Seven Ways of Going

by GloriaMundi

Summary

Arthur likes to find his inspiration in other people's dreams. Mal holds the secrets of a princess in a tower. Eames wants to cross the bridge and burn it behind him. And Saito's most popular author can't (or won't) finish her greatest work ...

Notes

Thanks to my marvellous artist, nresimes, and my betas and cheerleaders: Imeden, B, msilverstar, the_ragnarok.

soundtrack on YouTube
Arthur wakes up to the quickening arpeggio of 'Dream Operator'. He keeps his eyes closed for a long moment, unwilling to let go of the dream. He'd watched the sun set over Paris from the top of the Eiffel Tower. The two of them, Arthur and his projection, had been alone (Arthur has a pretty good idea of how much that would've cost to arrange in the real world). There'd been champagne. There'd been slow kisses and heated looks: there'd been a hand on his dick, then a mouth. His projection had stared up at him from under surprisingly long lashes, smirking even as he gave Arthur one of the best blowjobs he'd ever (not) had. There'd been another kiss. Even now Arthur's body is tricking him into thinking that he can still taste his own come.

And he's awake, despite David Byrne singing: 'Don't you wake up, this dream will come true.'

Huh.

He's in his own bed, his left arm held motionless against the tiny sting of the needle, the PASIV on the floor beside him. His other arm's stretched across the bed as though he's reaching out to embrace someone. With his eyes closed, it almost seems as though he can taste and smell and feel the lingering presence of another person. It's years since he's brought anyone back to this apartment. He likes his privacy. But the sheets under his right hand feel rumpled and warm, and when he turns his head (his eyes still closed) and inhales, he thinks for a moment that he can smell...

According to the Journal, it's rare for anyone to dream in more than the three simplest senses: sight, sound, touch. Some people don't even experience touch, which has to be kind of confusing if you're trying to manipulate dream-objects. Arthur, though, pays attention to detail: he can still remember how his dream lover smelt: Puissance Deux, sweat, cigarettes and hair product. (Brylcreem, which has to be because of that British accent Arthur's associated with him.) It's oddly specific.

Arthur chuckles at the extravagances of his unfettered imagination, and opens his eyes.

He's alone. Well, of course he's alone. His portable security system's not sophisticated, just a few infrared sensors and a wire, but he's modded it to send an alarm to the PASIV if there's any intrusion: he'll be kicked out and up, no matter how far down he's dreaming, if anyone enters the room while he's under. There's a needle in his arm, the red flash of zero in his peripheral vision, a lingering stiffness in his bad knee that's the result of having lain still — old habits die hard, and he was trained not to move during a session — for too long. He removes the needle, hooks the buds out of his ears, turns over and sprawls on the cool smooth sheets, faceplanting on the other pillow where nobody's lain for a long long time.

And yeah, it's basically jerking off, when he goes into the dream and seeks out that particular projection (who insists that his name is Eames; Arthur hasn't worked that one out yet, but maybe his subconscious associates good design with good sex). It's masturbation, nothing more. But it's a hell of a lot easier than reality.

Okay. Morning. He's in New York, in a rented apartment on 42nd Street. (He can see the Empire State from the bathroom window). He's just finished a job in Seattle, and it makes sense to lie low for a couple of weeks while the noise dies down.

Arthur takes a long shower. He jerks off to the sharp clear memory of Eames' mouth on his dick and the lights of Paris twinkling on beyond the safety glass. If he closes his eyes as he props his
forearm against the tiles, it's just to focus his mind on the memory, the *invention*, of Eames' blue-grey eyes, the black ink that shifts and pools over his collarbone, his full red mouth. For a masturbatory fantasy, Eames is astonishingly detailed and thoroughly *random*. Arthur wishes he could use Eames as evidence for the defence, next time Signe accuses him of having no imagination. (Not that he'll be working with Signe again for a while. He doesn't like to use the same team twice. It draws the wrong kind of attention.)

Over breakfast (black coffee, an omelette, juice) he checks the Time Out site. There's a Diane Arbus exhibition he wouldn't mind seeing, and a couple of movies he's heard good things about.

The New York Times counts as business, because it has a feature on the aftermath of the Tadashi job. "Author reveals sources in unexpected u-turn." The piece doesn't mention Saito, doesn't question why Tadashi changed his mind after months of making such a big deal of the anonymity of his contacts. There's no indication of the go-between, the guy who passed the information from a network of small-time criminals to a respectable investigative journalist. Arthur mentally ticks off another successful extraction.

He needs something real. He needs to work out at the basement gym, walk the boulevards in thin grey drizzle, soak up the sounds and sights and smells of a city he can't predict or amend. He needs to anchor himself.

§

—Once there was a princess who lived in a perfectly round room at the top of a very high tower.

—That's me, maman, that's me!

—Yes, darling, it is. The princess was named Philippa, and every day her maman would come to visit her; but her maman couldn't always be there with her, because she had to go away to look after the princess's papa.

—Can I see my papa?

—Maybe, when you're older, chérie. ... And the princess's maman came to see her whenever she could.

—Maman?

—Oui?

—Why don't you and papa come and live here with me? You could have the room downstairs. We could make the spiders go away, and we could get some pretty curtains for the windows, and ...

—I'm sorry, darling. We can't come to live with you, because Papa can't come here.

—Why can't he?

—Because he's not allowed.

—Why can't I come and live with you, then?

—Because you were born here, darling, and while you're a little girl you have to stay where you were born.

—Where were you born, Maman?
—A long time ago, in a city called Paris that's far far away.

—And did you stay there when you were a little girl?

—I did, chérie.

—is that where Papa lives?

—No, Papa lives in another faraway city called San Francisco.

—Can I go there when I'm older?

—Maybe, darling. We'll see.

—My other maman tells me stories sometimes.

—Your other maman, chérie?

—She's not really my mother. She's just a nice lady. She comes to see me when you're not here. She does magic, and sometimes she makes herself look different but I always know it's her. But she never knows any new songs, and when I forget how to do a game she pretends she's forgotten too. I love you best, maman.

—I love you too, Phil. I—

…Mal is awake, with only Edith Piaf's brave defiant voice for comfort. There are tears on her cheeks, which Dom mustn't see: she scrubs them away, blinking until she can see the clock clearly. He won't be home from work for another hour at least. There's some big case he's investigating, something to do with a professor at Berkeley. She has time to shower, to change her clothes, to be Dom's wife instead of Philippa's maman. She has time to dream herself into the real world.

§

When he's between jobs, Arthur tries to block out at least a week when he doesn't use the PASIV. It's not enough downtime to restore his sleep cycle (let alone his ability to dream naturally) but it forces him to focus on the real world.

The problem is, the real world is ... unsatisfactory. He's been to the movies a couple of times, alone; he's spent an afternoon wandering around MOMA; he's taken a look at the fall collections from his favourite designers. (Looks like Tala went with the new print, even though it'd been leaked. Arthur doesn't especially care. He can take or leave paisley.) He's caught up on his reading, professional and otherwise, and he's cut three seconds off his previous record for running a mile. All well and good.

He wants to be working again.

He wants to be dreaming again.

Signe calls him one afternoon in early October.

"I was talking with a guy at the University," says Signe, faux-casual, once she's established that Arthur's alone and reasonably confident of a secure phone line. "I think you might find him useful. Want to set up a meeting?"

"Which university?" says Arthur. He can hear the crackle of a public-transit announcement (Danish, he notes) in the background, but that's irrelevant: they all travel a lot.
"Boston," says Signe. "His name's Alex. An architect. I went under with him, and he's very good. Crisp, you know?"

"There's plenty of good architects out there," says Arthur. "What's special about this one?"

Signe hums. "He's fresh. Nobody knows who he is."

That could mean anything. Maybe he's inexperienced. Maybe he's a plant. Maybe —

"He's British," says Signe, sing-song. "Easy on the eye, too."

"Signe …" Arthur pinches the bridge of his nose. "Are you seriously trying to set me up with this guy?" he demands, halfway between annoyance and amusement.

"Oh no," says Signe. "Would I do that? But Arthur, maybe you should meet him, yes?"


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He heads out to the Penthaus that evening, as arranged, and takes some time to check out the other customers before he grabs a seat by the window.

"Arthur?"

It's an English accent, which makes Arthur's pulse stutter: but when he turns and looks at the guy who's gesturing at the stool next to his, it's not —

Well, of course it's not. He's awake, goddammit. So awake he hasn't even bothered to check his totem for the last few days. And he hadn't let himself wonder if 'Alex' was a pseudonym of someone he'd already met.

"That's me," he says.

And okay, this guy isn't Eames, but he's pretty hot in his own right. He's a redhead, with wide-set blue eyes that give him an air of perpetual surprise: he's as slender as Arthur, probably has a couple of inches on him. His fingers are long and elegant; sinewy wrists; a well-tailored suit in charcoal wool. (It's from one of the English designers, but Arthur can't place the cut.)

"Hi," he says, with a broad smile that reveals bad teeth. "I'm Alex."


"Nah," says Alex. "I come over pretty regularly. Work, you know."

Arthur doesn't know, and doesn't care. But it's got to be good for him to do some living in the real world, right?

He gets Alex talking about his work. Alex, it turns out, is a recent graduate from the University of East Anglia. He's smart, and he knows plenty about paradoxical architecture and tricks of perspective, and Arthur can't work out why someone like that hasn't already made a name for himself. And the way he looks at Arthur, holding his gaze for a second too long, sucking on the slice of lemon in his G&T …

Arthur gets Alex another drink, and switches to gin and tonic himself. That way he won't mind the taste so much if they kiss.
Then Alex wrecks it all by saying, "I heard you were the brains behind the Seattle job."

Arthur frowns at him. "I'm sorry?"

"C'mon," says Alex. "I mean, you've got a brilliant reputation, you do know that? And how you pulled off the job with Smith: that was fucking inspired."

"I don't even know what you're talking about, man," lies Arthur. And yeah, he should just walk away from this, get out while the getting's good. But he's feeling reckless, and if Signe's been stupid enough to connect him with the Titanic job ... Well, Arthur doesn't suffer fools.

"But hey," he says, more amicably, "maybe you can tell me more when we don't have an audience." He flicks glances left and right, exaggeratedly wary, then leans in, his hand on Alex's knee as if he needs the balance. "Wanna get out of here?"

"Yeah," says Alex, staring at Arthur's mouth. "Yeah, let's take this somewhere more private."

Arthur lets Alex lead him out of the bar, but then, instead of turning right for the elevator, he pulls Alex left, towards the stairs.

"Are you kidding? We're twenty floors up!"

"A lot might happen between here and the ground," says Arthur over his shoulder. He winks at Alex and opens the door. "And I could use the exercise, if you get what I mean."

Arthur's been to Penthaus before, and he knows where the security blindspots are. In the dim corner of the landing between the seventeenth and sixteenth floors, he stops abruptly, turns on his heel and shoves Alex up against the wall.

Alex looks thrilled for a moment, before he registers Arthur's expression.

"Now, Alex," says Arthur. "Suppose you tell me what you're really here for?"

He doesn't carry a gun in the real world — carrying tends to mean using, sooner or later, and that attracts entirely the wrong kind of attention — but he's perfectly capable of intimidating somebody without any weaponry at all. Twenty minutes later, a white-faced Alex is stuttering something about a government agency ("I don't know which one, I'm not a bloody American! All the uniforms and badges and shit, they all look the same to me!") and a guy who promised to wipe the slate clean for Alex if he could just ... accompany Arthur to a particular hotel.

"An' that Danish bird, she better watch her back!"

"Did she tell you I was in on the Seattle job?" says Arthur, in tones of polite disbelief.

"Nah, she didn't give me anything I could use. The American bloke, the government one, he told me what you did to Smith."

"And you believed the government?" says Arthur. "Shame. I guess we're not going to be able to help each other out after all."

Because he's a little bit drunk and also kind of an asshole, he kisses Alex goodbye, and bites his lip hard enough to draw blood. "You follow me," he says darkly, "and I'll knock you out and shove you in a dumpster."
"Sure," manages Alex.

