Arthur...” Ryan spoke up once his wife had left the room, drawing the attention of the two dream workers as Eames pulled himself off the couch to stand next to Arthur. The Point Man turned to his father slowly, trying to find some balance between son, stranger, professional adult and lost child. “We want you to stay for as long as you wish. I just wanted to warn you that...” the man looked between him and Eames uneasily for a moment. “Well, we eventually couldn’t bear seeing your room empty, so it’s a guest bedroom now.”

His father tried to begin into a wave of explanations and apologies so Arthur cut him off quickly. “It’s alright; I understand. It’ll be fine,” he gave Ryan the best smile he could before he and Eames excused themselves for the stairs.

He led Eames down the hall and up the stairs silently, the other man not protesting with their slow pace as Arthur took in his childhood home again. Things had changed more upstairs than downstairs, with his and Diane’s playroom now converted into a sleek, organized study. The bathroom was also void of the little basket of bath toys he remembered playing with when young, the ducky wallpaper replaced with a simple white tile. Arthur paused at the end of the hall outside of the closed door that used to lead to his old bedroom, not sure if he was ready for this.

But he gripped the doorknob purposefully and pushed the door inward, leading the way into the moderately sized room. He stood in the doorframe, surveying the changes critically. The two single beds on opposite sides of the room had been replaced with a comfortable double bed closer to Arthur’s former side of the room. Diane’s side of the room had received a small couch for anyone who wished to sit and look out the large window there. Their dressers, which they had painted themselves, had been replaced with a sturdy wooden closet with a mirror – something an adult guest could appreciate.

“Are you alright?” Eames asked him quietly, concerned but confident in Arthur.

“I think so...” Arthur spoke in hushed tones, somehow worried about stirring the dormant memories attached to this room in the same way his breath disturbed the dust motes in the waning sunlight. “It’s hard to see that I – my presence – has been removed from this house,” he admitted, glancing over his shoulder to watch Eames’s eyes, watching the man try to understand. “And yet I think it would have been harder if I saw that my parents had never let me go. I would have felt guilty if they had been unable to move on and find new happiness. Does...does that make sense?”

“Yes,” he heard Eames drop his bag to the floor. Then he felt the other man peel Arthur’s bag away, setting it down as well. Finally he felt Eames step up behind him and wind his arms around Arthur’s waist, moulding their bodies together. “You are incredibly strong, darling,” his partner praised before kissing him lightly on the back of his neck, breath tickling the short hairs there.
“I’m not,” he argued half-heartedly, feeling uncomfortable with being praised for a strength he didn’t agree he had. “I’m just trying to survive.”

“Arthur,” Eames chided him lightly, catching his attention as the Forger circled him until they were face to face. “Why are you not considering that a strength? The world is not a simple place to live, and you have been handed your fair share of tragedy.” Arthur, blushing, watched as Eames tucked a few strands of his black hair behind his ear needlessly – simply as an excuse for contact. “All we’re all doing is trying to survive, love.”

“How do you do that?” Arthur questioned curiously, his discomfort with being in a room he used to share with Diane already shrinking somewhat.

“Do what?” his companion raised a confused but amused eyebrow, smiling lightly.

“I don’t know...” he shrugged, at a loss for words. “Make me feel like everything is going to be okay.”

Eames’s smile grew as he continued to watch Arthur. Normally Arthur would have felt uncomfortable being scrutinized in such a way, with so much attention directed specifically to his words, his expressions, but it just made him feel proud and important as those eyes watched him like it was a reward to do so. “You already know everything I’m saying to you, sweetheart. Sometimes you just forget and become too hard on yourself and need a little reminding.”

“Well aren’t I lucky to have you,” Arthur teased, half honest and half embarrassed.

“No no, darling,” Eames caught Arthur in an embrace, an arm holding his shoulders carefully to keep him in place. “I’m the lucky one.”

Arthur found it impossible to look away as those beautiful blue green eyes held his, making sure he understood Eames’s words. Despite the fact that he loved how Eames was looking at him, how it made him feel warm and special, and how the man had helped him through all of this suffering, he didn’t know how to respond to all of the attention. “Alright, this is getting a little too mushy for me,” he admitted with a smile, trying to portray his discomfort without making Eames falsely assume that he was upset.

Eames backed off immediately, his arm sliding away and a foot of space appearing between them. “I’m sorry,” the man apologized quickly. For the first time since he had woken up from the
dreamscape, Arthur saw true uncertainty and anxiety in his partner’s face. “I don’t really know what I’m doing,” the Forger admitted, taking another half step backwards. “I—I know you never really acted as the biggest advocate for relationships and I already pushed you away once...I don’t want to lose you--”

Arthur didn’t give his partner a chance to finish his sentence, instead closing the distance between them hurriedly and stopping those confused words with his lips. Eames stumbled back a step before the man groaned into his mouth and pulled him closer, their bodies sliding and pressing together. Arthur held Eames’s head in place, one hand on his neck and the other in his hair, locking their lips together. Eames returned the kiss with similar enthusiasm, the man’s warm hands holding the dip of his lower back, fingers dipping eagerly below Arthur’s waistband teasingly.

Almost immediately Arthur was opening his mouth in invitation, wanting Eames to realize that he wanted this just as much as the other man. His companion took the hint and dipped his tongue into Arthur’s mouth curiously, exploring excitedly as their tongues entangled and fought for dominance. He wasn’t sure he had ever wanted anything more than he wanted Eames in that moment, but Arthur forced himself to break away for breath a minute later. They ended up panting against one another’s lips, their noses brushing with how close they were standing, and Arthur narrowed his eyes. “Be who you are and what you want to be. You won’t lose me. It was never that I didn’t want you; it was that I was scared to let myself have you.”

The Point Man realized that he had been so busy dealing with his own issues that he had completely neglected his partner as Eames struggled with his own concerns and fears. He could see the uncertainty in the way Eames held himself and watched Arthur intently for a hint of what was going on in his head. The dark smudges under Eames’s eyes were also thrown into sharp contrast with Arthur’s sudden awareness mixed with the lengthening shadows as the sun disappeared from sight. Arthur realized that he was incredibly lucky to have Eames acting strong to take care of him and meet his needs while he struggled, but that he would need to provide that in return.

He could see that Eames was still swaying somewhat, internally fighting to believe Arthur’s words and suppress his fears. Arthur pressed Eames back carefully until the man’s legs hit the foot of the bed and the Forger sat down heavily on the light duvet. “Of all the things I am unsure of in my life right now...” he began strongly, “You are not one of them.”

Eames caught his hands with his own, tugging him closer. Arthur followed the man’s lead but remained standing despite the temptation to join the Forger on the bed. He watched Eames watch him for a long moment, and then tracked the man’s movements when he kissed Arthur’s wrists where the cuffs had dug in deeply, tearing his veins. “I’m very happy to hear that, darling,” Eames confessed, lips whispering their secrets to Arthur’s skin. “Now shall we go down for some dinner?” he offered tentatively, watching the Point Man critically. Arthur merely nodded his agreement, ready to face his parents again, and pulled Eames into a standing position.
The dinner itself was delicious; there was something about home cooked pasta sauce and garlic bread that could beat any restaurant in town. The conversation was pleasant as well, if a little strained. Silence reigned for a few minutes as the two dream workers stuffed their faces, starved from the afternoon of travel, but then Arthur realized he should probably start up a conversation as his parents watched him. The problem was that he couldn’t think of what to say. ‘How are you’ seemed very crass, especially since it was he himself who had put them through all of their suffering.

His parents saved him from that question, though Arthur soon wished he had spoke up first to direct the conversation the way he wished. He was a naturally secretive person – it came with an illegal profession and a life of raising yourself. Therefore, it was somewhat odd to be sitting across the table from his parents answering rather mundane questions, twirling spaghetti onto his fork while Eames held his hand under the table.

It began with the relatively safe question about him and Eames since both of them were seated there, although this was less than simple to answer in his mind. Even though he knew that he had cared more for the Forger than he had meant to even while working on Inception, he had only recently admitted and accepted this himself, let alone tell others about it. And of course, the inevitable and entirely common question of how they met had Arthur and Eames sharing a subtle look before he responded. “Work.”

That spurred questions of his job and what he had done after ‘leaving’. Arthur had winced at the word. His parents had tried to reassure him, but there was nothing to say. It hadn’t been ‘okay’ that he left, nor had they ‘understood’; they probably never would fully understand. It was something that could be forgiven, but not forgotten – just like Diane. So Arthur forced his guilt down and answered his parents’ questions to the best of his ability without putting them in danger, knowing that he owed them that much at least.

He explained how he had lost himself in his schooling for years, focusing on the details of his textbooks so that he wouldn’t have to think about the world around him. He rattled off the universities he had wandered through and the degrees he had gained, finding little enthusiasm in his own words even while his parents looked at him with a renewed sense of pride. School had really only been a form of distraction for him, rather than something he truly enjoyed. After that he explained briefly how Dom had found him buried deep in the musty stacks of a university library and taken him into dream work. That wasn’t exactly how his meeting with Dom had happened, and Arthur purposefully failed to mention the illegal aspects of his profession, but it was as close to the truth as he was willing to admit. Arthur also noticed that Eames was listening quite intently as well, though he hid his interest somewhat since it would be hard to explain why Eames knew none of this about his partner. Arthur reminded himself to tell Eames the real story later.

There was a little more explanation about what dream work entailed – minus the guns, theft and torture – before he subtly moved the conversation over to his parents, curious. It seemed like a safe jump, going from his profession to theirs, and was pleased when his attempt was successful; and as he continued to listen to his parents talk about what they did, Arthur became more and more proud.
of having some connection to them. His father was a professor at Berkeley and his mother, a few years after losing Diane and then Arthur, had begun working at a daycare associated with the university for adults who were taking courses. He was incredibly happy to hear that they had eventually been able to move on from the losses Arthur had inflicted upon them and pursued their passions.

Arthur was sure the questions would have continued on for days – his mother especially growing more curious as the rapport between them grew surprisingly quickly – but soon after they had finished eating, both he and Eames were struggling to stifle their yawns. As though he was young again with a friend over for a sleepover, his mother promptly snatched the dishes from their grasp when the dream workers attempted to help clean up and sent them upstairs to bed. Arthur gave Ryan and Mary two quick, awkward hugs before they all agreed to talk more in the morning. It felt odd wishing his parents goodnight on the bottom stair for the first time in over a decade and Arthur doubted it would ever grow ‘normal’ for him. He had been living on his own for so long, raising and taking care of himself, that it was unlikely he would grow accustomed to wishing someone goodnight and knowing to expect them in the morning. Well... he stole a shy glance at Eames as he followed the man up the stairs. Maybe with time.

Once they arrived back to the guest bedroom, Arthur offered for Eames to take the first shower despite the Point Man’s desperation to wash away the stale, sterile smell of the hospital. Eames wickedly offered to share but Arthur politely declined, unwinding himself from the towel he suddenly found himself bound in. He explained that he was still somewhat uncomfortable in his parents’ home to begin with and... He had blushed, much to his own embarrassment; he wanted to be comfortable for their first time. Eames had wiped his fears away with a chaste kiss before excusing himself, an anticipatory smirk on his lips for things to come as he left.

Despite his decision, it was extremely difficult for Arthur to not press Eames down into the mattress and yank the towel off the moment Eames stepped into the bedroom ten minutes later. The man’s skin was flushed and still damp from steam, and those lips looked positively delectable. “Stop mentally undressing me, darling,” his partner warned him, eyes growing darker as Eames roamed his gaze over Arthur, pupils dilating. “Unless you want to be undressed yourself,” he added with a playful wink. Arthur left the room quickly before his self control could crumble beneath him.

He showered quickly, brushing his teeth and setting his toothbrush on the edge of the sink beside Eames’s with a small smile. Even though he had rarely allowed himself to consider the possibility of a long term relationship in the past, worried about letting his partner down and terrified of the thought of being tied down, he had to admit that it was somewhat enjoyable sharing a few domestic moments with his boyfriend. To avoid further temptation, Arthur towelled his hair dry and slipped on his pyjama bottoms before returning to the bedroom, entering the room somewhat cautiously.

Since they had admitted their feelings, they had only been sleeping fully clothed and in a relatively public location that was the hospital room with Cobb present. However, as he closed the door with a soft click and flicked off the light, seeing that Eames had turned on the bedside lamps, he could
see that both of them were bare-chested. He swallowed thickly, mouth going dry as he saw Eames propped up against the headboard of the bed, sheets pooled around his waist and just barely showing the waistband of his pyjama pants. His partner glanced up at him with a welcoming smile before returning his attention to the slightly worn novel in his hands. “What are you reading?” Arthur asked curiously as he slipped under the sheets beside his companion.

“Some cheap paperback Cobb left in the hospital room when he went home. I didn’t have anything to read so I snatched it up,” Eames explained without glancing over at Arthur, flipping to the next page slowly. He was about to ask what it was about when he saw the other man’s smirk as Eames finally glanced over at him. “It’s a cheesy romance, in case you were wondering.”

Arthur chuckled lightly at the thought of Dom skimming through a romance novel while watching over the sleeping dream workers. Eames smirked back and discarded the novel on the bedside table, flicking off his light and sliding under the sheets. Feeling oddly shy and unsure, Arthur did the same. He was not accustomed to feeling so out of sorts, normally very confident in everything he did – even if that happened to be a one night stand for some distracting pleasure. But this was so much more intimate than that...and so much more precious as he curled under the sheets Eames’s body had already warmed up in preparation for him.

It seemed almost natural – like they had been doing this forever – when Arthur shuffled closer and Eames wrapped an arm around him, closing the last few inches of space between them. Their lips met slowly, unhurried as they tasted one another and explored. The pants stayed on, but that still left the skin of their warm upper bodies exposed for teasing and curious fingers. “I’m so proud of you, Arthur,” Eames whispered against his ear before nipping the lobe, hot breath fanning over Arthur’s skin and causing him to shudder.

“I’m so proud of us, Eames,” Arthur retaliated, remembering everything they had been through in the last few days. His mind flashed back to that morning before Dr. Maxwell stole Arthur for his counselling appointment. In the hazy dawn light, Eames had finally told Arthur what he had experienced down in the dreamscape, and Arthur had nearly cried at the thought of Eames experiencing all of that – for him. He had lost count of how many times he said ‘thank you’, but the words had never felt sufficient. It was only the brush of Eames’s lips that made him sure Eames knew and understood his gratitude.

Eames hummed his agreement, drawing Arthur back to the current moment, and then began peppering soft kisses down his jaw and sneaking down his neck. “I wonder what your parents would say if you came downstairs tomorrow with a hickey on your neck...” his companion muttered against his skin, suckling thoughtfully.

“Eames...” Arthur growled warningly, even as he hooked his right leg over Eames’s legs and rutted against the man slightly, his desire growing. It grew even worse when Eames used the opportunity to thread his left leg between Arthur’s legs, spreading them slightly and pressing that solid thigh up
just right. “Eames...!” Arthur gasped, rutting back despite himself. He could still stop this, but the window of opportunity was shrinking and he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted this to end here. He had thought about this for so long, what it would be like to have Eames above him – in him... Arthur was panting when he shook his head, hating his own decision even as he implemented it. “Wait.”


Arthur groaned and kissed his thanks to Eames for that comment even as another spark of heat flashed through him. “You’re not alone,” he promised against Eames’s lips, hating the thought of moving away now. “But I want to wait until I’ve dealt with things here and we can take our time...in private,” he added mournfully, carefully slipping his leg from the other man’s thigh.

“Alright,” Eames agreed, sounding understanding but slightly distressed. “But how about you don’t let me get this far next time?” he added with a light chuckle.

The Point Man’s gaze dropped to the sheets, unable to see Eames’s problem but feeling it when he snuck a hand down curiously. His eyes went wide when he felt the large bulge pressing against his hand through his partner’s damp pyjama pants. “I could...” he began to offer.

“Don’t worry, pet,” Eames cut him off. “I’ll be alright.” Despite what the other man was saying, Arthur could feel the hard ridge of his cock jump at his touch through the fabric. “You don’t need to do what you don’t want to, darling,” the Forger dissuaded him but didn’t sound very convincing, voice going a little breathy as he thrust up into Arthur’s hand.

“But I want to,” he admitted evilly as he hooked his fingers beneath the pants waistband and dragged them down just enough to keep them clean. “And this is different. This is like...” his voice trailed off as his hand dipped back down and strongly gripped Eames at his base. “Like a sleepover,” he finished, voice low and suggestive.

He didn’t manage to get any more words out as Eames groaned and pulled him into a kiss with one hand on the base of his neck. Arthur pulled away for a moment to spit into his hand before returning to the kiss and resituating his grip on Eames’s eager cock. He began slow and tight, mimicking his own methods when he thought of the Forger on his lonely nights. Arthur loved the sensation of the man’s hard flesh thrusting into his hand while Eames moaned obscenely into his mouth. They were still kissing for the first few minutes as Arthur worked his hand up and down that hot shaft, but then they were just panting against one another’s mouths, Eames whispering against his lips. “A little tighter...god, yes, like that, love...so bloody perfect...”
Arthur was about to respond when he saw Eames pull away to spit into his own hand a moment before it was engulfing Arthur’s twitching length, which had responded eagerly to the lewd noises his boyfriend was making. “Is that good, darling? A little tighter?” Arthur nodded, momentarily forgetting to stroke Eames in return as the man began to work skilfully on his cock. It felt like he was trying to milk Arthur’s desire from his body, hot hand stroking demandingly and yet precisely. “Do you like thinking about the chance of getting caught, doll?” Eames whispered against his ear, tongue darting out to trace his earlobe.

“Eames...” was all he managed in response, bucking into his partner’s touch when Eames slowed his pace and began twisting his grip.

“We must be quiet, darling,” Eames hushed him, silencing any further noises from him with a kiss renewed with energy and passion. Arthur began mimicking the other man’s hand movements as he remembered to stroke Eames, loving how uncoordinated and inexperienced they were acting both with the act and with one another. It heightened the sensation when he remembered they had to be quiet, that they shouldn’t be doing this here, and that Eames’s hand was around him, stroking him expertly.

It was over embarrassingly fast, both of them groaning into each other’s mouths as they spilled themselves into one another’s hands. Arthur let out an extra mewl when Eames gave one final twist of his hand, dragging another spasm out of his tired body while the Forger nibbled on his lower lip. The feel of Eames’s hot come spilling into his hand and onto his wrist was seared into his mind and sent another shock of intrigued desire through him, imagining what it would be like when it was inside of him. But for that moment he was distracted by Eames licking and kissing into his mouth again, touch so tender and adoring as they both fell slowly from their orgasmic bliss.

Finally, once they had both calmed down, Arthur pulled himself out of bed with a groan and snatched the box of tissues by the couch since it was closer to his side of the bed. He cleaned them both up slowly, loving the excuse to touch Eames further; the man did not seem to have any objections as he lay back and shivered in response to Arthur’s caresses. “I hope I didn’t pressure you...” the man muttered aloud, watching him as Arthur set the tissue box on the bedside table and threw the soiled tissues out before returning to bed.

“Do I look regretful?” was all he asked in response before slipping back under the covers, a noticeably blissed-out smile on his lips. Eames did not argue the point further as Arthur lay on his side facing the window and plastered his sweaty skin and newly returned pyjama pants against Eames’s chest; they would need another shower in the morning, but the thought was not enough to keep Arthur awake for another moment longer.
Arthur was disappointed when he opened his eyes a few hours later to still find the sky blanketed in darkness. He was utterly exhausted, both physically and mentally, and he internally cursed himself for the sudden inability to sleep. It was even worse when his eyes ended up straying towards the far side of the room – not a difficult task since he was already facing that way – and hovered over where Diane’s bed used to reside. It felt almost like the night he had woken up with the idea of them going for a late-night swim, watching Diane sleep contemplatively for a few moments while he built up his courage before acting.

For a long while he forced his eyes closed, trying to be lulled back to sleep by Eames’s presence. Arthur was nearly on his stomach now, with Eames sprawled half across him as he snored softly. It was a perfectly pleasant sensation, having his partner holding him close even in sleep, but Arthur could not find it in himself to relax. Eventually he gave up and carefully extracted himself from the other man’s embrace, crossing the delicate floorboards quietly to settle onto the couch underneath the window.

When he glanced out the window he could see the distinct glimmer of the moonlight on the man-made lake from the window. It seemed to be beckoning him – or taunting him – and Arthur was halfway for the door when he heard the bed sheets shift. There was a quiet “Darling?” laced with confusion when Eames’s sleep deprived brain slowly comprehended that Arthur was not in his arms, and the Point Man found himself rushing back to the bedside. “Darling?” his companion tried again, blinking up at him owlishly.

“I’m here,” he reassured the man in hushed tones, noting the sudden panic in those misted eyes. “Everything is alright. We’re in reality.”

He was expecting the Forger to reach for his poker chip, which the Point Man noticed had been set on the far bedside table before they had turned off the lights. But Eames merely nodded and nuzzled into Arthur’s hand as he brushed his fingers loosely through soft hair. Arthur was stunned and touched by the trust his partner clearly had in him, as well as the relief that Eames’s momentary confusion was fleeting. It looked like Eames was half asleep again as Arthur continued to apply his fingers expertly, but the other man continued to watch him with mild concern. “What’s wrong? Why were you out of bed?”

Arthur thought about lying but decided that doing so was not productive. Eames was the one he trusted more than anyone else in his life, so there was no reason for him to hide this from his partner. “I couldn’t sleep. I thought I’d...visit the lake.”

Eames blinked at him for a few seconds and then pushed himself up into a seated position with a yawn. “Alright,” the man groaned as he stretched. “Let’s go find some shirts to put on and get going.”
“You don’t have to come,” he reminded the man quickly, both remembering and seeing the exhaustion plaguing his Forger. Eames needed sleep as much as Arthur did, and if he could sleep that’s what he should be doing. Eames had been doing everything in his power to take care of Arthur, and now it was time for the Point Man to return the gesture.

But Eames was nothing if not stubborn, and met Arthur’s gaze strongly. “Unless you don’t want me there, I’m coming, darling.”

He could have lied and gotten Eames to catch up on some much needed rest; he knew the man would not be angry if Arthur said he wanted some time alone. But the thought of having Eames by his side as he returned to the lakeside for the first time since dragging Diane’s limp body out of the water was comforting to say the least. And Arthur was too selfish to say no, so he nodded and pulled two loose shirts out of their bags for them to wear while Eames rubbed the sleep from his eyes and joined Arthur’s side unfailingly.

The summer air was relaxing as they stepped out of the silent house together, trekking the short distance to the lake in silence. Once they arrived at the top of the hill Arthur held his arm out, keeping Eames from taking another step closer. Even though it was extremely unlikely that history would repeat itself, knowing the grass was dry beneath his bare feet, he couldn’t brave getting any closer. Luckily Eames had already been told the story and understood, sitting down carefully on the bank of the lake so that his legs stretched down the slow incline. The other man beckoned him down and allowed Arthur to slot himself against Eames’s side, both of them watching the moon’s reflection ripple across the water. “Do you want to talk?”

Arthur thought about it for a moment and then shook his head. “No. I just want to think for a little while.”

They sat there for a long time, uncaring of the time slipping by along with the warm breeze. There was still no hints of dawn as Arthur leaned against Eames, his head resting on that broad shoulder tiredly. He was surprised the other man was still conscious, but he appreciated the silent support. For a while Arthur just watched the water and the moon mindlessly, reliving that night he had lost his best friend and twin sister. It was painful to open old wounds, especially where it had originally happened; it helped him remember the feel of the grass as he knelt over Diane and the chill of her body despite the warm air. But at the same time it was almost therapeutic in the sense that he was finally able to face the fact that it had happened and that there was nothing more he could do about it.

“Let’s go back,” he suggested some time later, eyelids drooping with exhaustion. “She’s not here.”
“Do you believe in ghosts, pet?” Eames asked, sounding drained but forever curious to learn more about the Point Man.

“I don’t think so,” he answered eventually. “I couldn’t bear the thought of Diane being stuck on this earth after dying,” he confessed. There was a long moment’s pause when he realized that didn’t explain his previous wording much. “I just know that this isn’t the place I need to go in order to come to terms with it all and finally let her go.”

“Whatever you need, Arthur,” Eames reminded him as they picked themselves off the grass and made their way back to the house. Their feet dragged on the grass and they barely managed to remain quiet as they manoeuvred through the quiet house, practically trudging up the stairs. They didn’t even manage another word between them, both dream workers asleep the moment they were comfortably curled up under the covers.

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It was midmorning when Arthur’s eyes fluttered open next, the sunlight still weak on this side of the house but bright enough to indicate daytime. He could tell that Eames was still asleep by the steady breathing against his back so Arthur was wary this time as he made his way out of his partner’s arms. He was equally surprised and amused that they had somehow made it back into the position of spooning despite collapsing into bed on opposite sides of the mattress; they were like magnets, which he had no complaint over.

Feeling sentimental, Arthur remained seated on the edge of the bed this time, rather than escaping to the couch. He watched his lover sleep with a small smile tugging at his lips, loving how relaxed and peaceful Eames looked in his sleep. Those worry lines that the man tried to hide were smoothed away and the Forger’s body, always tensed and ready for a fight, fell into a calm and loose state. It was also rather adorable to see the grown man search blindly for Arthur’s presence in his sleep and eventually concede with the pillow his fingers grasped.

As nice as the moment was, the Point Man couldn’t help but wonder what their future entailed. They probably both had the money to stop working and live comfortably for the rest of their lives, but he knew they would both go crazy with boredom before the year was out. Arthur knew that Eames would quit dream work to be with him if Arthur no longer wished to partake in the profession, but that thought nearly broke his heart. Eames was an incredible forger, not simply because of his skill but because of his love for the roles. He would hate himself for taking the Forger away from that, even if he knew the man would willingly make the choice himself.

But Arthur didn’t know what he wanted, whether or not he wanted to return to dream work. His confidence and trust had been severely shaken with his team’s betrayal, and his body still ached painfully with the results of that betrayal. He didn’t know if he would ever be ready to return to
dream working, and what that meant for them. Would he be able to convince Eames to continue working without him? Would Arthur ever truly be alright with that thought? Never sure of his partner’s safety until it might be too late? Or could they work together on new jobs? Would that be viable?

“Darling, are you alright?” a voice drew him away from his swirling thoughts and Arthur glanced away from the window to regard his stirring lover tenderly. Eames was blinking up at him looking – much to Arthur’s relief – quite rested. He noticed the man watching him with a mix of fondness, concern, and scrutiny.

“Of course,” Arthur reassured his companion. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re...” Eames began and then trailed off, looking unsure of what to say or how to say it. The Forger waved a hand in the air, indicating Arthur’s form. “You’re a Point Man right now.” Arthur raised an eyebrow. “Now don’t give me that,” Eames warned, pointing a finger at him. “Your body is more tense and stiff, your eyebrows are furrowed in thought, and you’re holding yourself the way you do when you address a team before a job.”

For a moment Arthur was honestly speechless. He knew that Eames’s profession and skills were all focused on the ability to read someone’s body language, expressions, and tone in order to understand their behaviours and thoughts, but it was still slightly disconcerting to have that amazing skill turned against him for the first time since Eames’s teasing during Inception. He was surprised that Eames himself realized Arthur’s shift into the mindset of a Point Man before Arthur himself noticed, but he was also unhappy with the concern he saw in the man’s face. “Just because I’m acting like a Point Man doesn’t mean that I’m not alright,” he explained quietly. “It’s a part of who I am. It helps me think when I can diminish the emotions somewhat so that I can consider the emotional and logical arguments equally.” Arthur reached across the short distance and cupped a hand against Eames’s jaw, sending a pleasant shudder through both of their bodies at the touch. “Does that make sense?”

Eames nodded, effectively brushing his cheek and jaw against Arthur’s palm with the movement. Arthur leaned down and stole a brief kiss, silently showing his gratitude for the man’s continued understanding and support. “What are the plans for today, sweetheart?” Eames asked him afterwards, attempting to stifle a yawn unsuccessfully.

Arthur withdrew slightly in order to stretch his knotted muscles out, his body still aching unbearably despite the sleep he had finally obtained in a bed that wasn’t in a hospital. He was aware of his companion noting the movement and his wince as the skin on his back grew taut, but Arthur chose not to comment on it. Instead, he decided to propose his considered plans. “I was actually thinking of going downstairs and talking with my parents alone for a while, if that’s alright,” he added politely, though he knew Eames wouldn’t complain even if he did have an issue.
“Of course, of course,” the Forger nodded, settling back under the covers slightly. “Take all the time you need. I’ll probably just lounge for a bit – I barely remember what relaxing feels like,” Eames admitted with a small, strained chuckle. “And if I get bored I have Cobb’s Harlequin novel to keep me company.”

Arthur snorted in amusement and planted a final kiss on Eames’s forehead before pulling himself off the bed and heading downstairs. He grabbed a small tray of food before anything else, piling a plate with toast and jam, and some of the cooling pancakes on the kitchen counter that he found. However, by the time he gathered everything together and made his way back up to the guest bedroom, Eames was a curled up lump under the blankets again, breathing even. He set the tray on the bedside table and slipped out of the room with as much stealth as he could muster.

The Point Man grabbed a small plate of toast and jam, far too nervous to stomach much more, and trotted through the house in search of his parents. He found them shortly after, settled on a couch in the den watching the weekend news with ‘weather updates on the hour’. Arthur found himself momentarily pausing in the doorway, struck by how domestic and familial this all felt. This sensation was only heightened when Ryan glanced over at him and motioned him over to find his own place on a couch. He wondered what it would have been like if Diane were alive, bringing home her own partner - and maybe even children by this point – to join him and Eames in spending time with his parents.

For a while he couldn’t bring himself to speak, simply soaking in the proximity of his parents and the family nature of this moment. Eventually though, once his toast had been swallowed and had settled stably in his stomach, he realized that he had to speak at some point and it might as well be then. “Mother...father...” he tested the labels out, wondering how they would feel on his lips and whether he would be allowed to use them. It felt odd uttering the familial terms after growing up without them, but both of his parents turned to him without pause and muted the television set, flicking it off when they saw how serious he knew his face looked. “I was hoping we could talk...about everything. About Diane.”

The resulting conversation lasted for hours as he and his parents took turns talking, explaining, sharing and reminiscing about their past and memories. His parents told him some stories about him and Diane from when he was too young to remember, as well as more stories about what had happened after Arthur had run away. Arthur explained – finally and consciously, never having been able to properly speak the story when he was younger – what had happened to Diane. His mother and father shared their reactions to Diane, saying that they had been heartbroken but had never blamed him.

There was a lot that Arthur learned about himself and what he had put his parents through that hurt terribly - that he wished he had never been told. But he reminded himself that it was important and did his best to take everything in stride, understanding and accepting before respectfully setting each flash of guilt and regret aside. There was nothing he could do to change the past now; all he
could do now was make amends. Ryan and Mary seemed to be doing something similar, listening intently to Arthur’s explanations of what had happened and how he had responded while trying to understand and accept things as the past, not something to continue dwelling on.

In the end they began to sort through their issues one by one and set them aside. Arthur could almost physically feel his body loosening up slightly as more weight seemed to fall from his shoulders. It was like the chains he had built for himself long ago to chain himself to his past, and to his parents and Diane, were finally breaking and falling away; they no longer held power over him. Things were not perfect when they all fell silent, out of things to say or the energy to say it. There was still betrayal, disappointment and tension between the recently reconnected family members. However, the discussion had been enough to make Arthur feel as though he could truly move on after abandoning his parents with his mistakes so many years ago. Beyond that, something he had never expected, Arthur actually felt like he might be able to return to the house again and feel welcomed and loved.

Unfortunately the conversation with his parents had not really aided Arthur in shucking the heaviest weight and chains he carried around with him. Diane was still a strong presence in his thoughts. But Arthur was not terribly perturbed by this realization as he watched his mother excuse herself to go grab something from a bookshelf in the corner. He had not truly expected this talk to help him with Diane because this conversation was about him, his parents, their disappointment in him and his betrayal and abandonment.

Arthur knew where he had to go to finally put Diane to rest.

His thoughts were interrupted when his mother returned with a small envelope in one hand. Arthur leaned in closer as she opened the envelope and began flipping through tiny wallet-sized photographs until she was happy with her selections. “Arthur...” his mother began, sounding unsure and holding the photos close to her chest. “We want you to know that you are always welcome back here; Eames too. We’d love for you to come back and live with us but...” she glanced over at Ryan, who picked up where she left off.

“We understand that you have your own life now – have had your own life for a long time. You’re independent and grown up and...Well, we couldn’t be more proud of you to know how strong you’ve been despite everything.” Arthur was finding it difficult to hold down the tears that were threatening to well up, his father sniffing and clearing his throat embarrassedly not helping matters. “We want to respect your space but we want you to come back to visit whenever you feel you are ready. We’ll always be here.”

By this point Mary was crying but trying to hide it, and Arthur was having a hard time swallowing around the lump in his throat himself as his heart raced. “We’d like for you to have these to keep, if you’re willing to take them,” his mother held the two photos out towards him, her hand shaking slightly as she worked through her tears. “To remember us and to remind you that you have a
Arthur took the offered photographs carefully, not wanting to bend the flimsy material. The first photo was of his parents, holding hands and smiling at the camera, and Arthur was quick to notice that it had been taken a few years after he had run away; his parents’ hair was a little greyer. At first he swallowed hard, a small twinge of pain and jealousy over the fact that his parents had moved on after him. But then came the relief as he remembered that this picture was proof that his parents had been able to find happiness again, that Arthur had not inflicted so much suffering on them that they could not recover. This photo was what he needed much more than a memory of how happy his parents had been before Diane’s death and before he had run away.

The second photo, when he looked at it, made him break out into a smile and a sob simultaneously. He had to blink a few times to dispel his tears before he could focus on the image again, his nose tingling painfully with the tears, but his whole focus was on the picture. It was of him and Diane at their ninth birthday, still young enough that there was little difference between the twins. They were hugging, practically sitting on top of one another, and grinning at each other rather than the person taking the photo – they had no care in the world except their best friend and trusted twin.

It sent his mind back to the memory of Louis’s forgery of Diane, not of the young ten year old but of the grown woman who matched Arthur’s age. That was what had truly broken him in the end. The child Diane had been so off from his trusted companion that he had somehow known despite his lack of mental awareness. But seeing Diane grown up had multiplied his guilt so strongly that Arthur had wanted to stop breathing – had wanted to stop living – that moment he saw what his best friend could have become.

But as he looked down at the photo, tears falling freely now, he realized that Diane would not want this. If she were here now and watching him, she would probably give him a good beating for dragging himself down and causing himself such suffering because of an accident. Arthur would never stop missing her, never stop regretting his decision to drag her to the lake that night, and he still had to visit her one last time. But he had to let Diane go and move on. Not for his parents, not for Eames, not even for himself – though all of those reasons were important.

He had to let his twin go because Diane had never gotten a chance to live. And the worst thing Arthur could possibly do now would be to waste another day wallowing in self-inflicted pity and guilt over past mistakes that could never be changed. It was because of him that Diane had never gotten the chance to live, so it was up to him to live the rest of his life to the fullest.

Not to forget Diane, but to honour her.
They left a few days after arriving, and Eames was unsure what surprised him more. He had been startled by Arthur’s suggestion that they leave only a few days after he had been reunited with his parents, accepted back into a life the Point Man had thought he had lost. At the same time, Eames had been amazed that Arthur had managed to stay in the house for so long. His partner was naturally independent and somewhat distant; it was impressive that Arthur had managed to withstand the fond fussing of his parents for so long without snapping and withdrawing.

Either way, they were there for Arthur and he seemed quite sure of his decision to leave. Eames had watched the man while he made the suggestion, making sure there were no hints of indecision or fear – he didn’t want Arthur running away again after finally colliding with his past. The Point Man seemed comfortable though, so Eames had merely nodded and focused on packing up his belongings while Arthur had disappeared downstairs to discuss the decision with his parents.

Their actual departure involved some bribery, with Ryan and Mary finally dragging an acceptance out of Arthur for him to return for Christmas. Eames, of course, had been used in the bargaining and was now scheduled for the Christmas visit as well. Not that the Forger had any qualms about this; he missed the times when he had been able to celebrate the holidays with family. If he got the chance to experience holiday celebrations again with Arthur’s family, he would not complain; knowing he would be there to support his lover through another tough encounter was only a bonus.

By the time bargaining and the tearful goodbyes ended, Eames and Arthur made it out of the house around mid-morning with little packed lunches from Mary. Eames had done his fair share of chuckling and harassing Arthur about it later, never giving up on how adorable it was as they grabbed a taxi to a car rental depot. When he had questioned the Point Man on it, Arthur driving as they pulled out of the depot and turned onto a busy freeway, the other man had seemed distracted. Arthur had explained that there was somewhere he needed to go in order to confront Diane and then had fallen silent. Eames had been confused about why they needed their own car for that, but had remained quiet.

Arthur seemed to know where they were going so Eames didn’t bother pulling out a map. Instead, he watched the passing scenery or his lover thoughtfully over the drive that lasted about fifteen minutes. Once or twice Arthur had glanced over at him, aware of Eames’s gaze on him, but didn’t comment as he returned his focus to the road. As desperate as he was to know where they were going, he forced himself to bite his tongue and remain silent. Arthur was not the type of man to be rushed. And when they pulled off the freeway and their car slowed to a crawl under an old iron-wrought sign spelling ‘Cemetery’, he was thankful that he had kept quiet.
They navigated through the narrow, winding roads that led further into the fenced off cemetery silently, the air in the car heavy and expectant. Eventually Arthur parked the car on the edge of one of the roads and pulled out the key. They sat there in silence for a moment, Eames watching Arthur skim his gaze over the rows of tombstones through the windows. Then the Point Man shoved the key into his pocket and stepped out of the car, body and movements noticeably stiff. Eames, unsure of whether he was welcome or whether Arthur wanted some time alone, undid his seatbelt but remained seated in the car.

He watched sadly as Arthur strode purposefully to a little sign on the edge of the road listing the last names for people searching for a specific grave. Even though Arthur looked determined and certain in his movements, it was clear that his body was still suffering from its torture down in the dreamscape and was skittish of being assaulted by new, emotional pain. Eames was startled out of his thoughts though when Arthur made his way over to his side of the car and knocked on the window. The Forger glanced up at his companion questioningly through the glass, and Arthur merely motioned him forward before turning on his heel and heading down the aisle of grass.

Feeling like an intruder but aware of Arthur’s clear request for him to join the other man, Eames stepped out of the car and trailed along a step or two behind the Point Man. He could see the way Arthur still limped on the uneven terrain somewhat, favouring his left leg, but didn’t comment. It wasn’t long before Arthur came to a stop in front of a relatively simple grave, only about ten stones in from the road. Eames came to stand slightly behind Arthur, wanting to touch the man and comfort him but not knowing what Arthur wanted in that moment.