Arthur listens carefully all the way down, but he doesn't hear Alex's voice or his footsteps. Nobody's watching the building (or if they are, they've neglected the service entrance) and there's no one following Arthur as he makes his way unhurriedly down into the subway. He's home before midnight. Alone.

_Fuck reality_, he thinks, firing off an email to Signe. (I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. Stay alert, they're onto you. Don't call me: I'll be in touch.) Can't even get laid.

§

Tonight Dom's amorous, hands everywhere, breathless laughter behind everything he says, his mouth punctuating every come-on with a kiss. Soon enough, instead of mind-crime and militarisation, he's talking of romance, desire, love.

And it's so long, too long, since Mal has let herself fall into sheer sensation, so long since they've made love with the lights on, just the two of them with no angry little ghost between them. She allows Dom to kiss her, lets herself kiss him, caresses and undresses him, wrestles with him 'til the two of them are giggling like teenagers, wraps her hand around his dick and simply squeezes. The noise he makes is almost as pleasing as the feel of soft warm skin over pulsing hardness in her curled palm.

His fingers are exploring her. His tongue. He hasn't ... she hasn't let him do this since before. She couldn't help remembering all the blood, and Dom's a fastidious man: he'd taste it, taste what they'd lost, and turn from her. Now, this autumn evening with the wind howling past their bedroom window and drowning out the traffic-noise from the road six stories down, she lets the sensation lift her away from that grief, carry her back to brighter times. She acknowledges the grief but lets it fade. She is living in the moment. She is being here now.

Then Dom's dick is pressing into her, skin to skin, and it's exquisite. It's alive.

"Darling," she murmurs, curling her hands over his broad shoulders, kissing his neck. Dom holds himself very still above her, his dick twitching inside her. "Mal," he whispers. "Darling, is it ... is it still too soon?"

"I'm fine, beloved," she tells him. "You're not hurting me."

Dom sighs shakily, and moves. "I meant," he gasps against her ear, "is it too soon to try again?"

Mal locks and stills and freezes, and she doesn't even realise it's a physical reaction until Dom stills too.

"Mal? Honey, what's ...?"

I can't tell him, she thinks.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry."

"No," says Mal. She bites back _There's no need_. She bites back _I can't leave her_. He doesn't need to know.

But she made a promise, when she married him.
Mal clutches her courage around her, and says, "We don't need a condom. I'm taking the Pill again."

The look on Dom's face is bitter and hurt. "Mal …"

"You were right," she says. "I'm not ready. And … I must not, I cannot fall pregnant again. Not now."

Dom rolls away from her, folding his arms behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. He looks … sad. Betrayed. Disappointed. Mal shivers, and not just because of the sudden chill of her bare, sweat-sheened skin: but she can't let herself give in to the need to comfort him.

"Why, Mal? Just make me understand."

"I need to keep dreaming," says Mal helplessly.

"Sure, honey, but getting pregnant won't —"

"How do you know?" Mal flings at him. "How do you know it wasn't the very first time we dreamt, while our daughter was still invisibly small — before we even knew that she was there — that did the damage?"

"Somnacin's been rated safe up to the second —"

"And how many pregnant women have used it?" Mal laughs, bitter. "I don't recall the Army being happy with female soldiers who fall pregnant."

"It was tested —"

"Do I look like a laboratory animal to you?" Dom has no answer to that (or, more likely, knows that silence is the only safe response). "No, Dom. If we are to have ano— have a child, I must give up the dreaming before I conceive. And I cannot do that now."

"Why not? Help me out here, Mal: make me understand why the dreams are so important. Why you need to keep dreaming. Why you'd sooner dream than live in the real world."

Dominick is turning all his persuasion, all his charm, on her. It feels like a weight, like a peine forte et dure. "My work!" she says frantically, feeling like a little girl again, confronted by an angry parent, inventing to cover up some blatant offense. "It wasn't me! It was an accident! I lost it!"

"I need to dream for my work!"

"You never talk to me about your work any more," says Dom. Mal wants to hear hurt, sympathy, interest. What she hears instead is a calculated challenge.

You never ask, Mal doesn't say. Instead, "I'm working on a new project, looking at projections — particular projections, persistent projections, the ones who appear in dream after dream." The words come easily. It's almost as though someone else is speaking through her: someone who isn't bound by a secret she can't confide, someone who's never had a daughter who lives only in dreams. "The faces we see again and again that come, not from the real world but from somewhere in our subconscious: somewhere in humanity's shared dreamscape." ("She's not really my mother. She's just a nice lady. She comes to see me when you're not here," Philippa had told her earnestly. "She does magic, and sometimes she makes herself look different, but I always know it's her." Philippa had giggled, and Mal had made herself laugh too.)

"I see," says Dom slowly. "Have you talked to your father about it?"
"Not yet," says Mal. "Maybe we should visit."

"I can't take any time right now, Mal. The case —"

"Then maybe," says Mal icily, "I should go to Paris. Alone."

The notion is suddenly everything she wants. Nights where she can sleep alone, without the constant pressure of Dom's warm presence. Days to think about what she wants. Time to spend time; to dream.

§

Sex with a projection is, at best, masturbation (if it's your own projection); at worst, harassment (if the projection's spawned by someone else's mind). Arthur's okay about sex with his own subconscious. Like Woody Allen said, it's sex with someone you love: and it never gets complicated.

Never till now, anyway.

He realises he wants to see Eames again: which shouldn't happen, shouldn't be possible. Projections don't ... it's not like it's going to be the same Eames as the one who blew him and kissed him at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Never mind how often he runs into a projection that looks like and talks like and feels like Eames, there's no continuity. It's not like Eames is going to remember anything.

Not a chance in hell.

Still, he hooks himself in: twenty minutes of white noise on the iPod, followed by the Talking Heads — which has been his wake-up music since back when he first discovered shared dreaming, though now it's more ironic than anything — to signal the end of the dream. He doesn't bother with architecture going in. It's easy enough to change a dream once he's in it, and it'll be his dream: his projections aren't going to get aggressive about it.

The dream begins on a tropical beach, but Arthur's not really in the mood for sunburn and sangria: too much of a contrast with the autumn evening he left behind. He closes his eyes and concentrates on the sound of wind in the palms until it's the patter of rain on brickwork and tiles. The rush of waves becomes the sound of traffic on wet tarmac, several stories below.

"Always a pleasure, Arthur," comes a voice from behind him. English accent, light tenor, slightly slurred. "But to what do I owe this particular instance of said pleasure?"

Arthur opens his eyes. He's standing in the doorway of a narrow room, the ceiling sloping steeply above him, the lower wall given over to bookshelves, the dormer window blurred with rivulets of rain. To his left there's a big rumpled bed, crimson duvet and pale sheets.

"How long has it been?" he demands.

"Since?" says Eames lightly, putting his hand on Arthur's shoulder to move him aside as he steps into the room. Arthur watches his imperfect reflection in the spotted mirror at the end of the room. Eames is naked to the waist, and tattoos swirl around his muscles like oil in water. Arthur remembers tracing the curlicues and serifs of an unfamiliar alphabet on Eames' warm bare skin. He remembers the knowledge that he was tracing his own name. If the ink's spelling anything now, it's in a language he can't read.

"Since you last saw me," says Arthur, suddenly uncertain of his hypothesis but damned if he's going to show it.

Arthur's breath hitches in his throat. He turns to stare at Eames.

"Oh, come on, Arthur. D'you think I'm an idiot?"

"No," he says honestly. (There are lots of words he uses when he thinks about Eames, but 'idiot' has never been one of them). "But you shouldn't — you can't know that."

"What shouldn't I know?" Eames settles himself on the bed, leaning back against the Rorschach patterns of the walnut headboard. A paperback novel (The Tower, Arthur registers) tumbles to the rug. "What I am? 'Know thyself', isn't that what they teach you in school? Or should I not remember where I've encountered you before?"

"You're my projection," says Arthur, brutally honest. "You came from my subconscious. I'm pretty sure there's no schools in there."

Eames doesn't respond to the feeble witticism. "If it comforts you to believe you created me," he says, "then by all means do continue to cling to that belief." The skin around his eyes creases, though he doesn't smile. "And let me be the first to congratulate you on your exceptional imagination."

"If I didn't create you, how come you're here?"

"You found me, Arthur," says Eames. "You can find me wherever you like. Though I have to say I've no idea how we found ourselves here."

"I don't even know where 'here' is," says Arthur, scowling.

"Of course you do," says Eames. "It's your subconscious, after all. The decor's all yours: I just wandered in."

"Huh," says Arthur. He moves to stand by the window, gazing out. There's a sea of green foliage, a low grey sky, the distant geometry of houses. The rain makes everything softer, greyer, blurred. "I'm guessing somewhere in England," he says. "Where do you think we are?"

It's a test. Does Eames have any imagination? Any independence?

"We're in south-west London," says Eames promptly. "Kew. More specifically, at the top of the pagoda, in Kew Gardens."

Arthur scowls out at the rain. He remembers wandering around Kew Gardens as a student, with a guy called Dave who'd been giving off frustratingly mixed signals. They'd kissed outside the pagoda, which had been locked, and dared each other to break in. Later that night, at an overcrowded party, Arthur'd seen Dave groping a bosomy blonde.

"I've never been to Kew," he lies. It's another test.

"Whatever," says Eames. "Maybe you saw it in a movie."

"Maybe I saw you in a movie," says Arthur, turning from the view to take in the sight of Eames sprawled on the bed. "Must've been a porno."

If Eames is offended, it doesn't show. He smiles that slow wicked smile, and says, "Flattery'll get you everywhere."
"How about … here?" says Arthur, crossing the room with two quick strides and looming over Eames.

"Whatever you like, Arthur," says Eames, and he's smiling again as he twists and heaves and bears Arthur down into the too-soft mattress, pressing his erection against Arthur's thigh.

"Beats jerking off in the —" snipes Arthur: but then Eames is kissing him, rough and wet and delicious, and words are overrated.

The thing is — okay. Arthur doesn't like to dream from memory: it's the easiest way to lose those memories for good, overlaying them with the brighter, tidier, finished recollection of his reconstruction. But every dream has to have some basis in reality, in the dreamer's experience. Imagination isn't actually that important: what matters is rearranging notions, images, fragments from reality into something new. Arthur's built immense, surreal towers that he could never have created if he hadn't, as a child, been taken to Paris and climbed the stairs of the Eiffel Tower. (He remembers counting out loud as he climbed. One thousand, six hundred and sixty six.) He's designed a hotel with corridors that loop and contort, just like Jack Nicholson's lair in The Shining. And that tropical beach earlier was straight off the poster on his mom's kitchen wall.

So what the fuck is the foundation of sex with Eames?

Because it's ... it's fucking amazing, is what it is. Arthur's willing to bet a considerable amount of money on never having felt this way in the waking world. He's never been reduced so quickly to a shivery, incoherent mess, sinking down onto Eames' dick, unable to stop trembling as Eames' quick, sinewy hands map every inch of his skin. He's never craved more so wholly, never wanted anyone's fingers as well as their dick, never even considered how much he could take. (Fisting? No way.) He's never been so out of control, unable to stop himself shaking to pieces around anyone, on top of anyone, someone's dick in him and him trying to push himself through someone's — through Eames' skin, into Eames' mouth. He's never lost it, never passed out when he comes, never —

— never kicked himself out of a dream by orgasm before.

He's lying on the sweaty sheets of the New York apartment. He's come in his boxers, and it hasn't started to cool yet. He's alone, and ragingly thirsty, and ragingly ...

Yeah.

"Fuck," he says to the empty room. "Fuck you, Eames."

§

"I really thought we had him," says Dom, pacing up and down the kitchen.