He saw Arthur glance down the continuing row of graves and then stare at the grave they were standing in front of again. *Diane Tilmont. Beloved daughter and sister. 1981 – 1991.* Beside that, Eames saw something that caused his blood to run as cold as ice. *Arthur Tilmont. Beloved son and brother. 1981 – 1998.* “I should have brought some flowers or something...” Arthur muttered sadly, barely giving his own mistaken grave a second glance.

Eames noticed a grave further down the aisle covered in a fresh wreath of flowers. “Do you want me to go back to the entrance and buy something for you to put down?” he offered hesitantly, feeling somewhat out of place but wanting to help in any way he could. He also wouldn’t admit it aloud, but he wanted to be as far away from ‘Arthur’s’ gravestone as possible. The mere thought of looking down at Arthur’s grave – his final resting place – and being forced to acknowledge the truth of it had Eames panicked and heartbroken. Even though Arthur was standing beside him, as healthy as possible with their recent experiences, Eames didn’t want to think about his partner ever being gone.

Arthur stared at the grave for a long moment and then glanced over at him. “Would you? White lilies?” The man’s voice wavered noticeably but again Eames didn’t comment.

“Of course,” he agreed, kissing Arthur lightly on the temple. “Take all the time you need, darling.”
And with that, he dug his wallet out of his pocket and began the walk up to the entrance of the cemetery where they had a small stand of flowers for sale. He knew he could have driven up, but even though he wanted to be by Arthur’s side, he knew the man needed to be alone for a while. So he didn’t rush as he walked along the road, watching the passing rows of graves grimly; it reminded him that he was long overdue for his own visit to a few well-loved graves.

He bought a bouquet of white lilies as requested before slowly making his way back. When Arthur came into view, Eames decided to give the man some more time and settled down on a bench under the tree they had parked beside. He could see that Arthur had decided to sit down in front of the gravestone, right leg curled up and left leg resting straight out. The Forger could also see that there were tears marring the man’s pale face, catching the sunlight in a bittersweet beauty.

Eames couldn’t help but think that it was somewhat rude of the weather to be so cheerful as his lover confronted his most painful memories. It should be overcast and raining, matching Arthur’s pain. Instead, the sun was shining brightly with barely a cloud in the sky, birds chirping happily as they danced around on the branches above him. It seemed almost...disrespectful, though Arthur didn’t seem to notice.

With little else to do, Eames set the lilies carefully on the bench beside him so that he would not accidentally bend any of the petals and watched Arthur lovingly. He was so proud of Arthur for facing his past like this, and all at once without running away or withdrawing. And even though he was worried about how much suffering Arthur was putting himself through in order to do this, it was clear that it had been helping the Point Man. There was still a long way for him to go – for both of them to go – but they were well on their way to recovery.

His thoughts returned to the dreamscape momentarily and Eames remembered when Amelina and Louis had both mentioned Diane. The Forger remembered his flare of jealousy at first hearing the name, as well as the wave of relief when he realized that Diane was Arthur’s sister. He felt absolutely terrible for thinking such a thing – for finding relief in that knowledge – but he was still silently thankful when he realized his assumptions that Diane was a lover were incorrect. Nonetheless, he still felt horrible for finding any comfort in that and shoved the thought aside; Arthur was his, but that didn’t mean the Point Man wasn’t still suffering from his loss.

Eames still found it astounding that Arthur had managed to withstand extraction for so long down in the dream, especially once the enemy dream workers had begun to reveal the secrets of his past to use against him. Arthur had experienced a lot of pain and suffering in his past and had carried that heavy guilt with him for many years; it was amazing that those memories hadn’t ruined him. He was reminded again of how strong Arthur was in everything he did – even though he forced himself to be that way.

That brought his attention back to Arthur, who had drawn both of his legs up until his knees were against his chest. Eames could see that Arthur had his face buried in his palms, his elbows resting...
on his knees, and his shoulders shaking tellingly. But even though he wanted to be by his lover’s side and wanted to draw him into a comforting embrace, Eames knew that he had to give the other man space. Arthur would beckon him over when he wanted the Forger there; going over any sooner would not be helpful.

Instead, he forced himself to remain seated and watch the rare display of unguarded emotions from Arthur – knowing how privileged he was to bear witness to such a moment of, in Arthur’s mind, weakness. He doubted anyone had ever been trusted enough in the past to see such a crack in Arthur’s mask of indifference; maybe not even Cobb with how he had always treated Arthur like a statue, like someone who could be trusted never to break. He also knew that it was likely that once Arthur had put his past behind him, Eames would not witness many more emotional moments from his lover. Even though he would love Arthur either way – unlikely to leave the man’s side for the rest of his life – he felt somewhat saddened by the thought of losing these visible emotions. Although he didn’t want Arthur to experience anymore pain, guilt or suffering, it would be incredibly wonderful to see the Point Man allowing himself to be a little more expressive with positive emotions in the future as well.

Either way, in this moment, Arthur was letting himself go completely. There was no one else in their area of the cemetery, leaving only Arthur, Eames, the white lilies, and the graves beneath the sun. This left Arthur with his guard completely down, displaying everything there was to see to the sun and to the grave he had his eyes trained on; trusting Eames to watch over things while Arthur couldn’t. They remained like that for a long while. They were there for hours, long after Eames’s stomach had begun to growl its demands for Mary’s packed lunch. He couldn’t bring himself to move though, unable to look away from Arthur. It was almost impossible to believe how strong the man’s emotions were when they were finally given freedom; Eames could barely comprehend how such strong emotions had been suppressed for so long.

Arthur cried for a while, was silent for a long time after that, and then began crying again. Eames was just about to stand up and go over to the other man when Arthur quieted down and began murmuring softly to himself. There was a small smile on those trembling lips and it was breathtaking; it was like the first rays of dawn after a stormy night. From that point on, time seemed to slip by at an easy pace, Eames no longer concerned about how this might affect his boyfriend. He wanted to know what Arthur was thinking, what had finally drawn a smile to those lips, but he refused to interrupt.

The sun had begun to slip towards the other horizon, indicating early afternoon, when Arthur glanced over at him. Eames, eyes never having strayed from the other man, noticed immediately and met those soft brown eyes. He felt his heart jump when Arthur smiled at him and motioned him over, remaining on the green grass almost lazily. Eames picked up the lilies carefully and dragged himself off the bench, joints a little stiff from sitting so long against the uncomfortable wooden planks. He stretched his muscles out as he walked the short distance to Arthur’s side and held the lilies out carefully, Arthur watching his every move.

“Thank you,” Arthur took the flowers from his hand gently and set them on the small mantle of
polished stone on the bottom of Diane’s gravestone. Eames watched the movement and then felt his heart speeding up even more when Arthur reached up and twined their fingers together, pulling the Forger down to the grass softly. He followed the prompt easily, sitting cross legged beside Arthur so that he could watch his partner and the grave. Arthur allowed Eames to keep hold of his hand as he turned back to the gravestone, still smiling sadly. “I wish you could have met her.”

“I’m sure she was amazing,” Eames spoke softly, the atmosphere seeming to demand hushed tones.

“She was,” Arthur smirked then, lost in old memories. “And she would have loved you. I’m sure I would have wasted a lot less time trying to avoid my feelings for you if she had been around making sure I wasn’t a coward.” At that the smile faltered slightly and Eames felt inclined to lean forward and peck Arthur’s cheek, hoping it would comfort the man and display his forgiveness for the long delay before they finally got together. “I miss her, Eames. I wish she could have been a part of my life. But I...” Arthur visibly swallowed, leaning against him slightly. “I want to live for her.”

“As long as you live for yourself as well, love,” Eames reminded him, opening his arms further when Arthur continued to lean against him.

“I don’t think that will be a problem with you here,” Arthur admitted, sounding adorably shy for a moment. Eames tried to catch his eye but the Point Man snuggled further into his embrace, momentarily hiding his face from view.

It reminded the Forger so much of that moment after he had freed Arthur from the chains, Arthur’s hair tickling his neck as he hid from the world. But this time there was a peaceful air around them and Arthur just seemed to be in his arms to relish in the feeling, rather than to hide away from something else. “I love you,” Eames heard himself whisper against Arthur’s ear, utterly content despite everything they had gone through – or maybe because of everything they had gone through. He was so happy that they had ended up where they had.

Arthur didn’t respond verbally but did lift his head to catch Eames’s lips softly, slowly. There were still questions about their future – where they would go from here – but that did not factor into their thoughts as they held one another closer and stole loving kisses for a few minutes. They were finally broken apart by the sound of Arthur’s stomach growling and Eames’s rumbling in response. Arthur pulled away with a chuckle and glanced down at their stomachs. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”

Eames wanted to ask Arthur about ‘his’ grave, but didn’t see the point. The other man seemed to be handling the concept much better than Eames was. He seemed entirely unbothered by the carved marble, detached as though it was not truly his own – which actually made some sense. Eames also would have asked if Arthur was sure he was ready to leave but he found he didn’t need to; he could already tell that the other man was ready. The weight he had seen surrounding his
companion since they had woken up seemed to have finally dissipated. In fact, now that it was gone, Eames realized that he had seen a weight pulling the Point Man down since the first time he had met the other dream worker. It had always been there, keeping Arthur’s shoulders and back stiff, eyes downcast, and kept his mind sharp with intelligence but distant and avoidant of any further connections.

Now though, with that weight falling away as fast as Eames blinked, Arthur seemed like a new man standing beside Eames once they had both picked themselves off the grass. Arthur still had on a mask of indifferent independence, wanting to appear strong in his moment of weakness. But at the same time it was softer, allowing Arthur’s eyes and lips to show a little more emotion now. The man was also clearly still in some pain, limping mildly beside Eames as they made their way back to the car. The Forger had an idea of how to help his partner with that, but he was relieved to see that the stiff heaviness of the Point Man’s body was gone.

It seemed like Arthur had finally let the guilt over his past go; he had confronted his concerns over Tyson, Cobb, his parents, Diane, and even Eames himself and moved on. Now it appeared that Arthur was able to finally breathe, finally be his own person without shutting himself down. Eames wanted to cry, he was so happy and relieved.

They grabbed their packed lunches, both of them snickering this time at the mere thought, and settled down on the bench Eames had previously occupied to eat in the shade. Arthur shared a few more stories of his past – happy ones this time, of the mischief he and Diane would get into as they grew up. By the time they had finished their lunches and the stories they had begun to share, it was growing late in the afternoon. “So...” Eames began cautiously, knowing they would have to go somewhere to at least sleep. “What are the plans from here, darling?”

Arthur stilled in his movements as he gathered up their two bags to throw out into the lidded trash can beside the bench. “Are you talking about today, or are you talking about the future?” Arthur asked carefully.

“Either,” Eames shrugged, trying to alleviate any pressure from his first question. “Both.”

He watched as the Point Man pulled himself off the bench to throw away their bags before sitting back on the bench with a few inches of distance between them. Arthur weathered his lip nervously, Eames noting the movement despite himself, and glanced over at the Forger. “I want to keep dream working, Eames,” Arthur began. “And I want you to be there with me. I don’t want to do another job without you, however impractical that might be.”

“You know I’ll be there, darling,” Eames reminded the other man, attempting to wrap his arm around Arthur’s shoulder to pull the man closer.
Arthur dodged his arm though, giving him an apologetic look before looking down at his feet and the grass. The Point Man took a deep, sad breath. “The thing Eames...” his lover trailed off, looking conflicted and unsure. Arthur took another deep breath. “The thing is that I don’t know when I’ll be ready to get back into it, when I’ll be able to trust myself and those I work with again to get the job done. And--” Eames was cut off before he could really speak up. “And I don’t want to hold you back. Forging is as much a part of who you are as being a Point Man is for me. I couldn’t take that away from you.”

“You wouldn’t be taking it away from me, Arthur,” Eames assured strongly, catching the man’s chin carefully between his fingers to force Arthur to meet his gaze. “You said it yourself; it’s a part of me. That means nothing can take it away from me. And I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but I would gladly never go under again as long as I get to be with you.”

“Eames...” Arthur groaned warningly.

“I won’t let you feel guilty, Arthur,” Eames retaliated quickly, “Because this is as much my decision as it is yours. Do you know what I did for the year after Inception once we had parted ways? I took on dangerous jobs trying to get your attention – trying to get you to call – and then gave up and left reality for a constructed life under a PASIV.” He felt foolish even mentioning what he had done, how he had tried to handle his obsession and desperation for Arthur, but the other man needed to realize that there was nothing Eames wanted more than he wanted Arthur. “For months I lived down in the dream with my projection of you, Arthur. I would be quite content giving up dream work if it meant having you.”

Arthur was blinking at him, wide eyed and clearly disbelieving. “You...” the Point Man swallowed hard. “You took those dangerous jobs to get my attention?” Arthur hissed angrily, eyes now narrowed and livid. “Are you moronic? You could have—could have been--!”

His partner seemed at a complete loss for words so Eames held the man’s face between his palms and leaned forward for a kiss that demanded Arthur’s attention. When he eventually pulled away, Arthur was still glaring at him but seemed slightly calmer. “The point I’m trying to make, sweetheart,” he began again, a little desperate this time, “is that I’m not giving you up for anything. Until the time comes when you want to get back into dream work – hell, even if that day never comes – I will want to be with you.”

Eames only allowed his hold to break when Arthur leaned closer. He had assumed he was going to get a kiss, but instead Arthur nipped his bottom lip – hard. “Don’t you dare do something that stupid again,” Arthur demanded, this time holding Eames’s face in place until the Forger nodded his agreement. Eames wanted to remind Arthur that he had not exactly chosen a healthy method of managing either, but didn’t dare retaliate in that moment. But then Arthur sighed against his lips
and caught them in a kiss this time, lips moving sweetly and apologetically. “I wanted to come and intervene every time I heard about those jobs you were taking. But I was terrified you would reject me for coming to your ‘rescue’. I also couldn’t bring myself to rush to your aid because it would just prove all of my feelings for you I had been suppressing true.”

“Can we just agree that we were both idiots and move on, pet?” Eames teased, nipping Arthur’s tempting bottom lip in return. Arthur hummed and nodded his agreement. “Alright,” the Forger began again once he had finally memorized the taste of Arthur’s lips again. “Well where should we head now until we decide to start working again?”

The Point Man carefully pulled out of Eames’s grasp before standing. “I have an idea. But first I need to go to my flat and pick up a few things.”

“And where might that be?” Eames questioned as he stood as well, stretching lazily. He was curious to know where Arthur was thinking of going after returning to his flat, but he remained silent. In the end it didn’t really matter as long as he and Arthur were going together.

“Los Angeles,” Arthur explained as they headed over to the car together. “The drive from here will be a little over two hours.” The thought of driving to Los Angeles seemed strangely exciting and intimate and had Eames’s pulse racing. It would be so different going on a road trip with Arthur, however short it was. It would just be the two of them in the car to talk or enjoy the silence together, whereas on the plane there were always a ton of strangers around you being loud. However... “Eames!” Arthur grumbled when the Forger snatched the key from the Point Man’s hand and rushed around the front of the car for the driver’s seat. “I am more than capable of driving.”

“I know, darling,” Eames hedged, knowing that mentioning how tired Arthur looked would not achieve his current goal. “But you know how rubbish I am with maps.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes in suspicion but eventually climbed into the passenger seat while Eames settled into the driver’s seat and started up the car. He adjusted the rear view mirror and did up his seatbelt while Arthur pulled a map book from the side shelf in the door and flipped through the pages until he found the one he was looking for. Arthur scribbled down his address on a spare sheet of paper before giving Eames directions to get back onto the freeway. With that, they were off.

By the time they made it back through the city streets and onto the freeway headed north, they were just in time to get caught in evening rush hour as commuters slowly inched their way home after a long day of work. The two dream workers talked for a little while about mundane topics, both of them tired but Arthur too wiped out and exhausted from his emotional roller coaster of a day – of a week, of a lifetime – to discuss anything of much importance. Arthur continued to
ramble out directions as time wore on and they finally made it out of the commuter traffic jam, but he sounded more exhausted each time he spoke.

It had been almost three hours since they had left the cemetery when Eames saw the first sign indicating that they were nearing downtown Los Angeles. “What exit should I be looking for, darling?” he asked while reading as many signs flashing by over his head as he could manage. Silence dominated the car and Eames glanced over quickly, momentarily panicked. “Darling?” The view he was presented with left him smiling and melting into his seat. Arthur was half curled up on the chair, angled so that he was facing Eames. The man’s hands still held the spread out map, though loosely, and his lover’s face was relaxed and still. Arthur had fallen asleep.

With another adoring smile, Eames took the next exit and parked in the parking lot of a pit stop. He carefully extracted the map from Arthur’s grasp and found the last few exits and street names he had to look out for in order to find the Point Man’s downtown apartment. Once that had been accomplished he took the piece of paper with Arthur’s address and placed it in his lap before folding up the map as quietly as he could manage, thick paper crinkling annoyingly. However, Arthur never stirred as the map was put away and Eames started up the car again, pulling back onto the highway with a silent smile.

He indulged in the view of Arthur curled up and sleeping more than once, inevitably missing the correct exit off the freeway and having to continue on to the next exit before looping back around. The downtown streets were still crowded despite the late hour when he finally drove into the grid, searching for the right street names. He was half tempted to wake Arthur up, knowing the other man would be much better at navigating the city than he was, but decided it wasn’t worth it. He was in no real rush to make it to his companion’s apartment as long as Arthur was getting the rest he needed.

A few wrong turns and another two minute park in a no-park zone to check the map later, Eames was driving down into the underground parking garage beneath the apartment building Arthur apparently lived in. He hoped that they would be able to return the car to a Los Angeles depot the next day, not caring terribly if he would get fined for not returning it that night. Instead he focused on finding a set of keys in Arthur’s bag and dropping them in his shirt pocket before slinging their two bags over his shoulders. When he opened Arthur’s car door, the Point Man was still asleep. As he undid the seatbelt, Eames checked the man’s pulse quickly, relieved when he felt it beating normally under his fingers. It was hard to believe someone could sleep so deeply.

Eames locked the door from the inside and then carefully manoeuvred Arthur into his arms, kicking the door shut behind him once he was sure of his grip. With Arthur’s address already memorized – 1509 – Eames made his way for the elevator and awkwardly nudged the ‘up’ button with his knee. He wasn’t sure whether he was glad no one else was around, not sure how he would explain how completely unconscious Arthur was, or whether he really wished someone would just show up and help him press buttons. Either way, the elevator finally arrived, the doors slid open, and Eames managed to jab the ‘15’ button with his elbow.
It was a long way up and his arms were beginning to shake with exertion, but Eames forced himself to hold out a little longer when the elevator finally slowed to a stop and opened on the fifteenth floor. He would hate to get this far only to wake Arthur up now. The Forger checked the plaque in front of him to figure out which direction to take and then made his way to Arthur’s door which, of course, was at the end of the hallway. He carefully wound his arm further around his armful until he could reach his shirt pocket, pulling out the key quickly. Even though he jostled the Point Man quite badly as he balanced the sleeping man, the keys, and the doorknob, Arthur merely let out a quiet snore and nuzzled closer to Eames’s chest.

Once the door was open, Eames made a beeline for the bedroom and settled Arthur down on the mattress and blankets he found there. Just as he was reaching to pull the blankets over the man’s shoulders though, Arthur blinked his eyes open and stared up at Eames with a mischievous smirk. Eames groaned. “When did you wake up?” He knew for a fact that Arthur had been legitimately exhausted and sleeping for at least the entire car ride.

“In the elevator, I think,” Arthur confessed, his smirk fading away into a thankful smile.

“You little brat,” Eames complained with a kiss to Arthur’s forehead. “Go back to sleep.”

He left the bedroom quickly to lock the front door behind him, paranoia never dying completely. After that he dropped the bags down outside the washroom and relieved himself before heading back to the bedroom, too tired to contemplate changing. Arthur was under the duvet and asleep when he arrived, and Eames wasted no time in crawling under the covers and slotting his face against the back of Arthur’s neck before falling asleep.

#

The sun was slipping into his eyes when Eames blinked his eyes open blurrily, finding the bed empty in front of him where Arthur’s body used to be. He rubbed his face tiredly and pulled himself out of bed, heading for a shower he desperately needed after a day of travel. He found Arthur in a new casual suit, hair slicked back but still damp from a recent shower. His partner was in the kitchen Eames had bypassed the night before, toiling away over the stove in the process of making something that smelled wonderful. “Get washed,” Arthur called to him without looking back. “Breakfast is almost ready and we have a plane to catch at noon.”

Blinking in confusion, Eames headed for the shower and did as he was told. The shower did not last long before he was towelling his hair dry and pulling a comb through it half heartedly, leaving it to dry however it wished. He snatched a new outfit from his bag and pulled the clothes on quickly, noticing how everything had been newly folded and smelled distinctly of fabric softener.
“I took the liberty of washing your clothes,” Arthur explained as he brought over a plate filled with a stuffed omelette. “I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t know what was clean but we’re going to need two weeks’ worth of clean clothes.”

Eames snorted, not terribly annoyed by the fact that Arthur had done his clothes – however bizarre that thought was – as he took a large bite of his omelette. “This is all very domestic of you, darling,” he accused warmly through his mouthful. He watched as Arthur’s eyes widened before his lover glanced away. Eames felt his stomach drop nervously. “What’s wrong?”

Arthur glanced back up at him after a moment. “Nothing’s wrong,” his companion promised, a smile on his face this time. “I just remember wishing that I could find someone who could help me find a functional balance between domesticity and professional work. I...” Eames noticed with affectionate amusement that Arthur was blushing. “I hadn’t even really thought about how domestic my actions were until you mentioned it.”

The Forger, unable to contain himself, made sure he had swallowed everything before dropping a tender kiss to his boyfriend’s lips. “It suits you, love, as long as we keep this balance for you.”

Arthur smiled up at him, looking unworried for their future, and laced his fingers on the back of Eames’s neck before pulling him down into an adoring kiss. Eames fumbled until he got his plate on the table beside his bag and then dug his fingers into the short hairs at the base of Arthur’s skull. Then, with great pleasure, he slid his fingers all the way up to the front of the Point Man’s head where his hair turned into skin, effectively mussing that carefully-done hair and causing it all to stick up on end with the gel. “And what is with all this gel?”

“Eames!” Arthur snapped irritably, pulling away as he attempted to smooth his hair back into place. Eames would worry about getting in trouble, but Arthur looked just as sated by the sensation of the Forger’s fingers running through his hair as he looked angry. “Can you at least leave my hair alone until we’re in private? I’d rather not have it look like I just rolled out of bed in public.”

“Whatever you say, doll,” he chucked as he picked up his omelette again, taking careful note of the ‘until we’re in private’. After that they washed up the few dishes that had been used, packed up the last of their belongings, and headed for the car. It was odd to have been in Arthur’s apartment for such a short period of time; it was place he had never expected to be lucky enough to see and now he was being hurried out again without much chance to appreciate it. He wasn’t terribly concerned though; he was pretty sure they would be returning at some point. He would get another opportunity to consider Arthur’s tastes and relish in the small sanctuary that Arthur normally kept all to himself.

They returned the car to a different depot with the same company – Arthur driving this time – and caught a taxi to the airport. Eames had sent Arthur a questioning look when their flight landed in Miami of all places, but his partner had purposefully ignored his raised eyebrow and led him out to yet another taxi. They picked up some dinner to eat on the drive, and with the time difference it
ended up being late in the afternoon when the taxi pulled up along the coast. A massive cruise ship came into view. “We’re going on a cruise?” he blurted out in surprise even as Arthur paid the driver and slid out of the back seat of the car.

“Problem?” Arthur perked an eyebrow at him across the roof of the car.

“Of all the things I had considered...” Eames chuckled in surprise as he slung his own bag over his shoulder and followed Arthur towards the docks. “A two week cruise was not what I had been expecting from you.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the Caribbean,” his companion admitted. “I figured now was a good time to do so. It’s the start of a new adventure...for both of us.”

“You’ve got that right, pet,” Eames agreed easily, wiping away that look of uncertainty wavering on Arthur’s face after the Forger’s initial surprise. With that decided, they headed up onto the ship and handed over their tickets when greeted at the main door. An attendant led them from the door to their room and Eames could do nothing but stare in awe at the passing lobbies, hallways, and stairways of grandeur. “You’ve really outdone yourself, sweetheart,” he warned as they stepped into their cabin, the attendant having disappeared to lead other guests to their rooms before cast-off.

He almost wanted to smack Arthur for spending so much money, their cabin looking like it should belong to the captain. Instead, he forced himself to step further into the room and take in the gorgeous cabin silently, disposing of his bag by the mirrored closet in the bedroom. The simple fact that the bedroom was a separate room was enough of a surprise in itself, and he caught Arthur watching him smugly while the Forger trailed around the room.

From the door on his right there was a small kitchenette filled with complimentary snacks, fruit, and alcohol. Beside that was a large sitting area with comfortable looking couches and armchairs and a small table that could be used for indoor eating. He could see that most of the wall was glass so that you could look outside at the view, which was currently overseeing Miami, with a door leading to the balcony. There was also a little alcove of glass with a half circle of bench seats around a small round table for eating. When he walked further into the room and looked to his left he could see the private bathroom with a full shower and tub, and a large queen sized bed. He also noticed that there was another wall of glass with a door leading out onto the same balcony. The room was all polished wood flooring or tastefully dark-coloured carpeting, and every other colour in the furniture was rich and complimentary.

“I figured we deserved a little pampering,” Arthur confesses as he set his own bag in the bedroom. “We’ve been through a lot, and I’d be dead if it wasn’t for you.”
“Well I suppose we have a lot to celebrate,” Eames stole a quick kiss before raiding the mini-bar, aware of Arthur trailing along behind him and looking a little dazed by the haphazard, passionate kiss. He found what he was looking for in a complimentary bottle of red wine and set it on the counter carefully. “If you’ll get that open for us, darling,” Eames turned and caught Arthur in his arms, who had been hovering behind him, “I’ll be right back.” Arthur seemed about to protest so he dropped another dizzying kiss to those lips before snatching one of the two room keys and making his way out into the hallway.

Although he hated postponing their celebration moment, there was something he wanted to get for that night. He followed the maps posted on the walls at the end of the corridor until he found what he was looking for. With his purchase made, he moved through the ship towards his cabin and his lover as quickly as he could manage, the hallways quite full now as the last swarm of passengers boarded before the ship set sail at six in the evening.

When he made it back to their cabin, locking the door behind him, he stowed his purchase away in a drawer of the vanity on the opposite wall of the bed in the bedroom and slipped out onto the balcony. Arthur was already there, two glasses of red wine set down on the table behind him while the Point Man leaned on the railing. Miami was falling away in the short time Eames had been gone, the setting sun over the growing ocean streaming over them and into their room behind them as they pulled away from the coast and headed south.

Arthur turned when he heard Eames approach, looking somewhat miffed that the Forger had disappeared after two quite breathtaking kisses. As a way of apologizing, Eames scooped up the glasses and handed one to his partner as he came to stand beside the other man by the railing. They watched the fading coastline in silence for a few minutes, sipping their drinks, and eventually shuffled closer to one another until they were pressed against one another tightly. He loved how Arthur looked lit up in the evening sunlight, and how relaxed the man looked with his jacket removed. Only his waistcoat and white shirt remained on his upper body, and Arthur had rolled the sleeves up lazily in the heat. Eames never wanted to forget what his partner looked like in this moment. “How about a picture to celebrate the moment, love,” Eames offered hopefully, slipping his phone from his pocket.

“Celebrating what, exactly?” Arthur looked over at him curiously, looking mildly suspicious and displeased at the thought of photos being taken.

“The fact that we survived Louis, Amelina and Nikolas’s attacks?” he suggested as he spun them both around so that their backs were against the railing and their sides were brushing. “The fact that you were brave and strong enough to confront and overcome your past?” he continued as he wound his left arm around Arthur’s shoulders, pulling him closer. He made sure that his wine glass, held tightly in his left hand, didn’t tip over while he held the camera of his phone out awkwardly in front of them with his right hand, trying to ensure he got both of them. “That we found each other and finally stopped being idiotic and stubborn? It’s the start of a new adventure, darling. The start
Arthur looked ready to comment, eyes focused forward but mouth open to speak. So just before pressing the button down, Eames turned his face to his left and planted a kiss on Arthur’s cheek. The action startled a brilliant smile out of his boyfriend just as Eames took the photo, the phone letting off an artificial shutter sound to indicate that the image had been saved. But before he had much time to celebrate or check the results of his photo, Arthur was shoving him away and cursing as he rushed back into the room.

Startled and nervous, Eames hurried into the room behind his companion, not bothering to close the balcony door behind him. He simply set his phone down on the vanity as he passed, following Arthur into the large washroom. The Point Man had stripped his waistcoat off quickly and dunked it into a sink full of water, scrubbing away viciously at the stain of red wine that was blooming across the fabric like blood after a gunshot wound. “This will never come out,” Arthur lamented in frustration when he noticed Eames stepping into the room behind him.

For a moment Eames didn’t know what to do, worried he had completely ruined the moment when accidentally spilling his wine down Arthur’s front. With his stomach doing nervous flips and his heart thudding in his ears, Eames stepped up behind his lover, knowing of only one way to tell how angry Arthur truly was with him. “I’ll buy you a new one,” he promised as he reached around and unbuttoned the bottom button of his companion’s white shirt.

Arthur stilled immediately, stiff and unaccommodating for a moment as he watched the reflection of Eames’s hands work in the mirror. It was only when he managed to get the last infuriating button undone when Arthur turned and wrapped an arm around his neck, hooking him and dragging him close as their lips slammed together. Relieved and eager to realize that he had been forgiven and managed to bring their moment back, Eames impatiently pushed Arthur’s shirt off his shoulders, sending it fluttering to the floor. Then he focused on returning his lover’s fevered string of quick, zealous kisses.

They were both breathing heavily when Eames finally found enough willpower to steer Arthur backwards out of the washroom and into the bedroom. The Point Man’s knees buckled when the backs of his legs came into contact with the edge of the mattress, and Eames led him down to the mattress carefully. Once Arthur was settled on his back in the middle of the bed, Eames turned quickly and dug out his previous purchase, turning back to his lover with a reassuring smile that probably looked mischievous. As he expected, Arthur immediately grew wary. “What’s that?”

“Massage oil. I think it will help you with your pain from the dreamscape, if you trust me enough to try,” Eames offered, holding out the small bottle for Arthur to inspect. He waited with nervous anticipation as the Point Man looked at the bottle carefully, the amber liquid inside catching the sun as it touched the horizon outside. Eames had remembered all of the times he had massaged Arthur’s aching limbs or his head, and how his partner had not only melted, but had seemed to
visibly recover from his pain.

“I trust you,” Arthur finally relented, handing back the bottle. With a grin, Eames momentarily abandoned the bottle on the bedside table and focused on kissing Arthur’s breath away. Their lips slid together almost indecently as both of their desires – what they had been ignoring, suppressing, and avoiding for over a year – were ignited. They were finally in their own private space and could drop their masks and indulge.

Eventually though, Eames forced himself to break the kiss and dipped his fingers into the bottle of oil. He readjusted his position so that he had a knee on each side of Arthur, half seated on the man’s stomach without dropping his full weight down. He held out his hand for his companion to test the smell before he began to use it, and Eames noticed with relish the look of calm and ease that washed over his lover at the faint smell of vanilla and cinnamon. “Just relax and enjoy yourself, love,” he requested as he caught Arthur’s left hand and began working meticulously on each finger lovingly. “And tell me if I miss anything that hurts.”

It was almost magical how quickly Arthur seemed to melt into the duvet beneath him. Eames indulged in watching Arthur just as much as he focused on the current limb he was working on. His boyfriend hummed his pleasure with his eyes closed at some points, while at other times Arthur spent long spans of time simply watching Eames work with half-lidded eyes, looking equally gorgeous, adorable, and fuckable. It was even better that he had not bothered to close the balcony door behind him when chasing Arthur. The warm ocean breeze drifted across Arthur’s skin and Eames’s face as he worked, and the setting sun had Arthur’s skin glowing invitingly.

Eames was thorough as he massaged each finger, each palm, each wrist, each forearm, each elbow, each bicep, and each shoulder before converging on Arthur’s collarbone. He added a few doting kisses along the dip of his partner’s collarbone before moving his lips upward and his hands downward. He kissed each inch of skin whether he remembered there being a cut there or not after rescuing Arthur from Louis’s chains, never growing impatient or bored of feeling and tasting Arthur’s skin beneath his lips and on his tongue.

At one point he remembered to finally muss up Arthur’s hair now that they were in private, running his slicked fingers through soft strands of black hair until the dream worker’s hair fell loose and haloed the man’s head on the pillow. Arthur sent him a light glare but did not otherwise protest, remaining silent and placid as Eames returned to work. As he dipped his fingers back into the bottle for more oil and repositioned his hands on Arthur’s chest, he was astounded by how much he was enjoying this and the silence that swam around them. The only sounds were the ocean surf below them and their measured breathing; normally Eames loved to talk, loved to hear Arthur’s voice rumbling in the man’s chest, but for right now things were perfect.

He tweaked each nipple teasingly for a moment, earning a surprised but not displeased hiss before dipping lower. The Forger did his best to work over every wound he had remembered seeing on
the other man’s body, or remember patches of skin had seemed more sore or sensitive when he brushed them for later. Even though he did his best to work on every inch of skin he could reach, he wanted to make sure he spent extra time on the wounds from the dreamscape.

He was incredibly pleased with his work, Arthur appearing to be a boneless heap below him, but then his fingertips skimmed over the skin below the Point Man’s navel and Arthur let out a tiny, half-choked off groan. “Eames...” When Eames sat down a little more he could feel the hard line of Arthur’s cock against his ass even as his lover bucked up against him, the sudden warm pressure against him drawing a moaned “Please...” from those lips.

“You’ve gone and ruined my work, pet,” Eames chided his boyfriend lightly, trying to hide how strongly Arthur’s small moans had affected him. He had immediately felt his cock stiffen in his pants, pressing insistently against his zipper until it was uncomfortable, and Eames couldn’t quite keep himself from grinding back down against Arthur. “Here you are supposed to be relaxing and instead you’re tensing up more than normal.”

“S-sorry,” Arthur stuttered out, sounding impish more than apologetic when Eames shuffled down slightly until he was seated over Arthur’s thighs.

“Looks like there’s something else I’ll need to pay special attention to...” he teased as he pressed the heel of his palm against the bulge in Arthur’s suit pants, grinning when he felt Arthur’s returning groan of agreement. He worked on the zipper of the Point Man’s pants quickly before shucking the pants and underwear, releasing Arthur’s bobbing cock to the briny ocean air. Eames took a moment to flick on the bedside lamps but didn’t get up to close the door, the air still warm despite the fact that the sun had sunk below the waves by this point.

He returned to kneeling on either side of Arthur’s thighs, looking down at the prize that was all his. Arthur was watching him with hooded eyes, every muscle beneath Eames tense and aware. With a few remaining drops of oil on his fingers, Eames wrapped one hand around the base of Arthur’s cock and squeezed experimentally, causing Arthur to draw in an audible breath through his teeth at the sensation. Then he leaned forward and flicked his tongue across the head teasingly before swallowing Arthur down, tongue plastered against the underside of hot flesh. This time the groan that fell from Arthur’s lips could only be described as obscene.

Eames got to work quickly, spurred on by Arthur’s vocal appraisals of his movements. He had never really expected Arthur to be vocal when it came to sex – even the projections that Eames had indulged in had not experimented in terms of speaking much – but he was more than pleased to be proven wrong. Arthur knew exactly what he wanted and was not ashamed to speak his desires, leading Eames until he had finally found the perfect pace and grip for his hand as he sucked Arthur’s length hard.
He learned quite quickly that his lover was a mess of binaries, loving it fast and hard one moment and then slow and teasing with Eames kissing or licking at the slit dripping precome the next moment. It wasn’t long before Arthur’s commands had fallen away to panting breaths and indecent moans. The Point Man tried to raise his legs to lock Eames in place but Eames was sprawled over them too much, forcing Arthur to buck up with minimal leverage. Eames had no intention of moving, loving the feeling of Arthur struggling beneath his weight slightly. He also felt a hand bury in his hair desperately, leading him more fully onto Arthur’s cock without too much force. He did his best to fight his gag reflex and swallow around Arthur, smirking around his mouthful when he heard the other man begin to babble his name and a string of curses. Finally, the words fell into a stutter of “Eames, I—I’m—god, I’m going to...”

Prepared, Eames moved his hand up and down once more tightly, stroking Arthur’s shaft before removing his hand and taking all of his lover’s cock into his mouth until his nose was against Arthur’s pubis bone. He swallowed hard, tongue wrapping around the hot flesh in his mouth, and then he felt Arthur’s entire body tense and buck up in time with a breathy shout of the Forger’s name. A moment later, hot ropes of come were filling his mouth and he did his best to swallow everything while trying to keep his partner pinned down to the mattress.

Once he was finished he pulled away quickly, gasping in air while wiping away a few droplets of come from his lips. He watched with pride and arousal as Arthur fell back against the mattress, his back momentarily bowing and curling around Eames as much as possible during his orgasm, and now melting completely. Any of the tension that had been in the dream worker’s body during his arousal disappeared like smoke on a windy day and Eames dipped his fingers into more oil before that could change.

Despite having his hard cock pressing against his zipper uncomfortably, Eames forced himself to calm his body enough to focus on Arthur’s massage again. As much as he wanted to fuck his lover into the mattress and have the man shout his name again, no doubt catching the attention of anyone on a nearby balcony, he wanted to deal with the pain first. He received a somewhat confused grunt from Arthur when he quickly worked over the pelvic bones before moving down his right leg. “Trust me, love,” was all he whispered as Arthur regarded him with dark eyes.

A lot of attention was placed into Arthur’s right thigh where the deep wound had bled across Eames’s leg, the mere memory causing him to shudder slightly. Then he moved down the rest of Arthur’s right leg and worked on that ankle before switching over to the left leg. This, he knew, would be his biggest challenge along with his partner’s back, so he spent a great deal of time kneading the flesh and bone there. He had no real concept of time once the sun had set, but he was still in no hurry for this to end.

At one point he readjusted his position to sit on the mattress beside Arthur, hoisting the man’s left leg carefully into his lap. It was still stiff and unyielding under his touch when he first began, but after a lot of unhurried attention, the muscles around the bone seemed to loosen and relax. Eames swept his fingers down to work on the Point Man’s left ankle before returning to his shinbone, calf and knee. Soon Arthur was humming and moaning again, but when Eames glanced up he could
see only minimal interest from the man’s flaccid cock. He smiled warmly when he realized his lover was simply expressing his enjoyment as Eames worked, and the Forger leaned over to kiss the skin he was working on tenderly.