Mal props herself against the counter, arms folded, and watches him. These moods make her prickle. There's such an air of suppressed violence about her husband: and yes, she knows what it is that he does. She knows that he'd never deliberately hurt her. She knows that there's simply too much tension in him to dissolve on the drive home. But still: it's like being in a cage with a feral beast. She'll be glad to escape the cage, tomorrow. She'll fly free, fly to Paris, be away from this faceless dream-thief who's stolen so much of Dom's attention.

"Why are you so certain it's a man?" she says.

"I'm not certain at all," says Dom, frowning at her. "It could be a woman. You could do it," he says, smiling, gesturing towards her with the mug in his hand. She takes the cup from him (he drinks his coffee strong and black, and spillage stains the tiles) and pours him more from the cafetière.
"You're as good as he is, Mal. And don't get me wrong: I'm saying 'he' because it's quicker than saying 'the offender'. There's nothing to say it's a man or a woman. Dreams have no gender."

That's not true, thinks Mal. "Tell me about your Mr X, then."

"He's good, Mal. He's incredibly good. I even ..." His gaze drops, abashed. "I emailed your father to ask if any of his graduates fitted the profile we've drawn up."

"Papa? What did he say?"

"He said if he'd had anyone with that kind of potential, he'd have moved heaven and earth to keep them on at the university." Dom shrugs. "But he'd say that anyway. He wouldn't want to set the FBI after someone he liked."

"He wouldn't protect a criminal," says Mal, though she's not wholly certain of this.

"Someone that good has to've been trained somewhere."

"Perhaps he is military? Sergeant X?"

"Nobody's left the program for years," says Dom. "No one unaccounted for, any road."

Mal knows what that look means. It means don't ask me. It means you won't like the details. It means people have died. People have been killed.

"This man," she says. "He steals ideas, yes? He is an extractor?"

"More than that. He ..." Dom scowls. "It's possible that he's pressuring his victims in some way. Coercing them to act in ways they wouldn't act. Getting that journalist to reveal his sources, even though he maintained he wouldn't."


"True," says Dom. "Though it was kinda smooth, you know? The one before that, and we're pretty sure this is the same guy, a marine engineering project got cancelled. He —"

"Cancelled?" Mal frowns. "How can an extractor cause something to be cancelled? He steals the ideas; he does not steal them away. Or ..." She swallows, leans back on the granite countertop, bracing herself. "Dominick, do you mean inception?"

She's terrified that the answer — despite everything she knows, despite everything her father believes — will be yes: but Dom shakes his head. "No. No, there's still no evidence that inception's even possible. No: what our man did was, he took the engineer down into a dream and made him believe that the plans he was working on were about to be stolen. — I didn't get the details, but there's something groundbreaking about this guy's work, something that could make a real difference in naval warfare. So the engineer's dreaming, and Mr X goes in and convinces him that his project's about to be dumped, unless he hands over the plans right now."

"Still, Dom, this does not sound unusual."

"Our Mr X is very creative," says Dom, almost fondly. "Okay, that time we don't think he got what he was after. The victim, the engineer, walked out of his job; retired with immediate effect, didn't even stick around to get his final salary. He's fine, by the way: we flew out to Seattle to interview
him. Took the PASIV." He looks at her meaningfully. "He's forgotten the designs; forgotten everything about the project that was his life for six years. Nothing to make me think he's lying. Mr X might not have meant to do it, but when he tried to steal those plans, he left an empty space behind him."

"That's not how extraction works," says Mal. There's a cold pressure on the back of her neck, as though someone is pressing metal or stone or ice against her nape. If thoughts can truly be stolen away from a dreamer, then nothing in her mind is safe. Nothing anywhere is safe.

"Maybe the engineer destroyed the plans himself; maybe it was another subconscious reflex, a kind of self-protection. There hasn't been nearly enough work done on the mind's innate defences." Dom looks curious, intrigued. "It might be another avenue to explore for militarisation."

"What makes you so sure that these jobs are the work of the same man, of your Mr X?" asks Mal. It's an honest question. She can't see any similarities between the two extractions.

"Something," says Dom, and frowns. "Something in the flavour." He shakes his head. "It's like when I go into a room and it smells of your perfume," he says, smiling, and for the first time this evening Mal feels as though he's truly here with her. "I know you've been there. I know it was you."

"So your Mr X wears perfume?" says Mal, amused.

"It's high time someone came up with a proper vocab for dream-work," grumbles Dom, reaching out and rubbing his thumb across Mal's cheekbone. She leans into the caress. "Yeah, Mr X's mind is ... pretty distinctive."

§

The first thing I remember is I'm running away from the burning tower. My left eye's swollen shut with dust, or glass, or tears: that's why, just then, I can only see the world I call 'fixed'. I see yellow taxis, people running and screaming, a bright opaque sky, a chaos of light.

Like waking up in the middle of a dream: I couldn't remember where I'd come from, where I was going.

Running away. Everyone around me was running too. People were screaming: I was screaming, but I couldn't hear myself, only feel it in the stretch of my throat. I could taste panic and it wasn't only mine.

I didn't dare look behind me but I could see the reflection of a great tower in the mirrored facades of the buildings I ran past. The tower was afire, black smoke billowing from it up into a clear blue autumn sky.

I didn't know my own name. I didn't know where I'd come from or where I was going. I just knew that I was alive, and I wanted to stay that way.
The Forest

Miles sits Mal down with a cup of camomile tea and moves quietly about the room, putting a record (some Debussy piano piece) on the old gramophone, opening the window so that Anna Freud can slink in and start shedding white fur over Mal's red skirt. Mal sips her tea and fights back tears. It's Proust's madeleine all over again (the summer-lawn taste of camomile, Anna Freud's rusty purr, the crackle of dust on the LP: they are keys to her childhood, they encode a simpler happier time) and she knows her father well enough to realise that it's deliberate.

"Tell me about your argument with Dominick," Miles suggests gently, settling into the armchair across from her with a sigh.

"We haven't argued," lies Mal.

"Mallorie," says her father. "He's not with you, and you haven't been sleeping well. Also," he lets his gaze linger on her wrist, where the sleeve's ridden up, "you've been spending more time than usual in dreams."

"I —"

She wants with all her heart to tell him everything. Wants to tell him about his granddaughter, make him understand that she's as real as the two of them here in this room listening to Debussy. But a small dark hard-edged part of her knows that he'll tell her not to live in dreams, to come back to reality, to cast aside 'I wish' in favour of 'I will'.

"He wants us to have a baby," she says. "I've told him it's too soon." She lowers her eyes, watching her father from behind her eyelashes. He looks sad, and guilt curdles the tea in Mal's throat. "I've been working a lot," she says. "I have some theories concerning projections that I'd like to discuss with you."

§

Today the white noise becomes the sound of wind in treetops. He's in the green shade of a mature woodland. Butterflies, in all the colours of a peacock's tail, float from flower to pale flower in the warm summer air.

Arthur stretches, and takes a moment to appraise his surroundings. He's dressed in light linen, a white shirt and khaki slacks. His feet — oh hell, he's wearing sandals, the battered leather sandals he bought in Morocco that time when he'd broken his toes on someone's kneecap.

This isn't Morocco. This is an anonymous glade in an anonymous forest — oak trees, he thinks, or maybe birch — that could be anywhere. Anywhen. There's no sign of any projections, no indication of human presence except for Arthur himself. There's no sound save the rustling rush, above him, of leaves in the breeze. Above the tall treetops, the sky is cloudlessly blue. There's —

Wait. No, he's not alone at all. There's a tall figure in a green cloak (the drape and sheen suggest velvet) standing at the edge of the clearing. A slim figure, with long dark hair. A woman, thinks Arthur, though he can't see the figure's face. He's oddly disappointed.

She turns towards him, and Arthur is positive he's never seen this girl before. Or ... maybe in a painting? There's something pre-Raphaelite about the luxuriance of her long loose hair, the luscious red of her mouth.
And ... okay. Arthur doesn't mind talking to his projections, whatever their agenda. (Which is actually, never forget it, his own.) You can learn a lot from your subconscious: hell, there's a multi-million dollar industry built on that premise. Dreamwork's cheaper, and comes with its own therapeutic tools.

He walks slowly towards the woman, who watches him unblinkingly.

"Hello," says Arthur, smiling. "Have we met before?"

"You don't remember me?" says the woman archly. Her voice is light and precise, without any discernible regional accent. "Arthur, I'm disappointed."

"You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"You can call me by whatever name you'd like."

There's something about the slow curl of her smile, the colour of —

— the blue-grey-green colour of her eyes.

"Eames?" Arthur huffs a laugh. "You're a woman?"

"I'm whatever I want to be," says the woman. Her eyes narrow. "I do beg your pardon: as a figment of your imagination, I should say 'whatever you want me to be', shouldn't I?"

"I didn't expect to see you like this," says Arthur, gesturing at the green velvet cloak, the clutch of her small hand at the collar of the rich fabric, the tilt of her chin as she looks up at him. "Don't make this into something I did."

"But Arthur," says Eames sweetly, "as your, what was it, projection, how could I be anything without your wishing it?"

Arthur rolls his eyes. "I didn't come here to argue with you," he snaps. "If you're going to be like that, I'll kick myself out." There's the comfortable weight of a semi-automatic in the pocket of his slacks, ruining the line. (It wasn't there a minute ago.)

"It's fascinating," says Eames-the-woman, "how differently you speak to me when I'm like this."

"Is that so," says Arthur flatly.

"But if it bothers you, my ... flexibility, I can be something else. Whatever you like, Arthur."

Arthur doesn't trust Eames at all. There's something sly in the curve of his — her — mouth, something wicked sparking in the changeless eyes. It's hard to see the man he fucked, the man who fucked him, in this ethereal forest-nymph.

"Do share the joke, darling," says Eames.

Arthur shakes his head. "So, what? You're offering to change into anyone I want?"

"It's in my nature."

Arthur files that away for later. "Okay, so if I wanted you to be, huh, Angelina Jolie, you'd do it?"

"It all depends on how nicely you ask, Arthur."
"But in theory, yeah?"

"Yes, well ..." Eames licks her lips, her gaze sliding from Arthur's to the bright flitting butterflies, the flower-speckled grass. "No, I'm afraid I can't oblige."

"I can ask real nicely," says Arthur. Frustration is tightening the muscles across his shoulders. "What would I have to do, for you to agree?"

"Sweet of you," says Eames, "but I wasn't being obtuse. I honestly can't." She enunciates the word 'honestly' as though it hurts her mouth.

"Why not? Didn't you just tell me you could be anyone?"

"Anyone I've seen. I don't recall encountering this ... Angelina."

"Hang on. You have to've seen them in real life?"

"Of course not," says Eames airily. "But I ... truly have no idea what your Miss Jolie looks like."

"She's not mine," says Arthur automatically, while his brain shuffles through a myriad solutions to the problem. Because it is a problem, if his recalcitrant projection is disclaiming all knowledge of a face so familiar to Arthur that it was instantly in his mind's eye, photographically clear, as soon as he spoke the name.

He thinks hard about Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*. (Who the hell doesn't have at least a caricature of Angelina Jolie in their head?) Eames — and Arthur's no stranger to dream-forgery, to shape-shifting, but he's already associating the name with a form quite different to this one — remains impervious, stubbornly changeless. Butterflies flutter to rest on her shoulders and in her hair.

As a mental exercise, Arthur contemplates bearing her down to the damp, leaf-strewn ground, seducing her as Eames had seduced him. He's surprised to detect, in this unappealing fantasy, an undercurrent of ... vengeance, pique, bad temper. It's inappropriate. So he let his projection seduce him, act out a masturbatory fantasy or two. That's nothing to do with Eames. It's all Arthur.

"Marilyn Monroe? Johnny Depp? Marlon Brando?" he suggests, more or less at random.

Eames won't meet Arthur's gaze. Was that a flicker of recognition at Brando? Was it hell. Maybe Arthur's subconscious lacks imagination after all.

"Sorry to disappoint," says Eames.

"So who can you be?"


There's something weirdly familiar about that succession of archetypes, but Arthur can't place it right now.

"Could you be me?"

"Oh yes," says Emperor Eames, smirking behind a well-trimmed beard. And in an instant, the blink of an eye, Arthur's staring at his own — his reflection, his projection, his own face down to
the shaving-cut he got that morning.

He's pretty sure he never wore that expression, though.

"In dreams, you can be anyone," he says slowly.

"Anyone I'm familiar with," Eames says: it's Arthur's voice, but he's never imbued 'familiar' with such innuendo. He winks again, and licks his lips. It's not as appealing as when Eames is being … himself? The guy Arthur first tagged with the name, anyway.

Arthur needs to wake up right the fuck now. Because if he doesn't, he totally won't be responsible for what happens next. And there's no way it's healthy to get turned on by your own projection wearing your own face.

A sigh, a Glock, a shot —

§

The lab is small, perfectly square and somehow, despite the white walls and the window looking out over a courtyard, manages to seem dingy. Perhaps it's that pervasive smell of ozone, moulding oil and (faintly) vomit that seems to pervade every dreamwork lab. Mal suppresses a sigh, decants a plastic cup of water for herself from the cooler, and settles on the recliner nearest the window.

Her father taps on the door and opens it without waiting for Mal's response. Behind him hovers a petite young woman in jeans and a hooded top: Miles ushers her into the room.

"This is Ariadne, the best of my graduate students," he tells Mal. "Ariadne, this is Doctor Mallorie Cobb: she's interested in dreams and projections."

Ariadne (who looks about fourteen) blushes, but meets Mal's gaze steadily enough. "Hi."

"Hello, Ariadne," says Mal. She presumes her father has some reason for not mentioning their relationship. "I've been talking to Professor Miles about archetypes and projections: he thinks you and I might be thinking about the same things."

"Really?" says Ariadne, brightening. "I've been wondering — hey, I don't know if you saw, but I contributed to a paper in the Journal of Oneiric Theory last quarter, about projections having a kind of existence independent of the dreamer."

"I don't always get to read JOT," says Mal, an ugly paranoia gnawing at her attention. Could Dom have seen Ariadne's paper, and hidden —

"I have a copy, if you'd like to read it," Ariadne says, trying to sound as though she doesn't care. "I, er …"

"How about an example, Ariadne?" interrupts Miles. "Let's go under, and you can show Dr Cobb the scenario you demonstrated for me last week."

Ariadne takes care of her own IV, neatly and efficiently, checking the somnacin levels and the indicators with a concentration that smacks of rote-learning. Miles winks at Mal, inviting her to share his amused superiority, but Mal just smiles and waits for Ariadne to make herself comfortable before she accepts her own lead from her father.

Ariadne dreams a neat manicured city park, high on a hill with shining towers in the distance, a river winding past, an indistinct haze of suburbs. The three of them are standing beside a path that
leads into a small wood. Birds are singing in the blossom-laden branches of the trees.

"How pretty," says Mal, amused.

"It's a fairytale," says Ariadne, rather irritably. "Of course it's pretty."

Mal thinks of Philippa's golden-roofed, pink-curtained tower and bites her lip. "I see," she says. "So... what was it that you were going to show us?"

"The dreamscape will show you," corrects Ariadne. "I don't need to do anything. I've simply built a typical setting. Look around you. What do you notice?"

Obediently Mal scans the park. There's nothing out of the ordinary. Mature plane trees rise above the smaller, more decorative greenery that surrounds them. In the distance, smoke spirals up from a fire or a chimney. The sky above them is bright blue, cloudless, though she can't see the sun.

"There are no projections," says Miles casually.

"We're all experienced dreamers," says Mal. "Why would there be projections, if we didn't invite them?"

"Some places produce their own," says Ariadne. "Follow me, and I'll show you what I mean."

The wood's bigger than it seemed from the outside. They walk for five minutes or so (though time's notoriously hard to gauge in dreams) before Ariadne holds up a hand: stop.

"What—"

"There!" says Ariadne, low and fierce, pointing to an ancient oak that stands to the left of the path.

Mal blinks. There's a woman there, by the tree—in the tree? A woman, with hair the colour of bark and eyes as green as acorns. She's not naked, but her garment blurs from second to second, impossible to focus on. She's watching the three of them warily, silently.

"We don't—" begins Ariadne, taking one step towards the tree, the woman.

A sudden sharp breeze gusts through the wood, bringing the smell of smoke and dead leaves. Around them, abruptly, the leaves on the trees are shading to copper. The woman, the dryad, is older, her hair is redder, and her face crueler. Another, colder, gust: and all at once the dead leaves tumble from the trees, a deluge of copper and gold, leaving bare branches against an icy blue sky. The dryad's skeletal now, white-haired, eyes pearly with cataract. She reaches out—

"Enough," says Miles firmly, pulling Ariadne back to the path. "We're not welcome here."

They follow the path back through a winter woodland, frost riming dead brambles and their breath misting the air. Mal glances back once. She can't see the oak tree, or the dryad. The path has vanished.

"I can't think of a way to prove that wasn't my own projection," says Ariadne, rather breathlessly. "But I promise—"

"You built the forest, didn't you?" says Miles. "I'm surprised we didn't get Robin Hood or the Green Man."

"The problem," says Ariadne, "is that you can't control what comes."
"I thought that was the point," says Mal.

"No: well, yeah, it is, but ..." Ariadne lets the sentence trail off. There's a fallen tree across the path: Mal doesn't remember it from earlier.

"Your thesis is that each environment has its own projections, is that right?" says Miles, like a teacher encouraging a slow pupil in class. He scrambles over the tree-trunk, and offers Ariadne a hand.

"No, that's not it," say Ariadne, ignoring the proffered assistance. (Mal's grateful for her father's help: she doesn't want to morph her clothing just to clamber over an obstacle.) "The environment has to be very specific," Ariadne goes on. "I've tried experimenting with scenarios I think are clichéd — drugstores with pretty girls sipping milkshakes, that kind of thing." She chuckles, ducking her head. "The projections are just as random as they'd be in any dream. It's only when we — when I design a dream that's built from myths or fairytales. That's when it happens."

Ahead of them, smoke is coiling up from the chimney of a small, rose-twined cottage. It's as pretty as a picture.

"When what happens?" says Mal.

"When the dream spawns appropriate projections," says Ariadne. "There'll be a woodcutter around here somewhere, and maybe an old lady knitting. They're not the problem. The problem is ..."

Something grey moves, with purpose, in the shadows beyond the cottage. There's a sudden mind-freezing howl.

"... that so many fairytales have monsters as well as heroes," finishes Ariadne. "I, er, I don't suppose you can run in those shoes?"

Mal looks down at her smart leather courts, and melts them into Reeboks. "Of course I can," she says.

§

Arthur's schedule's pretty light this month: a simple extraction, completely above-board and legitimate, for David H. — an artist currently working on his autobiography — who thinks his therapist has talked him into suppressing some key memories. Arthur can sympathise. Back in high school, he watched his best friend turn into a stranger after a course of counselling that was supposed to help him deal with what the school called a 'challenging' family situation. Challenging wasn't the half of it: Steve's dad was borderline psycho, and he'd never met a problem he couldn't fix with his fists. After a few sessions with the counsellor, Steve was turning his back on all the friends who encouraged him to fight back.

So, yeah. Therapy's just another way to get fucked up, as far as Arthur's concerned. He's more than happy to take on David H's case and help him uncover those forgotten fragments of his past. "How can you finish a jigsaw if half the pieces are down the back of the couch?" says David H, and Arthur nods and makes notes and calls in Yusuf, a chemist of his acquaintance who's more than a little experienced in blending somnacin with 'traditional herbal remedies' (Yusuf's line) — like the pot that Arthur's suit reeks of by the time he steps out of David's charming rural retreat in upstate Vermont.

"It will calm him," says Yusuf abstractedly, pipetting something from a brown glass bottle into a beaker. "And perhaps, if he experimented with other psychotropics while he was in college — as
one might suppose from his early works — it will unlock a door that was not yet locked at that time."

Arthur frowns at him. "You're not pushing ancient ayurvedic medicines to your local yoga class, dude. Are you telling me this will help him access whatever he's suppressed?"

"Yes," says Yusuf patiently. "That is what I am telling you."

In David H's mind there are forests. (There's a poem about that, Arthur thinks.) And in the forests are ... they're not quite ghosts, not quite human. They seem unsettlingly familiar: worse than that, they seem real. Arthur doesn't know what David was on when he saw this crew, but he hopes it was just a bad reaction. The idea of a generation of stoners encountering living myths every time they took a hike into the nearest wilderness while they were high ... It doesn't bear thinking about. No wonder there are so many wealthy therapists.

There's a sticky moment when Arthur, leading a blindfolded David along a winding forest track, sees something moving up ahead — a flicker of green, a flash of copper — and gets himself between the mark and a savage-eyed redhead just in time to prevent David from being stolen away by ... By what? His own subconscious?

(There's something familiar about the redhead. Arthur's neck prickles with the angry shame of a potential fuck-up. Was she one of his own projections? Because that would be totally unprofessional, grounds for taking a long break from dreamwork.)

But the job, despite Arthur's reservations, goes off without a hitch. David H is ecstatic, promising to 'put more business your way, young man, you've got a gift'.

"Incidentally," says Yusuf, almost shyly, as Arthur's packing up the PASIV and doing a final sweep of their office space. "I might have a lead for you. Another job: another artist. This one is a writer, but she cannot write."

"The world's full of writers who can't write," says Arthur flippantly. "Doesn't stop most of them getting into print. You wouldn't believe some of the shit that's out there."


"Sure," says Arthur. "You have my number."

He remembers that conversation, later.

§

Mal's heart is racing, just like when she fled the wolves. She sets up the PASIV with exaggerated care, trying not to rush, not to skip steps. She keeps telling herself that there's no way that the wolves from Ariadne's dark woodland could possibly have slipped into Mal's own dream, hungry for fresh hunting.

"Philippa?" she calls. She's fallen into the dream at the foot of the tower, at the big wooden door, which is still firmly closed. Are those muddy paw-prints, unnervingly shoulder-high, on the weathered wood? Mal refuses to examine them more closely. Entering, she bolts it firmly behind her. The hallway is blocked out in swathes of stained-glass colour from the leaded windows. The pretty, undying flowers in their vase still smell of violets, though they look more like lilies.

"Maman?" says Philippa, and Mal can hear her soft footsteps on the spiral staircase.
"Darling!" says Mal, and opens her arms wide to embrace her daughter.

"There were animals outside," says Philippa into Mal's chest. "Big grey dogs. They were singing to me."

Every drop of Mal's blood freezes, stingingly, in her veins. (She pushes aside the image. It's dangerous to be too poetic in a dream: the subconscious can be all too literal.) "They were trying to lure you out to play with them," she says. "They're called 'wolves', darling, and they would eat — you — up!"

Philippa giggles and wriggles, pretending to be afraid. It's only pretence. She's never known anything she needs to fear.

"They'd eat you up," says Mal again: doesn't say 'or worse'. "You mustn't let them in, Phil: do you understand me?"

Philippa nods solemnly.

"And sometimes they won't look like wolves at all," Mal goes on, raising her voice against a distant echoing howl. It might be kids playing: it isn't kids playing. The woodlands outside the tower are uninhabited, virgin forest. "You mustn't let them fool you, you mustn't trust anyone you don't know. They might not be what you think they are."

"So you could be a wolf?" says Phil, laughing. "Are you a wolf, maman?"

"Hardly ever," says Mal, feeling sick.

§

The heady smell of leaf-mould rises from each footfall. I've seen the map: I know the wood is small, no more than an acre of green shade and dappled light here at the city's heart. But something ancient dwells here. I understand that I can walk in any direction and find myself at the wood's edge; but on a deeper level I know, I feel, that I am lost and wandering in the maze of light and shade.

On the pale bark of a birch, a face stares — No! I cover my left eye. It's only leaf-shadow, moss, a trick of the light. It has no eyes to wink at me. It has no mouth to smile.

Somewhere far behind me something howls.