Once he was sure he had done everything he could for Arthur’s leg, hoping it would be enough and that it would last, he gently led the dream worker onto his stomach. Eames again took his position overtop Arthur, seated lightly on his ass while avoiding the man’s pained back, and began working again. He skimmed over everything he had worked on thus far, up his companion’s arms and shoulders before finally devoting his attention to the other aspect of Arthur’s anatomy that required the most love.

Eames was startled when he received a hiss of pain when he first touched the soft, pale skin of Arthur’s back. “Darling?” he asked hesitantly, hands hovering fearfully over that quivering back.

“It’s okay,” Arthur whispered into the pillow, voice catching but sounding determined all the same. “Keep going.”

He hesitated for another moment and then tentatively brought his hands down again, simply letting the heat of his palms seep down into the skin below him. Even though he could not physically see the wounds, he knew they were there just below the surface and out of view. Arthur’s body was tense and uncompromising for the first few minutes Eames worked, beginning at the back of his neck and shoulders before moving downward. But finally, slowly, those wiry muscles began to relax beneath his touch. He knew it had to be at least another fifteen or twenty minutes before Arthur was arching back into his touch, body vibrating as he hummed pleasantly, but he did not regret the time at all.

Even though he probably spent a lot longer on Arthur’s back than he truly needed, his boyfriend was showing no hints of protest. But Eames’s cock had never calmed down, relishing guiltily in the warmth of Arthur’s ass pressed against him and the sound of his lover’s pleased sighs and moans. When he couldn’t take it a moment longer without bursting, Eames abandoned Arthur’s back to work the last kinks and tenseness from the other man’s legs. Once he was sure that he had worked every pain and wound he could from his partner’s body, Eames trailed oil-slicked fingers up the crack of Arthur’s ass. He felt his heart flutter with excitement even as he bit his lip, feeling nervous but knowing he had to ask. “Louis didn’t...” he couldn’t voice his fears. “...Did he?”

Arthur was silent for a long moment, sending Eames’s thoughts into a tailspin of horror and anger, when his companion sighed. “No, he never forced himself on me that way.” Eames didn’t try to hold back his audible sigh of relief, Arthur not commenting when it sounded a little too close to a sob, and kissed the little dimples on Arthur’s lower back. When he didn’t hear any protests he began trailing his kisses backwards, over the warm flesh of Arthur’s ass. He snatched a pillow from the pile and lifted Arthur off the bed slightly before sliding it underneath, groaning when that left Arthur’s ass in the air, presented to him. He took careful hold and spread his lover’s cheeks,
tonguing at the puckered opening experimentally. “Fuck, Eames...” Arthur groaned, shifting back against his mouth. “I’m not a fucking porcelain doll. I won’t break.”

“You’re pretty enough to be one,” Eames retorted before nipping the warm flesh of one of Arthur’s cheeks before withdrawing to snatch up more oil. He dribbled a fair amount onto the fingers of one hand, noticing how he had less than half of the bottle remaining, and carefully inserted one digit.

“Fuck you,” Arthur snapped without much bite, body tensing around Eames’s finger for the briefest of seconds before relaxing again.

Eames hummed as he watched his finger sink deeper and deeper into his lover, the smell of vanilla, cinnamon, the sea and the two dream workers’ arousals filling the air. “That’s not exactly how this is going to play out, love,” he warned, voice tainted with mirth and arousal. With no further protests, Eames continued to work his finger in and out carefully until the muscles clenching around him had loosened. He followed this pattern as he added a second, and then third finger, thrusting them in and out with steady pressure.

It was when he leaned down and darted his tongue over his working fingers and Arthur’s spread skin when his partner lifted himself onto his knees slightly and bucked backwards against him, demanding as he rutted against Eames’s fingers and mouth. “Eames...please...” Arthur begged brokenly, and Eames could feel his own cock twitch in arousal.

He withdrew his fingers quickly, dragging a soft keening noise from Arthur at the loss, before frantically working off his clothes. He undid the buttons of his shirt with trembling fingers before flinging his shirt aside and focusing on his pants. He wasn’t sure he had ever gotten rid of his clothes faster than he had in that moment, but even that seemed to take forever until his cock was finally free to bob in the air while he looked over Arthur. Eames still could barely comprehend the truth that the Point Man was sprawled across the bed in front of him – waiting for him – ass in the air, and moaning for him to hurry up. It had his head swimming.

“I was tested recently and came back clean...” he offered hesitantly, not wanting to push his luck but needing to know whether he had to go riffling through his wallet for a condom.

Arthur glanced back at him impatiently over his shoulder, eyes dark and cheeks flushed. “I’m clean too. And if you waste another second, I swear you won’t have a choice in whether you want to fuck me tonight.”

“Saying things like that should be illegal for you,” Eames whispered warningly as he abandoned the thought of a condom and reached instead for more oil, covering himself generously. He
watched with slight amusement and overwhelming arousal when Arthur watched him coat himself, stroking his own length a few times. The Point Man licked his lips at the sight, and Eames nearly lost himself then and there. Instead he forced himself to calm down enough to reposition himself between Arthur’s knees. He pressed the head of his cock against Arthur’s entrance, sliding it up and down his lover’s crack to spread more oil, and paused for just a moment. “I love you, Arthur.” He needed his companion to know, to understand why he wanted this so badly.

Arthur, to his credit, looked loving rather than impatient this time when he glanced over his shoulder to meet Eames’s gaze. Their eyes held for a long moment before a smile bloomed on both of their lips. “I love you too, Eames.” There was a soft tenderness and understanding in the man’s tone, and Eames sunk in without another word.

They both groaned and cursed into the air as his cock pressed in with steady pressure until he bottomed out, both dream workers out of breath by the time Eames was pressed up against Arthur’s ass. He could feel his lover’s ass clenching and relaxing around him, adjusting to his size and girth, and it was all he could do to bite his lip and keep himself from coming right there. He skimmed a warm hand over Arthur’s back comfortingly as the man struggled to adjust, the Point Man on his knees and forearms with his head dropped down loosely between his shoulders.

It was Arthur who gave him the indication to move, rutting back against him and taking him in an extra half inch that had Eames seeing stars. No further hints required, he gripped Arthur’s hips tightly and slid out before thrusting back in quickly. He was sure to pull almost all the way out before sliding back in to the base each time, loving the sensation of Arthur’s body clenching around each inch of his cock while he moved. And as soon as he changed his angle and pressed in only to have his boyfriend gasp his name and demand ‘harder, Eames, please’, he made sure that each of his thrusts were angled towards his lover’s prostate to keep that stream of dirty, obscene, and incredibly hot commands and pleas spilling from Arthur’s lips.

Their bodies moved together in harmony at first, Arthur rutting back just as Eames thrust forward. Soon Eames threw one arm forward and hooked his hand on Arthur’s shoulder, pulling the man back harder each time he thrust up into that tight heat. He wanted Arthur to take all of him with each thrust, wanted his whole cock resting inside his lover for that split second before he was pulling out again, and not just for his own sensations. Eames had promptly fallen in love with the little fucked out sounds Arthur gave every time Eames bucked into him hard, the air falling from his lungs each time like he might die but could never get enough.

It didn’t take long for them to fall out of their rhythm though, both of them new to one another’s bodies and aroused to the point of nerve endings sparking with the novelty of the coupling. “Arthur...Love...” he panted, trying to remain focused on his goal. “I want to see your beautiful face.” Arthur grunted when Eames pulled out but rolled over onto his back without further protest, showing no indication of pain when his back came into contact with the mattress. Taking that as a good sign, Eames replaced the now-sweaty pillow under Arthur’s lower back and hooked the man’s right leg over his shoulder to widen his lover up.
This time when he entered Arthur, sliding in gently, he made sure that his pace was slower. While they had begun off quite quickly, desperate to display their desires while also reaching that tantalizing end, he wanted this to be a coupling that would not end too quickly. They had begun by claiming one another, their movements passionate and loving but quick and hurried. This time as he sunk deep into Arthur’s body, loving how the man’s ass still clenched around him as if saying ‘welcome back’, he made sure his movements were slow and endearing as well as passionate. He wanted them to relish in every moment, detail and sensation.

Arthur followed his pace for a short time, seeming to understand his underlying message without any vocalizations required. It didn’t – couldn’t – last forever though, and Eames felt his body speeding up again when Arthur bucked up against him demandingly. He could tell Arthur was getting close by the way Arthur was bucking up despite the lack of leverage and moaning his name into the air. Knowing he was nearing his own end, Eames used the remaining oil on his hand to slide his grip up and down the Point Man’s weeping cock in time with his thrusts.

“Y-yes, Eames,” Arthur whined, eyes clenched closed tightly. “Just like—yes, like—oh god, Eames...” the man’s vocalizations were crumbling away, words beyond Arthur’s reach as he rutted up and down erratically. It was clear that his lover didn’t know which direction to move, whether he should fuck up into Eames’s hot, tight grip, or fuck himself down onto his claiming cock. But it didn’t seem to matter when, a moment later, a long, drawn out groan was dragged from Arthur’s lips as his partner tensed, bowed his back, and spilt himself all over Eames’s moving fist and Arthur’s own stomach.

Eames continued to stroke his boyfriend until there was nothing left, whispering Arthur’s name like a mantra under his breath as each spasm of his lover’s body clenched around him tighter, milking him towards his ending. He leaned forward and planted a palm on each side of the mattress beside Arthur’s head, kissing Arthur messily as he thrust in harshly, searching for his completion. It only took another few deep, claiming thrusts, and a whispered ‘come for me, Eames’ from Arthur before he cried out into his lover’s mouth and spilt himself deep within Arthur with a string of shallow, needy thrusts.

He collapsed half on top of Arthur when he was finished, his whole body wracked with tremors from the force of his climax. He didn’t withdraw right away, loving the sensation of his cock still buried deep within Arthur as it softened slowly, the Forger’s come swarming around him as it was kept from spilling out. “Are you alright, love?” he finally managed to ask once his breathing and heart had returned to a somewhat normal pace. “Nothing hurt?”

“Besides my ass?” Arthur chuckled tiredly, peppering kisses along the side of Eames’s face that he could reach. “Nothing hurts. I think your massage actually helped...Thank you, Eames...” Arthur murmured against his ear. “I love you.”
“Love you...too,” Eames’s returning confession was broken off by a long yawn, and he finally pulled himself out of Arthur’s body. He was overjoyed at Arthur’s indication that he was not in pain, hoping that it meant all of the pain from the dreamscape was gone for good. He was too tired to celebrate though, only managing to plant another sloppy, slow kiss on Arthur’s lips. “Let’s sleep.”

Arthur hummed his agreement and rolled under the covers lethargically, body exhausted and fucked out. Eames forced himself out of bed just long enough to close and lock the balcony door and flick off the lights before crawling in behind his lover, snuggling close. Arthur ended up facing the wall of windows with Eames tucking his face into the crook of his partner’s neck, wanting to be as close as he could as his body moved slowly. Eames could feel wetness against his naked thigh when it brushed against Arthur’s ass and he knew the Point Man would be unimpressed and demand a shower in the morning. But all Eames could think about was the potential of them sharing the shower in the morning before drifting off into a sated sleep.
Part XVIII. Eames

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XVIII. Eames

Surprisingly, he woke up long before Arthur. His partner was still breathing deeply and slowly for the half hour Eames spent curled up against his back, trailing lazy fingers across naked flesh that was all his to explore. Even though the sun was on the other side of the ship, there was still some sparkling light coming in through the windows as the sun reflected off the never-ending ocean waves. Eventually, as much as Eames wished he could remain where he was forever, he remembered a project he had kept in the back of his mind and pulled himself from bed cautiously.

Arthur groaned and shifted in his sleep slightly at Eames’s retreat but didn’t wake. The Forger slipped into the shower quickly, washing away the evidence of his coupling with Arthur without any regret; he knew there would be many more times to follow. Once he was cleaned up he snatched his bag from the closet and got dressed in the sitting room quietly, knowing he would never escape to get his work done if Arthur woke up. Nonetheless, not knowing how long his objective would take him, Eames wrote a quick note explaining that he was headed out to find the nearest buffet. He set the note on the vanity mirror where Arthur would see right away, snatched up his phone, key card, wallet, and Arthur’s wallet and made a hasty exit out of the room.

The ship was teaming with life as passengers buzzed around the hallways during their one day before they started docking at island ports. He did his best to find what he was looking for in the first gift shop he found, but eventually he had to give up and ask an attendant in the main lobby. The ceiling above him was a large circle of glass, letting hot Caribbean sunlight flow into the room, and Eames couldn’t wait to lead Arthur around the gorgeous ship on his arm.

With the help of the attendant, Eames found the booth he was looking for and handed over his phone with his order. He was thankful that he had thought to do this now, before the rest of the ship decided that they wanted some photos developed of their trip as well. He waited the ten obligatory minutes while munching on an apple he had stolen from their kitchenette, and accepted the small envelope and his phone back when the machine was finished. Eames felt his heart rate picking up slightly at the thought of his project, wondering whether Arthur would like it or hate him for it, and headed back to his room.

He paused for a moment, selfishly wanting to study the photograph he had gotten developed for a moment. It was the photo he had taken from the night before, and it was the epitome of perfection. He and Arthur were leaning together on the railing facing the camera, Eames’s right arm disappearing out of frame as it held the phone aloft. His left arm was around Arthur’s shoulders, holding him close, and he could see with the picture the freeze frame just before his red wine spilt
across Arthur’s waistcoat. This, of course, had the Forger smiling even wider when he remembered that his mistake had led to the best night of his life.

The startled smile on Arthur’s face as Eames kissed the man’s cheek, frozen there, was breathtaking. Eames was quite sure that brilliant smile rivalled the sun setting in the ocean behind them, staining the water with rich shades of red, orange and purple. It was still bright enough for the details to be visible though, to see Arthur’s blush, the sun’s light catching in the red wine of their glasses, sparkling as they were held somewhat aloft. He had gotten it printed from his phone into a wallet-sized photo as well as a larger one that could be framed, which he pushed back into the envelope when he was finished staring and smiling at the scene in front of him.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the shower running as he re-entered and locked the door behind him again. Knowing he didn’t have much time left, Eames rushed into the bedroom and fished around for Arthur’s wallet quickly. He was surprised to find two other photos already in the wallet, though they had been shoved in the sleeve for bills while Arthur worked on the notion of having photos in his wallet again. Working quickly, Eames placed the photos and returned the wallet to where he had found it before dumping his own wallet, key and phone back onto the vanity; he wouldn’t need it when Arthur stepped out of the shower.

Although he considered slipping into the shower with Arthur, he heard the shower turn off before he managed to shuck more than his shirt. Unperturbed by this, Eames wandered around the room opening the two balcony doors, the breeze coming off the water refreshing but warm. He snatched up another apple as his stomach grumbled for food and settled down into the little alcove of glass on a section of the plush bench seat. He spent his time munching on his fruit lazily as he stared out at the balcony and the ocean beyond, lit up to a gorgeous blue with the sun sparkling on it.

His attention was drawn away when he heard the bathroom door open. He watched through the slightly distorted glass of the alcove as Arthur made his way from the bathroom out into the bedroom and then, after pausing for a moment, out into the main room. Eames felt his mouth go dry as he tried to swallow, seeing Arthur standing in front of him with just a white towel wrapped around his hip loosely. He could see, even with the short distance between them, that his lover’s skin was still damp and flushed, and Arthur’s beautiful brown eyes darkened when they landed on him. “You weren’t there when I woke up,” the Point Man chided him warningly.

“I left a note,” the Forger retorted, not feeling terribly worried when he noticed the way Arthur’s eyes were dancing playfully. He pre-emptively pushed the table away from him slightly, giving more space around the bench seat when he saw Arthur struggle to keep down a smile.

“I think you have to make it up to me anyway,” Arthur insisted, smiling dangerously as he crossed the short distance between them and settled himself purposefully in Eames’s lap. Arthur decisively set the bottle of remaining oil on the table behind him. Although the majority of his mind was entirely focused on that gorgeous naked skin inching towards him and the warmth of that body
against him, Eames managed enough awareness to take note of how Arthur was moving. His partner’s movements were fluid and precise without being forced, the muscles and bones shifting together perfectly without any hint of pain or even discomfort in the dream worker as he settled down.

That, as much as the feeling of Arthur sitting in his lap and straddling his thighs had Eames grinning up at his companion with loving relief. “I think you’re right, love,” he agreed before digging his fingers into that damp, wavy hair and dragging Arthur’s mouth down to meet his. His boyfriend moaned wonderfully into his mouth and dipped his tongue in quickly, holding the back of Eames’s head as he leaned in closer. They nipped and kissed and sucked on every bare inch of skin they could reach, always returning to pressing their lips together again like they would die without the sensation of their lips against one another.

It didn’t take long for Eames to yank Arthur’s towel away, causing the damp material to flop to the floor even as Arthur responded by pressing in closer and rubbing against one of Eames’s thighs. Eames felt a spike of white-hot desire shoot through him as Arthur panted, open-mouthed against Eames’s skin as the Forger dipped down to suck and nip a claiming mark onto his boyfriend’s collarbone. He thrust up against Arthur a few times, gripping the man’s hips to push him down to meet each thrust, and then they pulled apart just long enough to tear off Eames’s pants and underwear.

Arthur steadied himself with a strong hand on Eames’s shoulder and sank down slowly, moving as though they had been doing this forever. There were no words necessary as they waited for the lithe dream worker to adjust and grow comfortable, just a few teasing, dazed kisses here and there across sweaty skin. Once Arthur was readjusted to his size, they fucked slowly and without any goal in mind beyond pleasure and enjoyment. Their bodies shuddered and trembled with exertion as they continued to move at a slow, measured pace.

Eames could barely believe how lucky he was to have Arthur – gorgeous, especially in the sunlight with his skin tasting slightly of salt between sweat and the sea air – moving on top of him and taking him fully each time. His lover’s back was arched as he took Eames’s cock in deep, sitting down with added pressure each time he came down with the aid of gravity. The pale column of Arthur’s neck was also presented to him like an offering, gleaming with sweat in the sun, and Eames would be a fool not to accept and add new markings to that flawless skin when he had enough awareness to breathe.

There was so much trust in their movements, in the way Arthur moved against him and held on like Eames was a lifeline that could always be trusted to be there to steady him. Even though the Point Man had somewhat emerged again when they had gone out in public, there were still these distinct moments Eames would never forget where it was just him and Arthur and their emotions and pleasure. They were wound up together and bound, relying on one another as much as they were supporting each other. And that trust and devotion was absolutely gorgeous, causing him to catch his breath when Arthur seemed to realize he was being watched and looked down at Eames – still riding him demandingly – and shared a brilliant smile.
He had pulled Arthur down into another kiss at that point and dropped his hand to the man’s throbbing length, knowing that both of them were getting exhausted even though they never wanted it to end. His boyfriend gave a pleasing whine into his mouth and against his lips when they gave up on kissing and just panted against one another’s lips. He made sure that his hand stroked Arthur in time with their movements as Eames began angling his hips upward to thrust up each time his companion sat down, inevitably increasing the pace until they were both groaning and cursing quietly into the air.

The end came with a choked off sob from Arthur as he buried his face against Eames’s collarbone and neck, his entire body shuddering violently as his release fell across the Forger’s moving fist and chest. “Eames...” was all that came out as he continued milking Arthur dry, the other man wrapping his arms weakly around his shoulders to hold him close as he faintly moved to follow Eames’s frenzied movements. All it took was to hear his name tumbling from that professional mouth, those precise lips – name drenched in love, satisfaction and desire – for him to feel his own body tensing. He transferred one arm to wrap around the man’s narrow shoulders to push him down harder as he spilled himself inside Arthur’s hot, claiming body, and slowed his stroking to a weak caress as Arthur grew oversensitive.

They kissed for a long time after they were finished, too sated to get excited again but in no hurry to stop exploring one another’s mouths and skin. Eames took his time licking the salty taste from his lover’s skin before darkening the few marks he had left on the man’s skin where it would be barely hidden beneath shirt fabric. To his surprise, Arthur took his time leaving a few love bites of his own on Eames’s skin, the gentle sucking juxtaposed to the sharp sting of nipping teeth in a perfect blend. He was quite sure he could have remained seated there with Arthur devouring his skin for the rest of his life and been happy.

However, eventually they grew cool as the breeze brushed over the sweat on their skin and they decided to share a shower. Their shower ran incredibly long, both of them slightly more adventurous as the post-orgasmic haze began to fade from their fuzzy minds. Eames adored how his fingers skimmed over flushed skin so easily with the aid of water and soap, but spent most of his time carding fingers through Arthur’s hair and sealing their lips together again and again. At some point the Point Man rolled his eyes and shoved him away lightly, insisting that they actually spend their vacation outside of the shower, and they fell into washing one another’s bodies sensually but without further distraction.

Once they were dried off and dressed, Arthur’s hair once again slicked back – Eames took no issue with this knowing he was allowed to muss it up however he pleased as soon as they returned to their cabin for the night – they checked their email and then decided to explore the ship a little bit. They discovered a little lounge on a lower level of the ship, atmosphere shadowed but intimate. Eames dragged Arthur to a table where they proceeded to sip drinks for a long time, chatting about whatever came to mind. It was oddly relieving to have nothing to do; his relaxation time with Arthur while the man smiled softly at him from behind the rim of his glass seemed unhurried and wonderful. It was so different from Eames’s ‘retirement’ after Inception; it felt like he could actually let himself enjoy his time now that he had Arthur with him. Of course he knew that he
would one day miss the excitement of dream work, with Arthur by his side as the perfect Point
Man and partner, but he was content to wait in this lull with his boyfriend until the other man
decided that was what he wanted. It could be tomorrow or ten years from that moment, he didn’t
care.

Nursing their drinks for a long time, they eventually grew restless and decided to continue
exploring the ship. He couldn’t help but smile and whisper his relief to his partner as he continued
watching Arthur move without any hint of pain. Arthur actually looked surprised at first when
Eames whispered it to him, having almost forgotten about his pain and limp once they had finally
stopped plaguing his mind. They were out in public and the Point Man had returned to his
professional, independent self, but Arthur still allowed a sweet, chaste kiss under an unused parasol
on the sun deck before they continued on their way.

It seemed as though nothing could go wrong as they continued on their way and eventually headed
back towards their cabin to ‘dress for dinner’ as Arthur demanded. The sun was hanging low in the
sky as they dressed in comfortable silence but Eames found himself watching his companion with
something tinged with worry. Although Arthur seemed to have finally moved beyond his past and
abandoned his guilt and pain, the man had still been walking rather stiffly as they toured the ship.
It could have just been because they were in public, but there was something that seemed...overly
brisk and aware in the way the other dream worker had scanned their surroundings. “Are you
alright, darling?” he heard himself asking, trying to sound nonchalant as he thought back to when
Arthur had checked his email.

Arthur glanced up at him quickly, looking somewhat caught off-guard by the question before that
surprise slid away to exasperated affection. “Haven’t you studied me enough already, Eames?”
Arthur asked curiously, although he did not sound terribly upset.

“Never, darling,” he retaliated, continuing to watch his lover as the man threaded a tie under his
collar and began tying it expertly.

The Point Man, seeming to realize that Eames was still watching him, scoffed lightly, “I’m fine,
Eames. Really,” the dream worker added when he saw that the Forger was about to question him
again.

He was still somewhat suspicious, knowing Arthur well enough now to notice when the man was
being himself, when he was being distant in public, and when he was being the professional Point
Man. He was confused by the sudden switch to professionalism but knew things would be revealed
with time and not before – especially if he kept pressing his partner for information. Instead, he
forced himself to remain quiet and simply watch Arthur closely for cues as his boyfriend took his
arm with a small smile and led him out into the hall towards one of the more posh dining rooms.
Luckily, watching Arthur and leading him around on his arm – their attachment visible to anyone
who cared to notice – was not a terribly difficult thing to do.
When they arrived at the vast dining room it was already quite busy, but Arthur merely stepped up to the attendant and gave his last name easily – another fake name, of course. Eames did not miss the look of mild recognition on the older gentleman’s face when he heard the name, or the way they were led through the bustle of full tables and waiters to a specific table slightly out of view but with a perfect view of the rest of the dining hall. Nor did it slip past him when Arthur used a slightly commanding voice when he offered Eames the chair that overlooked the rest of the diners.

The large room was done with the same tasteful woods and colours as their cabin had been, with a large lantern-shaped chandelier fixed to the centre of the circular room. He surveyed the room and the passengers dining around them critically, realizing that something was going on. But he waited until their waitress had come by and taken their orders before leaning back in his chair and catching Arthur’s eye knowingly. “Alright, love. What’s going on?”

Arthur didn’t look terribly surprised or angry at the question; instead, he looked rather proud that Eames had realized this wasn’t just dinner anymore. The Point Man – epitomizing everything Eames had associated with that role since he had begun working with Arthur – sat against the back of his chair stiffly and took a measured sip of water. “Do you see the large table directly behind us, just to your right of the main chandelier?” the dream worker questioned him under his breath as he leaned forward for a roll of bread.

The Forger, adopting his own role to match his partner, subtly glanced past Arthur’s shoulder to the table a short distance away from them in the centre of the dining hall. The table was large, half built against a wall of frosted glass that bordered the bar directly underneath the chandelier. This cut the table from the view of over half of the dining hall, but Arthur had chosen the perfect table to see the table while most of its occupants were not angled towards him to notice. He could see a posh businessman seated in the middle of the throng, stomach protruding to the point where Eames worried about the man’s buttons. The man – the mark – had a slinky young girl under his arm, likely a mistress with the intimate closeness but the lack of any indication of commitment. He also had a rather dissuading entourage of business associates – judging by the suits – and buff bodyguards. “Yes,” he admitted warily.

He turned back to regard Arthur fully when the other man didn’t respond right away. He could see Arthur biting his bottom lip in thought, over-buttering his roll of bread. Eames was almost positive that Arthur was at war with himself in those few silent seconds, debating between Arthur and the Point Man and trying to find some functional balance between the two. But then those brown eyes sought his and even though the man’s body was stiff and distant, those eyes were determined but unsure, searching for his support. “I packed a PASIV in my bag when we left my apartment.” When Eames didn’t question or interrupt him, Arthur seemed to gain a little more confidence. “It’s just a little side job for Saito; he’s a lesser rival that uses less than legal methods of reporting his investments.”

Eames sighed and watched Arthur for a long moment, trying to discern what was going on in that
complicated head. “Are you sure, love?” he asked carefully. “You know I am with you until the end no matter what. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“It will be a simple job,” the dream worker explained easily. “We won’t even need to do anything but observe until the last night on the ship. I think this would be a good way to see how comfortable I am in the dreamscape; it’ll just be you and me working together.” When the Point Man emerged fully, speaking confidently and knowledgeably even as Arthur softened his tone as he shared his argument, Eames knew Arthur was ready.

Knowing Arthur was unlikely to take kindly to public displays of affection, Eames feigned reaching for some bread before slipping his hand down across the table to clasp his boyfriend’s hand. Arthur was watching him but didn’t pull away, just the ends of their fingers hooked together across the space of the table. The Point Man was watching him critically, gauging his response to the job proposal, but Arthur was watching him as a partner and lover. He wasn’t sure what to say, how to express his love for this man and his relief at seeing Arthur return to his confident self. “It’s good to have you back, darling,” was all he managed to think of, and even though it sounded to him like his words fell flat, Arthur gave him a pleased and affectionate smile that lit up the room.

They returned to safer topics after that, though their hands remained clasped until the waitress arrived with their food. They ate contentedly, the excitement of a new job and a new mark buzzing around them and mixing with their already energetic moods. It was only when they had finished eating and the bill came that Eames swallowed hard, suddenly realizing that his hopefully-well-accepted present would be arriving far sooner than he had initially planned. He was about to offer to pay for the meal but Arthur already had his wallet in his hand, the leather flaps folding open and putting Eames’s work on display.

There was a surprised, expectant, nervous silence that fell over their table, even though the rest of the room was still loud as eaters chatted. Eames couldn’t look anywhere but at his boyfriend, trying to read his face and body for some indication of how the man was taking it. All he could discern was absolute shock as Arthur studied each of the four photos that had been slotted into the four empty plastic slots in his wallet. The first one had been the one Eames had taken of them on the ship, selfishly wanting it to be the first one Arthur saw. After that he had slipped in the two photos of Arthur’s parents and Arthur with Diane, which had already been slipped away into the wallet and momentarily forgotten. The last photo was of Cobb, Mal and their children; the photo was obviously older with how young James and Phillipa looked. Eames remembered Cobb giving him the image before leaving to catch his plane, requesting that the Forger pass along the photo when he thought Arthur might be willing to accept it.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Eames whispered when Arthur seemed frozen and unresponsive. “I got the photo developed this morning and organized it while you were showering. You can take them back out if you want...” Blood wash rushing in his ears with his nervouslyness, worried he had just ruined everything he had ever hoped for and finally achieved. “I’m so sorry...”
“Don’t be,” Arthur cut him off, finally lifting those expressive brown eyes to meet his own. “It’s...” his lover paused, weathering his lip as he thought of the right words. “It’s actually really nice to see my wallet filled with pictures of people I care about. Even though I’ll have to be careful with it if I ever get back into the profession, I...” a soft smile curled those thin lips beautifully as Arthur ran a thumb over the protective casing. “I love it. There’s one thing missing though.”

“What’s that?” Eames asked quickly, feeling his body relax when Arthur accepted the wallet but tense again when the dream worker across the table frowned slightly. He watched apprehensively as Arthur struggled with the wallet for a moment and then removed a photo. A minute later, his partner flipped the wallet around so Eames could see, displaying the change to show how he had moved the photo of him and Arthur to the central pocket in the middle of the wallet. Eames didn’t bother trying to calm his fluttering heart as he saw the picture of them as a couple cherished and centralized, however arbitrary the decision might have appeared to anyone else. There was one problem he noticed though, eyes drawn away from the miniature version of the two dream workers. “It leaves one of the pouches empty though...” he lamented sadly, wanting Arthur’s wallet to be full of special memories.

Arthur glanced down at it briefly before smiling. “It just means there’s room for more memories to come,” he promised. And Eames had no argument against that, feeling warmth bloom in his chest and push his heart to an even faster pace. Despite the mass of people around them going about their own business, he stood from his chair and leaned across the table, nearly knocking over the small vase of flowers as he pressed his lips to Arthur’s. He allowed his eyes to fall closed once he saw his partner’s eyes flutter closed, blocking out the strangers around them and deepening the kiss when he felt their lips quirk up into a loving smile.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you: Alright, first things first, thank you so much for taking the time to read this story! I really enjoyed writing and posting this story; it got me through a lot of tough times. And a special thank you to everyone who took the time to review. I’m just happy that people enjoy my stories, but I absolutely love reading thoughts and feedback from my readers. Even if you didn’t review before, I’d ask for you to consider reviewing the last chapter; I always try to incorporate feedback into my new stories and I really value your opinion.

“Shades of Gray” Coda: Secondly, the “Fin” up there is kind of a lie. “Shades of Gray” the story is over. However, you’ll notice that I haven’t set it to “complete”. That’s because my friend requested I write a coda going into the back story of how Cobb and Arthur met in order to elaborate on what you have already read. So I’ll be posting that Coda next week on Thursday, and that will be the real end of this story.

Fanart: Third, some of my amazing friends have been wonderful enough to make fanart for this story! I strongly recommend you check them out, because the drawings
are absolutely stunning. And please take the time to leave a comment if you check it out; everyone loves to hear thoughts on work they’ve put time and effort into. The links are below (or on my FFnet profile page), just take the spaces out:

IssyKwan: http://issykwan.deviantart.com/#/d3l4mqb

AnimeRockGirl: http://animerockgirl.deviantart.com/#/d3k01s6
http://animerockgirl.deviantart.com/#/d3i5rw6
http://animerockgirl.deviantart.com/#/d3ks8md

Upcoming stories: Alright, so I’d strongly recommend you add me to your author alert list if you liked this and/or my other stories. There are a lot more stories headed your way.
Coda: The Point Man

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, so I'm actually really nervous about posting this. Just like with not giving Eames a first name, I feel that everyone to some extent has their own vision of how our lovely dreamworkers came into the profession. So I'd like to say that this is just my take on how Arthur became a Point Man. Technically this is a prequel to the "Shades of Gray" story, but I feel you'll enjoy it more now that you have "Shades" in your mind.

Coda: The Point Man

Cobb glanced through the folder of information critically, feeling the weight of his employer’s eyes on him. He felt rushed by the man’s attention but refused to fall into the mistake of taking a job without enough information. The picture was of poor quality, a side view of the young adult slipping into a computer store. The mark looked like a ghost – the cameraman lucky to have caught him on film before he vanished again. Pale, dull skin. Lips twisted down into a pained-looking frown. Shaggy black hair, looking clean but unkempt – as though it wasn’t worth the time. Similarly, the clothes hanging off the boy’s frame looked clean but out of place, as though he had bought the clothes years ago, lost weight, and not cared enough to buy more. And even though the information on a separate sheet of paper said he stood at 5’10”, his mark’s shoulders were hunched like he was hoping the world would not take notice – would pass him by.

The information behind the photograph was even poorer quality. Cobb had the photograph. He had a name: Arthur Wells. He had a height. He had an age: twenty – What could a twenty year old have done to warrant this attention? A quiet part of his mind asked. He had a line indicating that the mark had recently finished his undergraduate degree at Yale – impressive, even if you didn’t consider his age. But that was it. Cobb had no job or financial history, no hobbies, no schedules or popular hangouts beyond the Yale library and a nearby computer store. Hell, he didn’t even have a home address!

“This information is shit,” Cobb declared as he dropped the folder onto his employer’s desk. “You expect me to take a job with this little to work with?”

“Information gathering isn’t my job, it’s yours,” the man across the desk from him proclaimed loftily, seeming unbothered by Cobb’s words. “I just tell you what to do with the mark and pay you.”
“Still,” Cobb huffed in annoyance, “you have the resources, not us. You could have at least gotten me an address or a common haunt of the mark. I don’t know how you expect me to do everything.” From the moment they received a job, he and Mal were already swamped trying to prepare. Dom had to create a usable dreamspace that would influence the mark while his wife had to figure out the best angle to work in order to get the required information. It took at least twice as long to complete a job when they had to get the information on their mark as well before they could even begin that. Not to mention the added danger of the mark noticing their presence and fleeing or fighting back.

“Look, do you want this job or not?” Mr. Keyes stubbed out a foul-smelling cigar lazily. “I’m sure I could find someone else with your skills if you don’t.”

Cobb felt himself bristle with indignation even as the bottom of his stomach seemed to drop away in fear. How dare this man assume that Dom and Mal were commonplace, a dime a dozen? He certainly wouldn’t argue that he and Mal were the only dream workers out there, or that they were the originators of the profession. However, they were some of the best in the business and were certainly not amateurs; their work could not be duplicated.

And yet, they needed this job. He and Mal had always stayed on the right side of the law, only taking legal jobs. But then everything had started to become too much like the service industry. Architects especially were having their efforts abused, employers taking students fresh out of colleges and universities while dropping the older, more experienced dream workers. Designing military training grounds didn’t require much skill, so they went for the cheaper option. Mal hadn’t had things much better; she could have either become entangled in some classified government jobs as a skilled Extractor, likely to someday disappear without a trace, or she could keep the simpler and safer jobs. With little option, Dom and Mal had begun to turn to illegal dream work.

At the same time, illegal dreamwork was still growing as a means of making money. You got paid big sums of money to complete a job, but jobs were still rather rare. The rules hadn’t been entirely established yet, so employers and workers were both edgy and nervous about getting involved in a business transaction. No one knew who to trust, or how to keep yourself and your investments safe. Dom and Mal had only started taking jobs out of necessity, but despite the struggle of finding work, they had both admitted that they were beginning to enjoy it much more than legal work. There was so much more...freedom in what you could do and create. They were only bound by their own morals and ethics.

Those moral codes were what caused Cobb to nod, insist he would take the job, and then voice the question, “What exactly do you require of the mark?”

“Silence.”
Cobb blinked, noting the heavy sense of dread washing over his body. “Excuse me?”

“I need you to get information from him and then silence him for good. I hired him to collect information for me and he betrayed me. He took the money and got the information, but sold it to someone else,” the business man sitting across from him, from what Cobb knew, was involved in some sort of computer technology. Something he claimed would ‘really take off some day’. “I need you to collect the information I paid for, and then make sure the boy doesn’t keep talking.”

“Look, I don’t know what you think I do—” he began to protest, having no interest in becoming a real life mercenary. He had had to kill people in the dreamspace before, but that was different. People woke up from dreams and nightmares.

“Fine, fine, if you’re too soft then I’ll get someone else to take care of the kid. But you need to get that information out of his head.” Dom wanted to say something, truly he did. But he knew that would only get him killed as well. However, his mind was already rushing through new plans, wondering if he could collect the information and then warn the kid away. He’d have the information and the mark would survive.

Another thought occurred to him as he nodded and half stood from his chair, the folder of information held tightly in one hand. “You said you hired him to collect information...” he began. Mr. Keyes glanced up at him with mounting annoyance, but hadn’t called security yet. “Is he a—uh...” he considered his words, “Like me?” Dom had never worked against another dream worker before and could only imagine how difficult it would be to trick another dream worker into believing the dream was reality. Of course, Dom doubted everyone else in the field had thought of totems.

His worrying was unnecessary though, when his employer let out an unattractive bark of laughter. “Hell no. No, this is just some kid who’s good at sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong. He seems to be disconcertingly apt at computer use as well,” the man added as something of an afterthought, “though I couldn’t imagine where he got a hold on a working model. The only ones worth owning are still extremely expensive. Anyway,” attention returned to Dom, “Off with you. I expect results by the end of the week. Otherwise I’ll get the information in my own way before the brat catches wind and bolts.”

Dom felt himself swallow hard and nod, having nothing further to say as he left the office that smelt chokingly of the smouldering cigar. He was escorted out of the building by two burly looking men with suits and sunglasses on, who either deemed Cobb as some sort of threat or were simply taking pleasure in terrifying him. Either way, he didn’t bother looking back once he was out in the open air again, free to stuff his folder away and disappear into the throng of pedestrians on the sidewalk.
The thought of the mark and the job had his stomach twisting into knots his whole walk home, not bothering with public transit and unwilling to spend money on a taxi. By the time he did actually make it home, he was beginning to feel physically ill. He allowed his head to rest back against the wall of the elevator as it climbed up six stories, ignoring the other occupants who had the courtesy of ignoring him in return. Dom stepped out of the elevator alone, this being the top floor of the building, and pulled his keys from his pocket with shaking hands as he neared his door.