The sound grows louder, and I am instinct: I begin to run, brambles dragging at my bare arms, fallen branches snarling my steps.
"I think we should have lunch," says Mal to Ariadne once they've woken, hearts pounding, from
that dream of being prey. Miles has already absented himself, pleading a tutorial, though Mal
thinks he might let himself be sidetracked by the prospect of strong drink. (Being hunted by a
wolf-pack awoke some visceral prehistoric terror in them all).

"There's a great veggie restaurant on Rue César Franck," says Ariadne gamely, winding her red
scarf (Mal remembers blood) around her neck. "Just across the bridge."

Once they've snagged a table at the Cafe Debussy and ordered (Mal's having lasagna, and a glass
of wine; Ariadne sticks to salad and Coke) Mal props her chin on her clasped hands and stares at
her companion until the girl's fair skin begins to redden. Satisfied, Mal leans back, ready to fire the
opening salvo: but Ariadne gets there first.

"You're his daughter, aren't you? Professor Miles, I mean. Why didn't he want me to know?"

Mal shrugs. "It wasn't my idea."

"Are you ... I'm sorry, this is totally rude, but are you actually, do you actually have a doctorate?"

"I do," says Mal, wanting to laugh. "And yes, I'm truly working on a paper concerning projections
and how they manifest in our dreams."

"Cool," says Ariadne. Their drinks arrive and she smiles at the waiter and gulps down half a glass
of Coke. "So, what I've been thinking is ..."

Mal listens, sipping at her own wine (it slows her blood, settles her heart). Ariadne talks quickly but
clearly: build a specific environment to summon projections, she says. Similar in principle to the
therapeutic technique where patients are instructed to build a safe place where they can hide the
secrets they can't talk about. (Criminals do that too, thinks Mal, but she doesn't interrupt.) "The
thing is," says Ariadne, "it's really not like therapy at all. In therapy you get each person's
individual hopes and fears, their guilty secrets; whatever's blocking them. But if you build, say, a
glass coffin, or a cottage in the woods, or a wishing well ... everyone, every dreamer, projects the
same figures."

"Every dreamer?" says Mal. "How many dreamers have you asked?"

Ariadne flushes again, but she meets Mal's gaze steadily. "We've run the study on twenty-four
participants. And okay, it's not quite everyone, but it's statistically significant." She sidetracks into
a litany of stats tests, which Mal tunes out: her mind's eye is presenting her with a fairytale tower in
a green green forest, wolves howling at the tower door, pawing and clawing at the ornate lock,
battering their huge grey weight against the weathered wood.

"Where did you get the idea?" she interrupts.

"When I was a kid," says Ariadne, "my favourite books were these fantasy novels by a woman
called Vivian Tegraeus. Still are, actually," she adds, ducking her head. "Here."

She's hooked her bag out from under her chair; from it she produces a battered paperback. There's
silver lettering on the cover, and a shadowy bridge with a small frail figure at its highest point.
Ariadne hands the book to Mal, who rifflles her thumb across the worn pages, noting dog-eared
corners and ink-stains and brightly-coloured index tabs. Ariadne's expression — nervous resolution
— says that this *matters*, it's important to her, she'll close up if Mal mocks her taste in novels.

"Tell me about this book," says Mal.

And all through lunch (the lasagna is excellent, heavy with cream and cheese and tomato) Ariadne does tell her. "It's a seven-book series, but the seventh book — it's going to be called *The Island* — hasn't come out yet. It was due last year, everyone's desperate to find out what happens to Nyx, but ..." Ariadne shakes her head. "I suppose you can't force creativity." She tells Mal about the geography of the series — she calls it an arc, though it reminds Mal of a Tarot spread, of Tolkien, of innumerable lurid pulp novels and their formulaic plots. She enthuses about Nyx, the viewpoint character: Mal's not even sure if Nyx is a girl or a boy. "It's about seeing magic in the real world," Ariadne says earnestly, gesturing with her fork. "About looking at the mundane from a different perspective, bringing a sense of wonder into everyday life."

"I don't understand why that would inspire you," says Mal, impelled to honesty. "Shared dreaming isn't magic. If it's anything, it's about controlling fantasies."


"So you carry her book around with you for inspiration?" says Mal.

"No," says Ariadne, with a flash of irritability. "No; actually she's giving a talk this evening, and there'll be a signing. And I'd love to meet her, just to tell her how much her books mean to me, how much they've inspired me. Maybe that'll make a difference to her." She pauses, eyeing Mal. "Would you like to come with?"

"When is it?" asks Mal, intrigued by Ariadne's passion.

"Seven o'clock," says Ariadne. "Libraire du Pont au Double."

"I'll be there," Mal promises her.

§

The Libraire du Pont au Double seems smaller and darker than Mal remembers it. There are far too many people crammed between the shelves, sitting cross-legged on the floor, milling around and shrieking at one another in French and English and German. Mal's on her way back towards the door — this is ridiculous — when someone grabs her arm. It's Ariadne.

"Kind of busy, huh?"

"I don't like crowds," says Mal. It's not wholly true, but she doesn't care for this crowd, young and excitable and ignorant. This is not her milieu. These are not her people.

Ariadne steers her gently towards a corner that's less busy. Mal leans against the wall, eyeing the nearest books: she doesn't recognise any of the titles, any of the authors. Struck by a sudden fear, she plucks a book at random from the shelf: but every page is packed with words. *I could go back to the wooden house where the Dark Lady sits and broods,* she reads. *I could travel south.*

This isn't a dream.

"I don't —" she begins: and then there's a swell of noise, a patter of applause that quickly becomes a storm, and a woman emerges from the door at the back of the shop.
Vivian Tegraeus is short, stocky and far from beautiful. There are dark shadows under her eyes, and she has the papery, mask-like complexion that Mal associates with hormone therapy. Her dress — a loose black jersey affair with a too-heavy brooch at the breast — hides her arms, but Mal suspects there are needle-tracks on her wrists. She's an addict: it's obvious from the faint smell of tobacco, the drawn lines of her face, her febrile glances.

"Hello, everyone." Vivian's voice is rough and soft. Even with the microphone, she's almost too quiet to be heard, until a young man in jeans and a Superman t-shirt darts out from the back room and fiddles with the mike. "I'd like to read to you from The Island, which I'm working on right now." Several people whoop and cheer. "Then I'll talk a little about my writing. There'll be time for questions after that, and I'll sign your books at the end of the session."

She doesn't read from a book, but from a disorderly sheaf of papers covered with spidery handwriting in green, blue, mauve.

Mal means to listen, but the words wash over her. Something about the moon rising, behind a high volcanic peak, just as the sun sets. The imagery is vivid, and Mal wants to build it into a dream, but she doesn't give a damn about the narrator, who seems to spend most of her — his? — time staring at the sea, collecting flotsam on the beach and peering at things, expecting them to change.

True, it's very like a dream.

"And that's what I'm working on right now. Don't worry, though! I do know how the story ends, even though it's ... difficult for me to write." Ms Tegraeus looks down, fiddling with her bracelet. "And I do understand how important it is to you all. Truly I do. It's important to me too." She looks back up at her audience. "It's important that I finish Nyx's story and let go."

"What will you write next?" asks a girl in striped leggings. "If you let go of Nyx, who will you write about?"

"I have other stories I want to tell, of course," says Ms Tegraeus, blinking. "But Nyx is closest to my heart, you know. I've been dreaming about Nyx since I was five — though there've been some changes since then, as you can imagine! When I was five I didn't think in terms of Tarot, symbolism, the mythic journey. I was dreaming about Nyx going to places I'd seen on TV, dreaming that somehow I could live through Nyx and have power, have agency, the way that kids don't."

People are nodding, murmuring agreement.

"Are Nyx and Morgan ever going to get together?" asks a punkish young man with blue tattoos sleeving one arm. The audience, Mal notes, are much more interested in this question.

"I don't think Nyx's sex life is any business of yours!" retorts Vivian Tegraeus, reddening. "When — if — it is relevant to the story, I will include it. Otherwise it doesn't matter." She rallies, grinning. "So, it's okay if I ask you who you last had sex with, and what you did? Nah, didn't think so."

More laughter. Mal watches the way that Vivian's gaze flits around as though she's trying to commit every detail of the crowded bookshop to memory. She twists the bracelet on her wrist, and winces: as though, thinks Mal, her wrist is sore. As though there's a tiny round needle-bump, a swollen vein …

Mal stands, and holds up her hand like a child in school until Vivian Tegraeus points at her.
"When you say you've dreamt about Nyx," says Mal clearly, "have you ever considered using dreamshare technology to help you dream more clearly?"

In the split second before Vivian Tegraeus masters her expression, Mal thinks she sees something raw and genuine — what? Anger? Desperation? Fear? But the glimpse was too brief for Mal to be sure, and now the writer has regained her composure. "I'm sorry," she says, "but I have no idea what you're talking about."

It's so obviously a lie that Mal has to call her on it. Ariadne, at her side, has opened her mouth to speak. But Ms Tegraeus leans in close to the microphone, setting up a nails-on-blackboard feedback whine, and says brightly, "Well! That's all the questions we have time for. I'd like to take a short break before the signing. The staff will show you where to queue."

And in a whirl of black skirts and hennaed hair, she's up and gone, chased by a belated patter of appreciation.

"You scared her," says Ariadne, accusing.

"It was a fair question," says Mal. "I think your Miss Tegraeus might understand the question very well. I think she may have a lot to tell us."

"Except she won't tell us," says Ariadne. "Hey, I'm going to stand in line. Are you ...?" She gestures.

"I'll be in touch," says Mal. "I think we have a great deal to discuss, you and I."

§

Arthur likes to be honest with himself. He knows he needs to get out in the real world, get laid, have a fling, free the endorphins with something that isn't basically high-tech masturbation. But not right now. He's got to be in Boston for his mom's birthday; there's a rumour of something big going down in Berlin; there's the risk, still, of a legal operative joining the dots and realising there's something odd about the Titanic job. Maybe in a couple months, when his schedule's clear: maybe then he'll get a life.

So instead he heads back down into his own subconscious.

He's on a bridge, a broad stone bridge across a wide, tidal river. There are houseboats all along the banks, brightly painted and decked with flags. On the far side of the bridge looms a cityscape that Arthur doesn't recognise: the buildings are historic in the European mode, spires and chimneys fractal against a pearly white sky.

Arthur's not interested in the city, though. He's interested in the guy walking towards him from the other end of the bridge. He picks up his own pace, conscious now that he was already walking when he woke into the dream, so that they meet in the middle.

"What delightfully explicit symbolism, Arthur," says Eames, when they're ten feet apart. He's himself today, or at least he's wearing the face that Arthur associates with that self: plump lips, good cheekbones, a straight nose that's slightly too long for classical handsomeness. Not that it'd matter what he looked like (or so Arthur tells himself, quite aware that it's not exactly true.) You always know who somebody is in a dream, regardless of whose face they're wearing.

"Never mind the symbolism," says Arthur. "Wanna get out of here?"

Eames pouts: there's no other word for it. "In a hurry, are we?" (He's still got the British accent.
Arthur thinks he probably borrowed that from one of his lecturers in college.)

"Yeah, I am," says Arthur. "Take it or leave it."

"I'll take ... it," says Eames, just like Arthur's subconscious said he would. "Did you have anywhere in mind?"

"No," says Arthur. "But I'm sure we can find somewhere."

"Allow me," says Eames, turning to his right. Arthur scowls — is Eames seriously suggesting that they dive over the parapet and into the river? — but when he takes a couple of steps forward, the angles of the stonework resolve, and he sees that there's a stairway leading down the outside of the bridge.

"You're full of surprises, Mr Eames," Arthur says, and maybe he should be warier, but he's ... he's intrigued, dammit. Intrigued and horny.