He shouldered the door open and stepped into the apartment he and Mal shared. It was small since they had started to fall into the habit of moving around frequently when jobs went poorly. And unfortunately, jobs ended badly more times than he’d like to admit. It seemed that too often there was a little piece of information he’d miss or overlook – something that seemed insignificant in his research and yet be the pivotal aspect about the mark that unravelled weeks of preparation. The apartment was well decorated though, thanks to Mal – bless her. They were both used to living in some form of luxury – both of their families were well-off and the military paid well - but she had managed to make the apartment feel like home with furniture they wouldn’t mind leaving behind if necessary.

“Dom, mon cher,” Mal’s soft, lofty voice greeted him as he stepped further into the apartment. For a moment Dom wasn’t sure whether he was happy to see his wife or not, still feeling vaguely like he was going to throw up. “How did the meeting go?” He grimaced as he toed off his shoes and peeled off his jacket, moving to settle on the couch beside Mal and set the folder on the coffee table. He knew she could tell something was wrong immediately. Mal held his face between her hands and brushed his cheekbone gently. “Tell me.”

Cobb sighed and allowed his eyes to drop closed for a few minutes, leaning into the caresses. Mal knew exactly what he needed; it was like magic. One of the reasons on a forever-growing list for why he was grateful everyday for winning her over and marrying her. Eventually though, he had to return to reality and pulled away slightly, picking up the folder with distaste. “Mr. Keyes is sending us after some...some kid!” Dom huffed angrily, opening up the folder for Mal to see the blurry photograph of their mark. “He’s not even old enough to drink yet, Mal!”

Mal didn’t respond right away, and Dom fell silent to give her time to read over the folder’s contents. He noticed that she spent a few long minutes considering the photograph, but didn’t interrupt her thought process. “And what exactly does our employer wish us to do to this Arthur?” she glanced up at him, folder open in her lap.

He let out a sigh of air, remembering the stench of the cigar smoke and the harsh line of his employer’s lips. “He wanted us to collect information he hired Arthur to steal; apparently the kid sold the information to someone else. Then he wanted us to—to...” he took a calming breath when he felt Mal’s hand rest comfortingly on his knee. “To kill him.”
“Merde!” Mal cursed softly, gripping his knee a little tighter at the simple thought. “Dom, we can’t —!”

“I know, I know,” he nodded quickly, not wanting her to believe for a second that he was considering it. “I refused and he said he’ll have someone else...take care of him after we get the information. But I refuse to let that happen.” Dom swiped one hand over his face, feeling completely exhausted, while his other hand encompassed Mal’s on his knee. “I was thinking we could get the information we need and then warn the kid away. We get the information and the payment and disappear before Keyes sends someone out. It’s not likely he’ll send someone after Arthur until he has the information.”

“This will be very dangerous, mon cher,” Mal reminded him carefully, though her voice was also growing stronger with energy and determination.

“I know,” he gave a tight smile, “But I also know that we can do this together.”

He leaned closer and sealed their lips together softly, his smile growing less strained when he felt her hum against his lips for a pleasant moment before kissing him more firmly. They parted after a few blissful moments, knowing they had more pressing matters to attend to. When Mal spoke next, her voice was all professionalism, business and a hint of curiosity. “So what do we know about this Arthur fellow? The information in this folder is embarrassingly little.”

“That’s all Keyes had for me,” Dom explained in frustration, not even bothering to look over the information again as he took the folder and dropped it back onto the coffee table.

“Then I suppose you should start researching,” Mal smirked at him lightly, always ready to take on a new challenge.

Dom groaned his displeasure. “I hate this part.”

#

The next day Dom made his way to Yale’s main campus on the other side of town, heading for the registrar’s office. It was actually embarrassing how quickly he failed at his job of collecting seemingly-simple information on his new mark. He had spent a good chunk of the day watching the office that held all of the records on current and graduated students, as well as faculty and staff in each department of the university. Unfortunately, there didn’t seem to be any time during the
work day that the office was empty – even for a second – for him to slip in unnoticed.

He gave up a few minutes after five in the afternoon, ten minutes before a fake meeting he was supposed to have with a professor of Art History. Dom had read the name on a plaque for recent achievements and had used that as an excuse to loiter near the registrar’s office for the day, brushing them off with a polite but unmemorable smile when they offered to page the professor. However, Cobb knew they’d page the man if he was late for the ‘meeting’. He didn’t need the professor informing the people at the office that the man waiting to speak with him was a complete stranger and probably crazy enough to require an escort off campus.

Dom had worn his very best suit for the day, hoping it would help him blend in with the students, staff, and teachers on campus. He received a few head turns, but no one seemed curious enough to remember him after he was out of sight. Cobb took this small piece of luck to cheer himself up about failing so miserably at this part of a job, but it was a small victory. After all, he wouldn’t be able to stay on campus for too many days before he began to raise suspicion. Beyond that, he couldn’t allow people to remember his face when there was going to be a mysterious ‘break in’ at the registrar’s office.

He really didn’t want to break into the office at night when no one was on campus, but he knew it would probably become a necessity. Dom was keeping it as his last resort, but he had to prepare for all potential futures. However, that first night he was forced to return home empty handed and already slightly discouraged.

The next day proved to be a little more successful, though that was sheer dumb luck. Early in the morning Cobb had headed to the main campus library, this time dressed more casually, remembering Keyes’ minimal information on the mark. He mentally cursed when he was stopped at the library entrance, asked to sign a guest sign-in book and show some identification since he wasn’t affiliated with the university. Dom tried not to panic and lied about forgetting his wallet in the car, promising to return later with it later. The balding, middle-aged man insisted that no, he wouldn’t let Cobb in on the honour system.

Back out in the hallway, Dom cursed aloud under his breath. Why did this have to be so difficult? He had a fake ID back at the apartment, but it had been expensive and hard to come by. Dom and Mal each had a fake ID in case something went seriously wrong and they had to disappear; he shouldn’t use it for as simple of a job as this.

It was as he leaned against the hallway wall, running an agitated hand through his hair as he tried to figure out his next move, that Dom noticed a table being set up on the grass outside of the library main building. The table hadn’t been there when he had first entered, or maybe it had been and he had just been too rush and narrow-focused to notice. But as he saw the signs being hung around the table and the boxes being set under the table, it honestly looked like his salvation had arrived.
Yearbooks were on sale.

Feeling like a man stumbling upon an oasis in the desert, Dom rushed outside the building with a little more speed than could be deemed ‘casual’. A line was already forming, so he discreetly swiped one of the books off the table and joined the back of the line, pretending to wait to hand over money. A few students joining the line behind him gave him odd looks, no doubt noticing that he looked a little old to be picking up an undergraduate yearbook. Nonetheless, Dom forced himself to act relaxed as he flipped open the hardbound book and searched the graduates section.

He continued to shuffle closer to the table with the line, only one group of giggling, excited girls in front of him when he finally found the right page. There, in the bottom right corner, was a tiny thumbnail coloured picture of his mark. The youth looked almost identical to the photo Keyes had provided, no smile on those lips and eyes looking a little absent; not absent due to lack of intelligence, but as though Arthur couldn’t quite find a reason to pay attention and care. The column of text in the margins proclaimed ‘Arthur Wells’. So at least he knew for sure that the kid did actually go to this school, though the yearbook was certainly not helpful in providing an address to work with. Dom flipped through the book to skim through photos of various campus clubs, hoping he might catch another glimpse of his mark to find more hobbies to work with.

“Uh, excuse me?” Someone cleared their throat loudly in front of him, but Dom ignored it as he continued to flip through the glossy pages as quickly as possible. “Dude? Seriously.” A finger was snapped in front of Dom’s face and he jolted in surprise, nearly dropping the yearbook to the ground. “Good, you are listening,” the girl sitting behind the desk rolled her eyes before blowing a bubble with her chewing gum. “You need to fork over twenty bucks and a student or faculty ID so that you can continue reading your precious yearbook,” she seemed to drawl, looking bored.

Dom felt like cursing again. What was with this school and identification? He knew it was to keep the students safe, but dammit, he hadn’t signed up for this type of work. “I forgot my ID card at home,” he bit his lip, doing his best to look innocent and pleading. Mal had always been the better extractor down in the dreamscape, knowing just the right thing to say at just the right moment to get the information she desired. Dom had learned quite a bit from watching his talented wife work, but even though he was improving, he knew he would never rival her skill. And it was even more difficult in reality where he had no control of anything but his own body and voice to tell the story he wanted to be told. “Could I just pay you now and I’ll bring my ID tomorrow?”

“No can do, sorry.” She didn’t sound very sorry. “Don’t worry, man. There are plenty of copies. Just get your ID and pick up a copy tomorrow,” she held out a hand expectantly, and Dom had no choice but to set the yearbook in her hand. He hadn’t managed to go through the whole yearbook, but he doubted it would have been much use in the long run anyway.
Dom sighed and stepped away from the table, allowing more students behind him to step up to the table to get their own copies of the yearbook. He was debating on what to do next, whether he should continue looking around campus or if he should just head home for the day, when someone stepped out of the library building. Dom froze in place and pretended to be waiting for someone in line, hands in his jeans pockets as he watched his mark out of the corner of his eye. Arthur had stepped out of the library with a heavy-looking book bag slung over one shoulder, pausing for a long moment on the top step to readjust the bag’s strap, and then wandered down the stairs.

Barely believing his luck, Dom stood by the yearbook table for another few seconds, earning a suspicious glance from the bubble gum girl who stole his lead for information. Paying her little attention, he waited just long enough to leave a comfortable space between him and his mark, and then began to follow Arthur. He wasn’t sure where they were going as they stepped off the green lawn of campus and onto a busy sidewalk, but he didn’t mind. The city pedestrians and traffic gave him ample cover to ensure Arthur didn’t notice his continued presence, even if he did occasionally bump into other people rushing home after a busy work day.

He hoped desperately that Arthur was headed home, needing to know the address of the kid’s place where they would be able to sedate him and take him down into the dream without gaining anyone’s attention. Of course, if Arthur was headed somewhere else, Cobb knew enough from his forced research jobs to know how to trail someone and not make himself suspicious. If his mark stopped somewhere else, Dom would just wait the kid out. Arthur had to go home eventually.

Dom raised his gaze from the sidewalk again, wanting to make sure his mark wasn’t getting too far ahead of him on the sidewalk. And then he paused mid-step, his heart clenched tightly in his chest. Where was Arthur? Dom had seen him about twenty steps ahead of him on the sidewalk just a few seconds before, walking at an unhurried pace. It seemed unlikely that Arthur would have reached the next intersection without Dom noticing – not at the pace he had been walking anyway. He glanced across the street as he stepped against the wall and out of the way of passing pedestrians. He scanned the length of the street on both sides. Arthur was nowhere to be seen, and there weren’t any alleys the kid could have ducked into.

Trying to not let his frustration show on his face and in his body language, Dom spun on his heel and began walking slowly back up the street. He peered in through the glass windows of a cafe, a barber shop, and a local cobbler’s store as subtly as he could manage, but didn’t notice the shaggy black hair he was looking for. Eventually he was forced to give up and begin walking again, headed home. He decided he had suffered enough failure for one day.

#

His mark was really starting to frustrate him. It was almost humiliating how poorly Dom was at finding Arthur in town and on campus. Mal kept reminding him over the dinner table, voice soft and hand softer as it rested on his forearm comfortingly, that he was an Architect – the best
Architect; this wasn’t his forte. Dom knew this, knew he had been trained to create mazes to ensnare the subject’s mind, rather than how to manoeuvre reality’s mazes. But that didn’t make him feel any less disappointed and angry. Keyes had given them a solid deadline, and he didn’t strike Dom as the forgiving type.

Cobb had spent most of the next two days outside of the library, a book open in his lap to avoid suspicion. He turned the pages mechanically, never actually giving the words on the page more attention than a brief skim as he kept watching for his mark. He didn’t attempt to get into the library again, not wanting to deal with the security and hoping he would see Arthur traveling through the entrance and exit. He could also see the yearbook table setting up again in the early afternoon but didn’t bother, doubting it could help him further.

Unfortunately, Arthur never showed up on campus; or at least not where Dom was watching. He realized that this wasn’t very surprising considering the fact that Arthur was graduated now, but it was still aggravating that he had so little background information to work with. He was wasting valuable time. Realizing this, and that the library was not a reliable location for finding Arthur, Dom decided to look into the other lead from Keyes the next day: Arthur’s apparent favourite computer store.

It was about a ten minute walk from the campus, but closer to Dom’s flat, so he managed to arrive before the store actually opened. It was a small location tucked neatly amongst a string of other stores along the street block, with fogged windows and unwelcoming iron wrought bars on the insides of the windows – barely visible. At first he was considering stepping into the store himself to wait for Arthur or try to gain some information, but decided against it. The only experience Cobb had with computers was the clunky machines he had seen from a distance with the military; he had been uninterested in purchasing his own, not to mention unable with his lack of funds. Beyond that, he knew that he couldn’t stay in the store for eight straight hours waiting for Arthur to arrive, even if Cobb could keep up an intelligent conversation on the topic of computers – which he couldn’t.

Instead, he ducked into a small cafe across and slightly down the street. He bought a steaming coffee and sticky pastry before snagging a table by the window that allowed him to look out and watch the computer store’s doors. It was a dreary day outside, dark heavy clouds hanging low in the sky, threatening rain but continuing to be fickle. It must have been Dom’s lucky day though, since he was only halfway through his first coffee when he noticed the messy black mop of hair bobbing amongst people rushing off to work. He wiped his fingers of the sticky residue of his pastry onto a napkin as he watched his mark duck into the computer store and continued sipping his coffee, unhurried.

He had to wait nearly an hour for Arthur to re-emerge from the computer shop, by which point the last few drops of coffee in his mug had grown cold. Dom pushed his chair away from his table and stood up quickly, ducking out of the cafe before he could lose sight of his mark again. Arthur was carrying a large and rather heavy looking bag slung over one shoulder, so Dom suspected that he would be headed directly home. Perfect.
Wanting to keep an eye on all of his surroundings this time, rather than just twenty steps in front of him, Cobb remained on the opposite of the street as he began trailing behind Arthur. He thanked his continued luck when he noticed the kid walking at a slower pace this time, seemingly distracted and weighed down by his package. Arthur also stood out quite noticeably amongst the crowd parting like a controlled sea to give him a wide berth. There was no way Cobb could lose him this time. No way at all.

Feeling his confidence rise with each of his steps on the concrete sidewalk, Dom closed some distance between him and Arthur until they were almost walking parallel along the street. He was just considering crossing the street to slip in behind Arthur when they both ran into a red light. And then, as though some god wished for him to complete this job and had finally decided to help out, Arthur turned on his heel and began crossing the street towards Cobb, surrounded by a small mob of pedestrians.

Dom forced himself into a bored, relaxed posture as he stared straight ahead, seemingly waiting for his light to turn green again. Out of the corner of his eye he watched his mark, looking more and more like a lost kid as he got closer. Arthur’s gaze remained fixed straight ahead the entire time, stepping up onto the curb at the end of the pack of pedestrians, readjusting the bag’s strap over his shoulder before continuing on down the street. Dom remained rooted in place as Arthur brushed by him, counted to ten in his head, and then turned to follow right before his light turned green.

Arthur was gone. Again.

#

Cobb wasn’t a fan of reckless moves unless absolutely necessary; he liked to keep a low profile and not draw any attention to any sort of illegal activity, let alone himself. But desperate times called for desperate measures. He really had no idea how Arthur had managed to elude him again, especially with such a heavy looking box slowing him down. But once again, Arthur had seemed to simply disappear from the street entirely. There had been an alley near the crosswalk which Dom had inspected, but it had been a dead end with an eight-foot high chain link fence blocking him from the rest of the alley. He knew his mark probably couldn’t get over it on a normal day, let alone with his package. The stores further down the street had not held the kid either, and Dom refused to loiter and draw attention.

Which brought him to his current situation, dressed in dark clothes as he slipped across the shadowed patches of campus and into the registrar’s office. Security had been minimal and the locks child’s play, and it wasn’t long before Dom was kneeling down in front of the filing cabinet for students “T to Z”. He applied his illegally obtained lock picks to the lock on the cabinet, giving it a hard jerk to overcome a small build up of rust. Then drawers of perfectly alphabetized files –
all filled with more information than he could ever hope for – slid open for his viewing pleasure.

Feeling uneasy at the thought of breaking in, knowing there had to be some form of night security on the premises, Dom quickly riffled through the files until he found the “W” section. _Walker, Tim._ _Wallman, Jenna._ _Walsh, Jacob._ _Webber, Maria._ _Wittermore, Laura..._ Wait. Where was “Wells”? His heart rate was picking up as he checked over the row of files again, making sure there hadn’t been two folders accidentally stuck together. Then he went through the rest of the cabinet, fingers shaking with nerves, for the misplaced folder.

It was with a whispered curse that Dom shoved the filing cabinet drawers closed again, relocking it with movements made jerky with anger. He considered looking through the other cabinets before leaving, but doubted it would yield any results; there had been no other filing mistakes amongst the student files. It was simply the case that there was no longer any file for _Wells, Arthur._

#

“This kid is going to be the death of me, Mal,” Dom confessed to his palms as he groaned into his hands. “This is fucking ridiculous. He’s still stumbling his way out of puberty; he shouldn’t be this damned hard to get information on! He’s like a fucking ghost!”

Mal brushed a hand soothingly over Dom’s shoulders before handing him a glass of red wine. “I’d assist you if I could,” she murmured softly before sipping her own glass of wine.

“I know,” Dom sighed, nursing his own glass of wine. Mal would probably have better luck gaining the information, being the best Extractor Dom had ever met, but they couldn’t risk it. Generally they made sure that the mark never knew Mal before then went down into a dream to steal information. If the mark recognized and remembered recently meeting her before the dream, it was more likely that they would become suspicious and more aware of their surroundings.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, dinner heating up in the oven. “I think we’ll need to push this one, Dom,” Mal suggested calmly, watching him for a reaction. “I’d like to be away from Keyes as soon as possible.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, staring down into his glass. “You’re right. It’s time to take a more aggressive approach.” Dom downed the rest of his wine, not appreciating the taste nearly enough.
It wasn’t easy to research computers, considering the fact that Dom had little personal experience with them. It didn’t help that the technology seemed to be continuously progressing, two new models of any particular piece of technology being developed before someone could write information down about previous versions. However, it proved to be easier studying general computer technology and usage in the city’s public library than trying to find information on the ghost that was his mark.

By mid afternoon, Dom was making his way towards the computer store with what he hoped was enough computer knowledge to bluff his way through the upcoming encounter. He pushed open the heavy door to the store open, hearing a tiny bell chime above him as he stepped inside. The small store was brightly lit and entirely empty, except for the thin shop clerk with glasses that kept sliding down his nose. “Can I help you?” the man asked Dom carefully, looking like he was nervous around strangers but trying to hide it.

“Yes, actually,” Dom flashed the friendliest smile he could manage, relaxing his posture in an attempt to express comfort and ease. The shop owner wouldn’t be much help if he was too scared to listen to Cobb’s lies. “It’s a bit of a silly situation, but I have a delivery to make but don’t know the address of the buyer.”

“I’m not sure how I can help...” the store owner frowned in confusion, shoving the brass frame of his glasses back up his nose.

“Well, I got a call a few weeks back from someone named Arthur Wells.” Dom noted the other man tensing slightly. “He wanted to purchase a new motherboard my boss’s company was developing—” it was always easier to explain misunderstandings and lack of knowledge when you weren’t in charge – “but just gave this as the address for pick-up.”

“Oh, well I, uh...” Dom was scrutinized with narrowed eyes for a moment. “I guess I can take it and hold onto it for him. He usually comes in at least once a week.”

“No, no, you see...” Dom bit his lip in an exaggerated motion, purposefully looking nervous now. “My employer will murder me if I don’t deliver the package personally. Company policy,” he waved his hand as though waving away unspoken questions. “So I was wondering if I could get Mr. Well’s address.”

“Um...sure,” the store owner paused and then nodded, reaching below the desk to pull out a heavy looking binder of sheets of paper.
Dom was about to ask if the man was kidding, barely comprehending the fact that this was going as easily as it was. This had to be a trap, didn’t it? It couldn’t go this well. He had been half prepared to use the gun hidden in the waistband of his jeans, refusing to leave without his mark’s address. But as he watched and cautiously shuffled closer to the front desk, he could see that the shop owner was scrawling out an address on a spare slip of paper in messy but legible writing. “I...I really appreciate this,” he allowed his relief to seep into his voice, still playing the nervous delivery boy.

“Anytime,” the man behind the counter actually smiled at Dom as he handed over the slip of paper. “Is there anything else I could do for you?” Cobb was about to refuse and leave before his good fortune ran out, but the man continued to speak. “You’re not from around here, are you? Here, take this city map. It’ll save you the trouble of walking across town to the tourist office.”

The urge to pull his gun was growing, even as the smile on his face genuinely widened. Dom was used to team members turning on him, on the military changing plans without telling him, on dreams becoming a confusing maze even for the dreamers and the marks becoming aware and tearing him to shreds. Dom was not accustomed to things going according to plan. And yet...by some strange miracle, they were. So when the slip of paper and the folded map was in his hand, the address looked legitimate, and no one burst in holding guns, Dom thanked the shop owner and made a hasty retreat for the exit.

Even when he made it back outside the store and halfway down the street, no pedestrians on the sidewalk paid him any attention, and no one looked like they were about to pull out a gun. Dom knew this probably wasn’t a healthy way to be, but when things always went wrong, you learned to be aware and prepare for every potential issue. He only allowed his guard to fall slightly when he had found the written-down address on the city map and neared his target after about twenty minutes of walking. He would still need to be cautious in case the address was a fake and this was a trap, but Cobb seemed to be mostly in the clear.

That was when things went terribly wrong.

Dom had just wandered past the alley he had seen the day before with the high chain link fence, making him believe that Arthur really was just a sneaky bastard. Cobb had been so close to finding his mark’s apartment, based on the map informing him that he was just one side-street and an alley away from his destination. He continued walking along the sidewalk until he found the labelled side street and turned down it, slowing his pace. He brushed the heel of his palm against the butt of his gun, desiring its reassuring press as he found the shaded alleyway that his mark’s apartment was supposed to be on.

The alley looked relatively well maintained, the pavement clear of everything but a few trash cans sitting by peoples’ doors. It was only wide enough for two people to walk shoulder to shoulder, but it felt oddly quaint; he could see that a few people had laundry lines or flower baskets strung up
between the buildings. Seeing no spectators or threats, Dom steeled himself and stepped off the populated sidewalk, feeling his heart beating in his chest with nerves and anticipation.

He only made it about twenty steps down the alleyway when he suddenly felt the biting cold metal of a gun’s barrel pressed against the back of his neck. A second later, before Dom could do anything more than automatically flinch towards his gun, his jacket had been roughly shoved aside and his gun stolen. Dom bit his lip and mentally cursed, wondering if he’d be able to spin and get the guns out of his attacker’s hands before they could retaliate. It seemed unlikely.

Instead, he kicked his foot back, trying to unbalance the other person. All he got for his efforts was to be tripped up himself, pushed against the alley wall. He could feel the side of one gun against his back where he was being held, while the other gun returned to pointing at the base of his skull. “That wasn’t a smart move.” The voice behind him was low and smooth, some peculiar mix of angry and distant.

“Who are you?” Dom snapped, his cheek and lips scraping against the brick wall.

A cold, humourless chuckle wrapped around him then, causing Dom to shiver. “You should know who I am, Mr. Cobb. You have been tracking me for almost a week, haven’t you?”

Arthur! Dom’s whole body tensed up with this realization – the fact that his mark had him at gunpoint in an alley where no one would look for him, and who knew Dom’s name. There was a heavy weight of dread in his stomach, making him feel sick and wishing vehemently that this was a dream. This wasn’t though, because he remembered how he got here, and he couldn’t change the architecture when he focused. “I—what?” he hoped playing dumb would get him out of this alive, though with the fact that Arthur already seemed too knowledgeable, he doubted this would end well.

Another chuckle. Another shiver. “You mean to tell me, Dominic Cobb, that you are not the moron who has been blundering around town this last week trying to collect information on me? And failing, I might add?” Arthur clicked his tongue behind him in a disdainful way. “That you did not move here with your new wife, Mallorie Cobb, to take this specific job for Marshall Keyes?”

“No, no, I--” A million lies flitted through Dom’s brain, but none seemed adequate. They would probably just piss off his mark more.

“Please, Mr. Cobb,” Arthur drawled, somehow managing to sound bored. Like he didn’t even really care that Dom had been tracking him and had nearly made it to his apartment. Like this was just a blip on the radar, soon to be extinguished. Dom swallowed thickly. “Don’t insult me by
assuming I am easily fooled. After all, you wouldn’t have even made it this far if I hadn’t allowed you to collect the right information.”

“What do you mean?” Dom asked, confusion flowing into curiosity, even as his blood turned to ice in fear of what his mark would do to him once this conversation ended.

“Do you really think I would destroy my student file and yet not keep the computer store clerk from giving out my address?” Dom could hear the smug smirk in Arthur’s tone.

“You told him to give me your address?” he reiterated, barely believing what he was hearing.

“Unfortunately for you, I was growing bored of leading you on this merry chase.” The gun’s barrel slid downward slightly, resting between Dom’s tense shoulder blades. “You were fumbling around like a child just learning to walk,” his mark insulted, and Dom did his best to keep from snapping back to save his pride. “Keyes was planning to have you killed next week if you didn’t deliver.”

“How--?” Dom began to ask, and then cut himself off; if Arthur was capable enough at collecting information on him, then it made sense that he would be able to keep tabs on the man trying to get him killed. “Why not just let him kill me then?” he asked instead.

Arthur spun him around suddenly, forcing Dom to flatten himself back against the wall again when the gun was pointed at his heart. “Because then he’d just send someone more competent, and I need some information from you on Keyes.”

Dom took a moment to study his mark up close. Arthur looked scary with his gun, Dom’s shoved under his waistband hastily; Arthur was calm and confident. At the same time, however, there was something in the kid’s eyes that spoke of an internal conflict. It looked as though part of Arthur was ready to fight to the bitter end, and the other half looked tempted to give up on the spot. There was a heaviness to Arthur in the way his shoulders hunched and in the dark smudges under his dark eyes. It seemed unnatural and sad in a kid this age, and even though Dom was still very aware of the gun pressed against his breastbone, he felt an unwanted stirring of sympathy.

Apparently he was staring too long to suit Arthur, who pressed the gun against him hard enough to bruise before motioning further into the alley. “After you. I trust you at least know the address for my apartment.”

“All thanks to you,” Dom retaliated with a glare before dragging himself from the brick wall. He
hated the feeling of someone walking behind him with a gun; he felt as though he was being led to his death – which he probably was. He considered fighting back again, his mark still younger and smaller than him in general. But with Arthur possessing two guns, and Dom with none, he wasn’t going to risk pissing off his mark more quite yet.

They continued walking down the alley until it was nearly as dark as twilight, the walls high and blocking out any hope of much sunlight. Arthur kept his gun trained on Dom even as he slid a set of keys from a pocket and began undoing the multiple locks on the door in front of them. Once the door swung in, Arthur motioned Dom inside, staying at his back with the gun. With few options, Dom stepped through the doorframe and into a spotless, simple living room.

He heard the door close behind him and Arthur take a few steps into the house, and then the telltale smack of metal hitting skin and bone and a dull thud. Dom turned, heart trying to beat out of his chest, to see Mal standing over an unconscious Arthur, gun in hand. “I’m so glad you made it here first,” Dom let out a loud sigh of relief, scrambling to steal both guns from his mark before Arthur woke up. He had called Mal from a payphone the moment he had gotten the address, but hadn’t known which of them would make it to the mark’s apartment first.

“Yes,” Mal pursed her lips, agitated in the way her body stood tense, but trying to hide it. “I am also very glad, mon cher.”

They shared a quick, relieving kiss, before slipping back into the mindset of work. “Let’s get this job done with already.”

#

“It was really easy, actually,” Arthur shrugged lightly, leaning back against the Yale library armchair. Dom and Mal nodded in clear interest, playing on the desire for approval that had only manifested in their mark once Arthur’s defences were down. “All you really need to do is understand people; then you can figure out how they’re likely to store and hide their information. That and get information from people without them realizing. And you need to know the best method for how to get the actual information, of course,” their mark smirked proudly. “Libraries, offices, and now these new computers are absolutely wonderful.”

“That’s amazing,” Mal smiled across the small coffee table at Arthur brightly, the smile Dom knew could make you feel like you were the only person in the world that mattered. Arthur blushed lightly and glanced away. “So what did you learn?”

“Everything I was paid to find out,” Arthur assured them with another smirk. “And then some. I
got a lot of personal information on Mr. Johnson in order to figure out how to get the information. And then I got all of the information needed to get into his computer system and got the blueprints for the new hard drive his company is developing.”

“Can you give us the details?” Mal asked curiously, eyes wide and bright as she continued to focus on their mark. Dom also watched Arthur, but for a different reason. He couldn’t help but wish he had had Arthur on his side when trying to collect information, the kid a clear prodigy in the art. And at the same time, his curiosity and sympathy was continuing to grow; it seemed evident that Arthur was weighed down by something. He seemed to be running forward at full speed while fighting the urge to look back over his shoulder.

“No need,” Arthur waved off Mal’s question, “I have it all written out back at my apartment; I haven’t shredded it yet. I’ll show you...” Dom’s attention returned solely to the current moment when Arthur’s voice trailed off. Cobb glanced around in confusion for the distracter and saw a small girl, maybe ten years old, standing a few steps away and staring at them. Dom glanced between Arthur, who was staring at her, and the girl, who waved before smiling and skipping away. The next moment, Arthur was whirling on them, snarling. “What the hell is this?”

“What do you--?” Mal began in a soothing voice, faking her confusion. But before she could even finisher her question, Dom felt a painful tug on his mind, like someone had pulled an elastic band taut and let it fly against every synapses in his brain.

His eyes were watering with pain as he watched Arthur stand up hurriedly, face sickly white and eyes wide with fright and fury. “This isn’t reality!” he yelled at both of them, tall bookshelves behind him shuddering and toppling over. Projections screamed in terror as they dodged the falling books and ran for the exits. Not that it did them any good. As his brain continued to flare with pain, Dom could see staircases and hallways turning into loops, all leading back to the same point.

“What is this?”

When neither of them gave an answer – neither of them even knowing what to say – Arthur began to stumble backwards towards an exit. Dom couldn’t help but groan and clutch his head when another bright flash of pain, as searing as lightning, shot through his body. The dreamscape went blank for a moment, like a whiteboard wiped clean, and then he, Mal, and Arthur were standing on the bank of a small man-made lake under a bright full moon. He fell to his knees, unable to support himself through the pain as Arthur seemingly took control over the dream’s architecture.

Luckily, Mal was mostly unaffected by the sudden shift and was able to shoot Arthur in the back of the head when the kid began to run away from the lake. Dom swallowed hard as he watched his mark crumple to the lush green grass, and then gave a sigh of relief when Mal kissed his forehead before shooting him – freeing him from this pain.
He took a minute to blink his eyes open, allowing the pain to fade into the back of his mind as a dull throb. They were back in Arthur’s apartment, and even with his eyes closed, Dom could hear weak struggling and then a defeated sigh. He heard the dream device being packed up and then felt a soft hand on his cheek. He forced his eyes open, seeing Mal’s beautiful face watching him with concern. “Are you alright?” she asked him, brushing some hair aside. “What happened?”

“He took control of the dream,” he explained in a daze, barely able to understand it himself. He had seen marks panic and upset the dream before, causing things to break or topple. But never before had he seen a mark gain enough control to completely change the dreamscape – and Dom knew he was not responsible for that mysterious lake. “I’ll be fine,” he assured her with a small smile. Then he pushed himself out of his chair to confront their mark.

Oddly, Arthur did not seem nearly as panicked now as he had been in the dream. He watched Dom approach with eyes that seemed even duller than they had twenty minutes ago in the alley. Cobb’s gun was visible in his waistband, and he knew Arthur saw it, but it was Dom who was scared. Arthur didn’t look concerned at all; he looked relieved. “I knew Keyes would come for me,” Arthur whispered, eyes staring blankly at the gun for a moment before falling to the floor. “I didn’t care. I don’t care. You might as well kill me now; he’ll send someone else if you don’t.”

A heavy silence filled the room, and Dom felt an uninvited chill crawl up his spine. What could have happened in Arthur’s brief twenty years of life to turn him into this hollow, empty shell? Curiosity and sympathy fought for dominance in his mind as Arthur bowed his head to the floor, patiently awaiting his death. Dom glanced over at Mal, seeing her nod at the question on his face. He swallowed again, stepping closer to his tied-up mark. “Arthur, you were right before. It wasn’t reality.”

He saw Arthur’s head twitch up in curiosity before falling again, either uncaring of the answer or unwilling to allow himself to care. Mal stepped forward then, gliding across the bare floors to kneel by Arthur. She placed a calm hand on his knee, kneeling right where Arthur couldn’t look away. “We control dreams, Arthur,” she explained softly, her voice as smooth as honey as she tried to woo Arthur out of this terrible state. “We can create anything and everything we wish, and steal information from people,” she said the second part with some regret in her tone. “But we are long overdue for a new team member. We need someone with your skills at collecting information so we can prepare before a job.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked tiredly. “Why are you even telling me this?”

“Run point for us, Arthur,” Dom requested in a rush. He had no plan in mind as he spoke; he was just scared of losing Arthur to pure hopelessness. “Research our marks the way you researched me. Collect information to determine the best methods for cornering a mark and stealing information from them.”
“Run point...” Arthur whispered, tasting each word curiously, “Be a point man?” he tested.

“I uh...” Mal glanced up at him and Dom shrugged; it seemed to fit. It felt...right. “Yeah. Be our Point Man.”

Dom took a nervous step back when Arthur suddenly lifted his head and their eyes met across the short distance between them. There was something far too serious, too haunting in those brown eyes. “Why do you think I’d want to join your little team and do that?” the youth asked darkly, a bite in his voice like a wild animal feeling cornered.

“I think you need the dreamscape,” Dom answered honestly, even though he couldn’t begin to guess or comprehend what had brought Arthur to this point. “I think you need something to focus on, something to always keep you challenged and constantly allow you to build and expand.”

“Somewhere where there are no rules,” Mal chimed in.

“You need a different reality to adopt, because you don’t seem all that keen on this one, and yet you haven’t made the effort to leave it,” Dom added. He still barely knew what he was saying, only working with what he saw in the kid’s hunched shoulders and listless eyes. Arthur’s gaze was still trained on him, unwavering.

A few minutes passed, and no one said anything. “Arthur?” Mal questioned again. Arthur didn’t even blink at her. Dom watched her pull herself to her feet and step away to collect the folders of information Keyes had hired them for. They weren’t leaving empty handed.

“What makes you think you can trust me?” Arthur asked him when they were alone, still seeming quite unbothered by the rope binding him to the chair.

Dom shrugged uncomfortably, still barely understanding his decision to make this offer in the first place. It was true that they needed another team member, someone to focus on information gathering and running point on their future jobs so that disasters like this one wouldn’t happen. But Arthur was right; there was no way Dom could trust him to stay with them, let alone not kill them in their sleep for hunting him, or sell their secrets. “I don’t,” he admitted. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mal motion at him, indicating that she had the folders. “But I hope I can. If you want to work with us, meet us on the train leaving for New York tonight at eight,” he explained as he pulled a pocket knife from his pants to cut the bonds on Arthur’s wrists.
“And make a totem,” Mal added as she breezed by, picking up the dream device in one hand while the briefcase of information swung in her opposite hand. “I hope to see you again soon, Arthur,” she said her farewell before slipping out into the alleyway.

He could see the question in Arthur’s eyes, and Dom felt a flash of hope. If he could just capture this youth’s attention, give him something to work towards and fight for, maybe that hollow look would fade away. “It’s something unique that only you can recognize. It helps you tell the difference between dreams and reality so you don’t get lost in fantasy.” Arthur didn’t move to get out of the chair when the rope was gone, and Dom bit back a frustrated sigh. He didn’t even know why he cared so much, but at this point there was nothing more he could do. “Keyes will have the information in three hours. He’ll probably send someone else shortly after that. I hope to see you again, Arthur,” he offered.

When he didn’t receive a response, Dom slipped out of the apartment and into the alley without another word.

#

Keyes had gotten his information. Dom and Mal had gotten a very substantial sum of money; enough to give them more freedom of choice in terms of employers and jobs. They hadn’t seen or heard mention of Arthur, even though they knew he knew where they were staying, so they were forced to travel to the train station alone. It was disappointing, and he felt a little sick at the thought of Keyes sending someone else after Arthur, but Dom forced those thoughts aside.

The sun was edging towards the horizon when they bought their tickets and climbed onto the train. The concrete train platform had weak, flickering lamps fighting off the evening’s shadows. Unfortunately, that was all there was to see as Dom watched it fall away into the distance as the train pulled out of the station and headed on its voyage. Mal was sitting on the seat across from him, the two chairs beside them both empty.

No Arthur.

“We tried, mon cher,” Mal whispered sadly before turning her gaze outward to the passing scenery. He could see that she was just as upset as he was, her jaw tight and eyes shadowed. But she was right; they had tried. It hadn’t been enough. Or maybe Keyes had been anxious and got to Arthur before the kid could make a decision.
The sound of a throat being cleared caught his attention, and Dom’s gaze flickered up tiredly. He had been expecting the train conductor looking for tickets, so when he saw Arthur slipping down into the chair beside him, Dom had to physically force himself down from hugging the boy. “You made it,” he spoke quietly, not wanting to draw the attention of other passengers. He knew his voice betrayed his relief and happiness, but he didn’t care.

“I’ve met highschoolers who are better researchers than the two of you,” Arthur snipped as he slid a duffle bag beneath his seat.

Arthur’s tone was sharp, and Dom wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. He didn’t care; he laughed anyway. “Welcome to the team,” he murmured with a small smile.

“Did you bring a totem?” Mal asked curiously, a beautiful smile curling her lips now that she had turned from the passing fields of green to consider their newest team member. Oddly, Dom felt as though he and Mal were welcoming their son home from a long hard year of school, asking for the report card to see how he had fared.

Arthur looked between them for a moment, considering them, and then slipped a clear red die from the breast pocket of his wrinkled button-up shirt. The die caught the dying rays of the sunset, the material looking like glass stained with blood. “Any particular significance?” he asked curiously. There was so much to learn about Arthur, their newest team member, but a person’s totem always seemed especially interesting to him.

Arthur twirled the die around between his fingers for a few seconds before holding it still between his thumb and pointer finger. He was staring at it like the little white dots held all the secrets, like every answer was trapped between six sides of glimmering red. There was the tiniest of smiles on Arthur’s face, something that could be easily overlooked if you didn’t think to look. What struck Dom was how incredibly sad the smile was. And then Arthur slid the die back into his pocket, resting a hand over his chest for a moment to feel it pressed against his skin before his hand dropped back to his lap. “It belonged to my other half.”

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