He follows Eames down the narrow steps. The honey-coloured stone is pitted and scarred: there's graffiti, but when Arthur pauses to peer at it he finds it's only lorem ipsum. There are fossils of tiny winged humanoids. (Arthur snorts a laugh.) There's a nest of wild bees tucked under the corner of the parapet, revealed as they descend. And at the foot of the steps, on the base of the pier on which the bridge arch rests, there's a tiny cabin apparently constructed from driftwood and other flotsam.

"Please do come inside," says Eames earnestly, his accent plummier than before. "A small thing, but mine own."

"Small?" says Arthur archly.

"Oh, I'm sure it'll do the job," says Eames, standing aside — he's right on the edge of the pier, one shove and he'd be in the water — to let Arthur enter first.

The gloomy cabin is really no more than a vast, rumpled bed with a roof. In fact, that's exactly what it is, Arthur realises: an old-fashioned four-poster, like something out of a period drama, with crimson velvet curtains that conceal the ramshackle shell of packing-crates and dry dead branches.

Eames, suddenly aggressive — because apparently what Arthur needs right now is sex that's also wrestling — shoves Arthur down onto the bed: he's on top immediately, pinning Arthur down, stripping him efficiently and enthusiastically. Arthur returns the favour as best he can, between fighting back (which is cool, because Eames can take everything Arthur dishes out) and sudden hard kisses that get both of them gasping.

The sex is ... it's fine, exactly what Arthur wanted. (Of course it is.) He comes quick and hard and then just lets himself be fucked, because apparently his subconscious wants to lie back and take it, watch the show until his timer runs out rather than kicking himself out of the dream. And afterwards, when Eames flops down next to him all sweaty and muscular and radiating heat, it's kind of nice to hold onto him, just the two of them, hold onto one another and kiss slow and sweet and sleepy.

Arthur almost forgets that he's alone with himself. Even when Eames says, "I'll see you again soon," as though it was his choice. Even when Eames whispers, "When you least expect me, darling." Even when Eames whispers —

But the music's playing, and the dream is over.
Mal has barely even thought of Dom in the rush of intellectual excitement that's transformed the days since she landed at Orly. Arguing with her father about projections, dream theory, the chemistry of shared dreaming. Listening to Ariadne lay out her theories about archetypes and fairytales. Being drawn into Ariadne's passion for Vivian Tegraeus' novels, and hearing Tegraeus speak about writer's block, and myth, and creation. (Mal even purchased a copy of *The Tower*, though so far she doesn't care for the overblown style or the ambiguously gendered protagonist.)

But on Saturday morning she wakes thinking of her husband, missing the heavy comfortable warmth of his presence: the bed feels empty, abandoned, though she only stayed here once with him, and that was before they were even married. She misses him: that's good, isn't it?

She fishes around in her handbag until she finds her phone and switches it on. There's a voicemail from Dom, timestamped two days ago: he misses her, he hopes her work's going well, he's still working on tracing that illegal dreamspace operation. He thinks it's no more than three people — possibly just one individual, 'Mr X', contracting other dream-workers as necessary. "This guy's good," says Dom, and even through the crackly recording Mal can hear a note of admiration in his voice. He's impressed by Mr X. He's fascinated by him. He's teetering on the brink of obsession.

Mal scrolls through her missed calls and clicks on Dom's name. And right there, lying in her old bedroom staring at the sunflower-patterned curtains, as Dom's phone begins to ring thousands of miles away, she suddenly knows how Dom can catch his thief, knows the shape and the colour and every detail of the plan that'll work, she's positive of that. The shock of it is enough to make her shivery, and she pulls the soft yellow comforter closer around her shoulders, huddling down into the pillows.

"Mal, honey!" comes Dom's voice. He's somewhere outdoors: Mal can hear the rush of wind or traffic, voices rising and falling in the background. "How's it going, over there?"

"It's good, Dom," she says. "I miss you, I wish you were here," it's not quite a lie, not this morning, "but I'm thinking and writing and talking to people."

"How's your father doing?"

"He's well: he seems much happier since Maman left. Listen, Dom: I think I know how you can find your dream-thief."

"Have you just woken up?"

"Yes," says Mal impatiently, "but it's not something from a dream, I promise you. I've been working with one of Papa's graduates, a young woman named Ariadne, an architect: she believes it is possible to, I don't know, to summon, to create specific projections. She speaks of building a setting, but I wonder if what she's truly doing is building a trap. And then I thought of your Mr X: no, listen, I know he's not a projection, but …"

"... You think we can trap the thief," says Dom slowly. It's pathetic how warming that 'we' is.

"Yes. I think if the right situation presents itself, he'll be drawn to it."

"What situation were you thinking of?"

Mal lays it out for him, and it's one of those magical moments, that synthesis or synergy where she's simply describing something that's sprung fully-formed from (into?) her mind. The thief's interests: his modus operandi: his probable connections. And the bait that'll lure him in.
"He'll see it as a challenge," she tells Dom.

"What's in it for him? It'd have to be done above board, or not at all."

"Not everything he does is illegal," argues Mal. "It can't be, or he'd never have acquired the skills he has. It's a challenge, an intellectual puzzle, and I think he won't be able to resist."

"I don't know, Mal. It's risky. How do you know he'll be the one to respond? He can't be the only dream-worker who'd pick up on the news."

"You've profiled him, yes? Then we simply instruct the client — the person who'll be paying him — to reject everyone who doesn't match that profile."

"And who's going to play the client?"

"Nobody. As you said, it has to be legitimate. And who would this matter to most?"

"The subject."

"Apart from her. Who stands to gain or lose from the outcome of this work?"

"Her publishers," says Dom. "They're the ones she's failed."

§

Arthur's grown accustomed to familiar faces. Dream after dream, they show up. His subconscious draws from a vast (though not infinite) catalogue: children's faces from kindergarten, kids and seniors from the town where he grew up, family members from decades of Thanksgivings, weddings, funerals. Faces he knows from movies and TV (and yeah, his subconscious has a weird sense of humour, coming up with Indiana Jones on that archaeology job, or Audrey Hepburn when he was designing a dreamscape of Fifties Rome). He's spotted women from Vogue and men from GQ, rockers and celebrity chefs and Colonel Sanders. (Unlike some, he doesn't blithely deny responsibility for his projections. It's his subconscious, damn it; and yeah, it's embarrassing when it comes up with a face that everyone'll recognise.)

The same faces show up in a hundred different guises. (Obama as a bank clerk. Angelina Jolie as a secretary.) And sure, sometimes he'll dream a face that he'd swear he'd never seen before. A face he'd follow in the street, a face he'd clip from a magazine or right-click on his laptop. A face that feels new: jamais vu. Seems his subconscious has plenty of imagination when it wants.

The guy who's eyeing him, brazen as anything, across the room, isn't someone Arthur's ever seen before. No, that's not quite right. He's familiar: it's just that never before has Arthur met someone new in the real world and recognised them from his dreams.

And this is the real world: he's checked his totem twice, and he remembers everything he's done since waking up this morning: jerking off, newspaper, coffee and croissants, a few hours' research and a long walk in the fall sunshine, out along the waterfront and finally to this Bridge Street bar that looks like something out of an Edward Hopper painting. He's seen this guy in his dreams, with somnacin coursing through his veins. He remembers — and Arthur's good at remembering dreams when he's awake — the face of the man who's watching Arthur now.

Eames.

He's alone in the bar, occupying a booth at the back, reading a book (Arthur can't see the cover) and glancing up from it again and again to meet Arthur's curious (and, frankly, uneasy) gaze.
Arthur's kind of disappointed. He wanted Eames to be a fantasy, something he'd created. Wanted to have that one small proof of his own imagination. Instead — okay, he doesn't get down to Quincy that often, but maybe he saw the guy last time he was in town. Or maybe it was in London, Berlin, Paris: it's not like Arthur's the only person who travels a lot. He can't recall when he first started dreaming about Eames. (Can't remember, either, when he first jerked off to dream-memories of the man.) But he's real, and Arthur can't do anything with that.

He sips his Irish coffee and lets himself stare. Eames — no, fuck it, it's not Eames, it's just a guy with the same face — is wearing a good white linen shirt; his cuffs are rolled up; no tie; there's something dark, a necklace maybe, where his top button's undone. He's drinking beer, dark and foaming: either he's eaten already, or he's waiting to order. Outside it's getting dark, and the man's reflection in the window beside him is clearer by the moment against the night sky.

Arthur wants to go over, introduce himself (though obviously not with his real name), invite himself to join the guy for a drink, see where it goes in the real world. He wants ...

He grabs his overcoat and heads for the door, leaving his half-finished drink on the counter.

§

"I talked to Ms Tegraeus' publisher," reports Dom on Friday evening. "The CEO of Proclus Publishing. His name's Saito, and he is extremely keen that she finishes the final book. Apparently he's already asked her to repay the advance."

"And she paid it," says Mal. It's not a question. She remembers the fear in Vivian Tegraeus's eyes, and her defiance.

"Yes," says Dom, sounding surprised. "Obviously, if she does complete the series, she'll get the money back."

"The money isn't important to her," says Mal. "What's important is that she is ... she is afraid to write."

"Saito suggested that we simply went in and extracted the rest of the plot. He says he's got a team of ghost-writers on call, ready to complete the book in her name."

That idea makes Mal queasy, though she can't pinpoint the reason. "I don't think she'd welcome that," she says. "Can we persuade her that she needs to finish? That whatever she's scared of is not truly a danger?"

Dom's silent for so long that Mal wonders if the call has dropped. At last he says, "Mal, that's ... what you're talking about, that's inception."

"Inception?" echoes Mal. It's a discredited concept: her immediate, unconsidered reaction is to laugh. "They say inception's not possible."

"Then why suggest it?" says Dom curtly. "We need to come up with —"

"We wouldn't be making her believe an idea that isn't her own," says Mal. "We would not be forcing her to anything. We'd enter her mind to discover what it is that prevents her writing: and then ... then ..." She's working it out, step by step, as she speaks. "Then," she says, suddenly sure of herself, suddenly inspired, "we help her defeat it."

"'We'," says Dom. "You do realise that it won't be us doing this? That it'll be Mr X, a wanted criminal, and his hypothetical accomplices?"
Mal had forgotten that, but she's unwilling to admit it. "They will do as this Mr Saito wishes," she says. "If you tell him — he will cooperate, Dominick?"

"I told him it was a matter of national security," says Dom, pleased with himself.

"Not quite the truth," says Mal.

"It could be! We don't know where our Mr X will strike next."

"You make him sound like a murderer."

"That's not impossible. This guy could be anything, anything at all, if he turned his mind to it. What if his next job is ... what if he targets a general? Or a cryptographer? Or, I don't know, a nuclear scientist?"

"These are nothing like the things he has done in the past," says Mal. "Always he chooses someone creative: a designer, an artist, a film producer." It occurs to her that her subconscious has been busy with this problem for a while now. "That's why this is the right way to bring him in, Dom: that's why Vivian Tegraeus is the bait that will lure him."

"Build it, and he will come," says Dom, her own words repeated back to her. "So, Mal: how do we persuade Ms Tegraeus to be the bait for the dragon?"

§

"The mark is a writer," says Yusuf. "Apparently she is quite well-known: Vivian, er, Tegraeus." He stumbles over the surname.

"Never read anything by her," Arthur tells him. "No, wait a minute: I think I maybe flipped through one of her books at some airport."

"I don't think you need to worry about your literary qualifications," says Yusuf dryly. "The job involves persuading her to finish her latest book. Finish writing it, I mean."

"Okay," says Arthur. "So what are we talking here? Set up some subconscious suggestion, strong-arm her into getting it done, what?"

"It's not as simple as that. The client is her publisher, a Mr Saito."

"I've heard of him," allows Arthur. Saito is a legend in the publishing world: ruthless, brilliant, not above using underhand (and borderline illegal) methods to get what he wants. Arthur has done some work for him in the past.

"And the mark is ... familiar with the use of the PASIV device to promote lucid dreaming."

"How the fuck did she get hold of a PASIV? It's not like you can buy them at Wal-Mart. And somnacin — what, she cooks up her own in a backroom still?"

"Er," says Yusuf. "I may or may not have some ... inside information regarding her somnacin supply."

"We better talk about this face to face," says Arthur. He didn't get where he is today (to wit, unjailed and with a rap sheet that consists mostly of traffic offences) without being paranoid, and though he doesn't think this line's tapped, he'd sooner be out in the open air where he can take care of his own and Yusuf's physical, as well as verbal, security. "When can you be in Boston?"
"As a matter of fact," says Yusuf, "the job is in Paris."

"Like fuck. The job's where I say it is."

"Ms Tegraeus is concluding a promotional tour in Paris, and Mr Saito wishes to act while she is still in his sphere of influence."

Arthur sighs. It's not that he doesn't like Paris: even in the fall, it's one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. But it's his mom's birthday in a couple of weeks, and —

"Mr Saito has told me that money is no object," says Yusuf.

Arthur snorts. "Then he's a fool." He brings up the calendar on his laptop, and opens the current Air France schedule in another tab. "Okay. I can be there for noon tomorrow: how's that?"

"I will meet you on the Pont Neuf," says Yusuf. "At the middle of the bridge."

§

Vivian Tegraeus, age 39, born Moira Grey in a small town in Galway, Ireland; raised by her mother, Róisín, who never divulged the father's name. Moira Grey — 'Vivian Tegraeus', legally, since Róisín's death when Moira-Vivian was twenty — has never married; she's had several romantic relationships, but all seem to have ended abruptly within a few months. Her current residence is a house in rural Maine (thirty seconds with Google Maps reveals that it's actually on an island, several miles from the nearest town), and her income — as declared to the IRS — is around $50K per annum. In the last five years she has consulted her doctor on seventeen occasions, for reasons ranging from insomnia to dysmenorrhoea. Her doctor is concerned that she is injecting class A drugs, though his notes show no reason for his suspicion. Vivian Tegraeus is allergic to penicillin, hamsters and latex (which last might explain the failed relationships: Arthur used to know a guy who couldn't use condoms for that same reason). She has two black cats, Havoc and Damage. She pays a maid service to clean the house once a week, on Tuesday afternoons: she avoids the house while the maid is there, but seldom ventures far from her property. Under 'Special Requirements' on the contract, there are some notes about the cats and an explicit instruction not to enter Ms Tegraeus' study, regardless of whether she's working there or not. She claims not to watch television — she doesn't own a TV — and is infamous for having asked, during an interview, "So what manner of books does this Harry Potter write?" Her hair is naturally red, though her hairdresser keeps it artificially bright. She wears contact lenses to correct severe astigmatism in her left eye. She likes to listen to Bach when she writes. She drinks her coffee black. She smokes menthol cigarettes.

Arthur shuffles the jigsaw that is Vivian Tegraeus. He can make a good case for somnacin usage. If she has a friendly chemist — Yusuf, for example — who'll mail supplies to her, she needn't be close to a major town or a university. Needle-marks would be enough to make a doctor suspect drug abuse: if there was no other evidence of it, he might simply make a note. And she keeps cats; they're probably vicious little fuckers who scratch and bite enough to cover up any number of needle marks. (Arthur's not a cat lover.) Insomnia's a common problem for dreamworkers. Vivian Tegraeus lives alone: if she's going under, she's doing so without safeguards. (Probably in her study, where the maid wouldn't interrupt if something had gone wrong; where the maid wouldn't notice a PASIV, a sharps box, a shelf full of bottles.)

She dreams alone, and she comes back with stories.

§
"Okay," says Arthur, pouring himself more coffee. He's rented a one-room office above a patisserie near the Pont Bir-Hakim, and the smell of burnt sugar drifting up from below makes him want to finish up and head out for dinner. "So we get the mark sedated, take her under: design a level that looks like something out of her books, and get one of the characters to deliver a pep-talk about finishing the goddamned story. How's that sound?"

Yusuf shrugs. "I am not the expert here. You're the one who specialises in the subconsciouses of artists."

"Heh," says Arthur. "Let's run with it for now. We'll need an architect." He flips through his Moleskine. "How about Nash?"

"I thought you didn't like Nash," says Yusuf mildly.

"Me? Nah, I don't mind him." He doesn't work with the guy often, because Nash has a bit of a confidence problem. If something he's designed isn't perfect, he winds up thinking the whole thing's a disaster, and Arthur does not have time for that level of hand-holding. Most of the time, though, Nash's architecture is impeccable, and he does have an excellent eye for detail. "Never go drinking with him, though," Arthur adds as an afterthought, opening up his laptop to compose a quick, equivocal email to Nash's last known address. "Guy can drink me under the table."

"I have a pill that will help you with that," says Yusuf, beaming. Arthur squints at him. He's never quite sure if Yusuf is yanking his chain.

"You have a pill for everything," says Arthur. "How come you're not some billionaire on a yacht, watching the patents roll in?"

"The pharma industry is unnecessarily bureaucratic."

"You mean they threw out your studies?"

"Yes," says Yusuf. "And anyway, I prefer to work in a more relaxed, experimental setting." He's still smiling. Arthur sometimes wonders if Yusuf's perennial good cheer is a product of his research.

"How long've you been Ms Tegraeus's supplier?"

"Ten years," says Yusuf. "Since before she was famous. Nowadays they wouldn't let anyone like me near her."

"Saito lets you near her."

"Saito believes I've helped her write her best work," says Yusuf. "And who am I to say otherwise? Now: you will need a forger, too, I think."

Arthur doesn't look up from the screen. "Sure, in an ideal world. But to the best of my knowledge there are only four reliable forgers who'd consider a job of this nature. Of those four, Markus is doing time; Houseina won't take jobs where the mark's a woman; I wasn't impressed with Beukes; and I don't have current contact info for Mr Singh."

"Singh? Oh, he's out of the game," says Yusuf. "Something went very wrong on his last job, and he's..." Yusuf's gesture indicates either mental instability or neurological trauma, and honestly? Arthur doesn't want to work with anyone who's suffering brain damage. In a dream, it might actually be contagious.
"Right," says Arthur. "So getting a forger on board isn't really an option, regardless of how much money Mr Saito's throwing at the project."

"I know a chap," offers Yusuf. "Excellent forger. Met him in ... where was it? Ah yes: London. University College." He smiles nostalgically. "You might say he was a motivating force in my early experiments with psychoactive compounds."

Arthur laughs. "You mean you got stoned together."

"Well, yes," says Yusuf. "But he's bloody good at what he does, and I believe I can get in touch with him: he was in Mombasa, last I heard."

"If he's that good, I should have heard of him. What's his name?"

"Eames," says Yusuf.

Arthur's whole body jolts, and he nearly overbalances. Kicks himself forward so that all four chair legs are touching the floor again. "Eames?" he repeats. It has to be a coincidence. Has to be. Eames — the guy he calls 'Eames' is just a projection, a production of Arthur's imagination, with a liberal dose of sexual frustration.

"I don't think he ever told me his first name," says Yusuf, frowning up at the flickering light-fitting. "Or maybe that is his first name."

"I might have met him," says Arthur. "Once. What does he look like?"


It could be the Eames that Arthur knows. It could, except that his Eames (and that possessive pronoun is wholly accurate, given the encounters they've shared) is merely an aspect of Arthur's own subconscious.

"I'll need to run some checks," says Arthur nonchalantly. "London, you said?"

Slowly, he extracts dates, places, names from Yusuf. (Extraction: now there's an idea. But it's common courtesy not to go into another dreamworker's mind without good cause, and Arthur's convinced that Yusuf is being honest with him. Doesn't necessarily mean that what he says is true: but he believes it, and frankly Arthur'd have a hell of a time disentangling fact and fantasy in Yusuf's drug-infused subconscious. Plus it's an extra layer of hassle that he totally doesn't need right now.)

"Okay," he says at last, when Yusuf's answers have become terse and belligerent, and a headache's starting to affect Arthur himself the same way. "I'll look into it. You reckon you can contact Eames if he checks out?"

"Sure," says Yusuf. "Talked to him ... last week."

He frowns as he says it, like he's not quite sure, but Arthur lets it go. They've been working for five hours straight, the kind of work that's detailed and draining.

"Let's call it a day," says Arthur, and closes his laptop.

He's annoyed to realise that he's excited. Because if Eames is real .. if Eames is real ..
Arthur can't even finish that thought. He says goodnight to Yusuf and heads out into the drizzle, to his hotel. He'll grab takeout and coffee on the way: he can work through the night if need be.

For the first time in weeks, he doesn't take the PASIV with him.

§

"What do you do when I am not here, cherie?" enquires Mal gently, as she brushes Philippa's hair with long regular strokes. There are burrs tangling the fine blonde strands, as though Philippa has been outside. But Philippa would not venture out of the tower, surely?

"Sometimes my other mother comes to visit," says Philippa, giggling at the rhyme. "And sometimes there's a little boy who comes to play."

Mal feels cold.

"Tell me about this little boy, darling. What does he call himself? Have you seen his maman too? Is she your other mother?"

Philippa looks puzzled: too many questions, Mal realises.

"What is his name, sweetheart?"

"He won't say his name," says Philippa. "He says he doesn't have one. Or sometimes, sometimes he says ..." She's frowning now, twisting round to look up at Mal seriously. "Sometimes he says he can't tell me his name because I would have power over him."

The frown's gone: she's smiling again. Mal smoothes out her own grimace. "Maybe he's a fairy," she suggests. "Like Rumpelstiltskin: did I ever tell you about Rumpelstiltskin?"

"He was the one who ..." begins Philippa: then she changes her mind, and shakes her head vigorously.

"Rumpelstiltskin was a naughty imp," begins Mal, and from memory she recounts the story of the lying miller's beautiful daughter, the straw that's spun to gold in the tower-room, the song the imp sings that lets the miller's daughter guess his name and banish him.

"What's 'banish', maman?"

"She made him go away forever," says Mal.

"But I don't want him to go away forever and ever!" cries Philippa. "He's my friend!"

Mal hears a distant, plangent sound. She thinks for a moment that it is her heart breaking again.

"Then you mustn't ever tell him that you know his name," she murmurs against her daughter's half-brushed hair. "It can be your secret, yours and mine."

"Rumpelstiltskin," whispers Philippa sleepily, nestling into Mal's embrace.

§

Yusuf's easy enough to trace, though somebody's hacked his UK criminal record rather ineptly to remove references to an arrest for intent to supply class A drugs. His Master's from Imperial is wholly genuine, which doesn't surprise Arthur in the slightest.
He tracks Yusuf through university, through his employment with a big-name pharmaceutical company, to his departure from that position after senior executives blocked his study concerning the use of psychoactive compounds in, huh, shared dreaming. Subsequently, Yusuf's resume becomes somewhat murkier: he was in Amsterdam for a while, in a relationship with a graduate student. (Or possibly in a relationship with her lab access privileges, notes Arthur cynically). Then Tangiers; Mombasa; Hyderabad, on a year-long program researching the pharmacology of traditional ayurvedic medicines; back to Mombasa, where he operated a quasi-legal dream den ...

By dawn, Arthur's mouth tastes of toxins, and his hands are shaking a little. He has a working timeline of Yusuf's career, criminal and otherwise; he has copies of Yusuf's scientific papers; he has a cross-referenced list of known associates.

None of those associates has ever, as far as Arthur can discover, used the name Eames.

None of the photos that Arthur's been able to find look anything like the man — the projection — that Arthur's been fucking so enthusiastically in his dreams.

Arthur's feeling flat, pessimistic, frustrated: an emotional chord that he associates with disappointment. On reflection, it's most likely fatigue and the inevitable come-down after hours of mental clarity and creative association. Realistically, he should be annoyed at Yusuf for claiming to know Eames, for claiming that Eames is the forger they'll most definitely be needing to convince Vivian Tegraeus that she needs to suck it up and write. He can't muster annoyance.

He falls into bed and sets the alarm to go off in three hours.

He doesn't remember dreaming.

"So, should I give Eames a call?" says Yusuf the next morning. "Or did you have someone else in mind?"

"Bring him in," says Arthur magnanimously. It's mostly because he wants to see if anyone will actually show up. And yeah, a forger would be useful on this job.

Where's the harm?

I have two choices. I can go forward into the unknown, through the mist to the other side of the river where, yesterday, those shining houses stood. Or I can turn around, retrace my steps, go back to the places where I've felt safe and cared for.

I wish I could see more than ten feet in front of me. Or behind me: but I know what's there. I could go back to the wooden house where the Dark Lady sits and broods. I could travel south, further than I've journeyed before, towards the sea I've never seen. (What visions might await me there?)

The bridge is built of iron (I see the rust, redder than my hair, filigreed on the parapet) and the river here is fast-flowing, tidal, bringing the rotting-seaweed rich-mud scent of the distant sea. Iron and running water: charms against witches, faeries, ancient nameless things.

I should be safe from the hunters now. Or is it that they will be safe from me?

I don't feel impeded. I set foot on the span of the bridge: but even as I do, a light flashes and a siren sounds, and from above me a barrier descends.
"What the hell?" I say out loud. "What is this?"

"The bridge is openin', love," says the man beside me. (When I squint left-eyed, he's a shadowy monochrome shape: no magic here, nothing but a mortal.) "Can't cross when the bridge is openin', now can you?"

"Why's it opening?"

The man shrugs. (He's quite monochrome however I look at him. Grey raincoat, grey hair, dull skin, dull eyes. Dull life, that barely glimmers around him.) "Some fancy yacht comin' through," he says, shrugging. "No, hang on —"

I follow his gaze to the open water downstream, and perhaps I gasp. There's a fairytale ship there, three tall masts (too tall to pass beneath the bridge) with snow-white sails furled on their yards. A bright banner snaps and stretches above the crow's nest, with a device I feel I should recognise — a bird with wings spread wide, ablaze with gold and red.

For a long moment I'm distracted by the vision of freedom it affords. Then somebody presses against my back, and I'm abruptly aware again that I don't have the liberty to marvel. I am pursued, and now surely my pursuers will catch me and —

Ahead of me, the road is lifting, improbably angled as though someone's folding reality; it shows me the way upward into empty air.

Forward? Back?

There is always a third choice.

I toss away the bag I'm carrying, imbuing it with a sheen of 'valuable, precious, fragile' as distraction. While the waiting pedestrians converge upon it, I'm over the parapet in a moment.

Nobody notices. Nobody calls out.
Nash shows up on Monday, while Arthur's compiling notes on Vivian Tegraeus's novels and Yusuf is rotating virtual molecules on his laptop. Nash taps on the office door and saunters in. "Arthur," he says.


"Hey," says Nash, pulling up a chair and sitting down beside Arthur. Arthur fights the instinct to turn his laptop so Nash can't see the screen. "What am I building, anyway? Elven palaces, shit like that?"

"I thought you said you knew the books," says Arthur coldly.

"Read a couple of them," Nash says. "Not really my kind of thing. I figured I can get by with generic fantasy: you know, like that job in New Zealand?"

"Better make it your kind of thing," says Arthur. "We need to convince Vivian Tegraeus that this is just another one of her own dreams."

"Hang on, I thought —"

Arthur doesn't register what Nash thought. (Or perhaps he does register it, even begins to react to it, and then that reaction is overlaid by subsequent events.) There's the sound of footsteps on the stairs, quick and assured, and when Arthur looks up there's a man standing in the doorway expectantly.

"Eames!" cries Yusuf, flipping the lid of his laptop closed. His accent's suddenly more British. "Glad you could make it, mate. Come on in."

"Cheers," says Eames.

Eames. It is Eames: it is the guy Arthur's been dreaming of, the projection who seems so warmly real. Even the voice, with that cultured English accent, is the voice that's whispered so many filthy fantasies into Arthur's ear — and realised on all of them. Under the edge of his desk, Arthur's hand slips into his trouser pocket. His die is reassuringly, unevenly heavy. This could still be a dream. Or Eames could've broken into Arthur's dreams somehow — people keep talking about the possibility of remote dreaming, and if something's possible then it's hackable — or —

"Arthur, right?" says Eames, gesturing towards him. Fuck, he's real: he's taking up space in the office, wearing a Dunhill suit, breathing the same air, smiling blandly at Arthur as though he doesn't —

Well, of course he doesn't know Arthur. Of course they've never met. What's happened is, Arthur's subconscious has got hold of this guy from somewhere (from dreaming with Yusuf, most likely, and seeing his projection of Eames) and made him into something he's not. Eames, the real Eames, has never seen Arthur in his life.

"Mr Eames," says Arthur, shoving his die back in his pocket and rising to his feet, hand outstretched. "Congratulations on your excellent retcon. I was starting to think you were a figment of Yusuf's imagination."

"Well, he is very imaginative," says Eames. His hand is warm and strong, and the calluses, the
skew of the pinkie, feel familiar. He smells of Puissance Deux. "And you must be Nash," he goes on, turning to Nash.

Nash is frowning. "Haven't we met?" he says. "Yeah, that's me. Architect, on this job."

Arthur sits back down, closing his laptop. He feels disconnected: the distance between his brain and the real world has stretched, as though he's perceiving it through a telescope or a TV screen. Eames is here, and how the hell has Arthur's subconscious picked up on the broken pinkie and that particular cologne?

"I don't suppose you know anything about remote dreaming, Mr Eames?" he enquires mildly.

If Eames feels surprise at the question — or guilt, or amusement — he hides it well. (Of course he'd hide it, Arthur reproves himself. Whether or not he's guilty, he's a goddamn forger.) "I've skimmed a couple of articles about it," he says. "They seem to think it'll be feasible in the next five years or so. Unless you have more up-to-date information?"

"Just thinking out loud," lies Arthur. "Let's sit down and work this out. Yusuf?"

And then it's work, of the most exhilarating kind: swapping ideas with smart people, shooting them down mercilessly, sharing details from his own research where they're relevant. Eames (and Arthur has to separate him from Arthur's projection, because he finds his gaze lingering on Eames' mouth in a way that's far from professional) makes some interesting, and credible, observations about the mark's work.

"Do you think you can forge this ..." Arthur checks his notes. "This Nyx?"

"Oh yes," says Eames, inexplicably amused. "I'm positive that I can be Nyx for the lovely Vivian."

Arthur can't read his tone at all, which is disconcerting. On the other hand, it helps to remind him that this isn't the Eames he knows. (The Eames he created.) This is just some guy Yusuf went to college with. This is their forger.

"Cool," says Nash. "So, you going with the cover art?" He holds up a glossy paperback: on the cover, beneath spidery silver lettering (The Crossroads), an androgynous red-head peers doubtfully at a blank roadsign in the middle of an Escheresque maze of paths.

Eames snaps his fingers, and Nash slides the book across the desk to him.

"Hmm. Not bad," says Eames, studying the cover. "Though I'm inclined to be somewhat truer to the author's original vision."

"You read this shit?" blurs Arthur, surprised out of his detachment.

The corner of Eames' mouth twists, familiarly. "Would I take the job if I didn't have a handle on the requirements? And really, Arthur, you shouldn't call it 'shit'. Show a little respect."

His smile is mocking. Arthur wants to punch him, which is … heartening. He can deal with this Eames. He just needs to retire a single wayward projection.

Arthur takes the PASIV back to his hotel at the end of the day. Eames and Yusuf have set off to find an Australian bar that Yusuf remembers from his last visit to Paris: they'd invited Arthur to join them, but didn't push it when he demurred. (Nash'd headed out earlier, claiming a prior
engagement.) Nobody's around to question Arthur's desire for somnacin-induced dreams tonight. He doesn't set anything up: his subconscious can take care of that, since it's so keen on second-guessing him. (And hey, Arthur doesn't want to sound bitter, but his own mind is pulling a con on him here.)

The dream starts in the middle of a dark open space. For a moment Arthur thinks that he's screwed up, that he's nowhere, in the chaotic void: his hand drifts towards the Glock at the small of his back, ready to kick himself out and try again. But there are dim blocky shapes rising around him, black against a night sky that's sparsely peppered with faint stars in patterns he doesn't know. He's in a city, and either there's a power-cut or they've never bothered to invent street lighting.

Even as he formulates that thought, there's a glimmer of light, warm and fiery, behind him. "Well, fancy meeting you here."

The voice is familiar, and not only because Arthur's been listening to it all day. "Mr Eames," he says, not turning around.

Eames comes to stand before Arthur. He's dressed all in black, tight jeans and plain t-shirt and boots: and Arthur can see all this because Eames is, incongruously, holding an old-fashioned lantern.

"Arthur," says Eames, rolling the 'r'. "What a delightful location you've picked for our rendezvous."

"I wasn't expecting to see you here," says Arthur. It's not exactly a lie. Up in the waking world, Eames is having dinner with Yusuf. There's no way he could be hacking into Arthur's PASIV session.

"But since I am here," says Eames, "shall we find somewhere more ... congenial?"

He lifts his lantern higher, and the soft yellow light catches on something white and gleaming, a foot or so above eye level. It's an old-fashioned signpost, with black letters (which aren't, quite, the letters of the Latin alphabet) marking each of the five branches.

"Oh, don't pay attention to the signs," says Eames. "We can go wherever we like."

"Wherever I like," snaps Arthur.

"Of course, darling," says Eames. He reaches up — he's a few inches shorter than Arthur — and bats at the nearest pointer. The whole post begins to revolve like a carousel, and Arthur reminds himself that he's dreaming.

"Cheap hotel, 50m'," says Eames, nodding at the indecipherable sign that's pointing the way they're facing. "Let's hope it means metres, eh?" He lifts the lantern high, illuminating a dirty asphalt sidewalk, and hooks his other arm through Arthur's. "Shall we?"

Arthur suspects that his subconscious knows exactly what he wants. Needs. Maybe it's even more reliable than his conscious mind, which is complaining about Eames' cavalier attitude and reminding him that he's down here to rid himself of this projection.

"Sure," he says. "Take me to your cheap hotel, Mr Eames."

They walk in silence. The city around them is apparently, conveniently, deserted. Arthur sees a fleeting shadow that might be a stray cat. Apart from that there's no sign of life: all the shops are
closed and shuttered, there are no cars, there is no sound except their own footsteps. Arthur spots the hotel from a block away, because its flickering red neon VACANCIES sign (or, actually, VACANCES) is the only light he's seen apart from Eames' lantern.

There's no one at the desk. Eames leans over the counter — black denim stretching mouth-wateringly over his ass — and snags the key for room 9. The elevator is decorated with an 'Out of Order' sign: they take the stairs, and Arthur doesn't take his eyes off the muscles in Eames' thighs.

And yeah, apparently this is exactly what he needs: this dingy hotel room, lit only by the lantern that never burns down, the two of them stripping as though it's a race and crashing down together on the bed ... there's no way that the real Eames can taste of autumn nights and beaches at dawn and half a hundred other hackneyed clichés of romance. No way that the real Eames would ever scrape a snaggle-tooth across Arthur's jugular and laugh out loud at his expression. Arthur can't decide whether he's repulsed or turned on. From the neck down it's certainly the latter. Against all gravity the taint is spreading upwards. But then he and Eames are making their own gravity, and they can't really be rolling and bracing against each other in slow-mo, but that's how it feels, deliciously dreamy and ... not real.

And because it's not real and Arthur finally has proof of it (else how would Eames be here with him, when half an hour ago he was heading downtown with Yusuf to some bar in the 14ème arrondissement?) he lets himself go. He lets Eames bear him down on the clammy sheets, into the miasma of someone else's (perhaps two someones') sweat and semen and sighs. He wrestles Eames over onto his back, and Eames laughs up at him silently, like an animal, and does something with his hips that'd have Arthur crashing down to the threadbare carpet, if this were real.

But since it's not, he tumbles slowly enough to catch himself on the corner of the mattress and propel himself back at Eames, whose t-shirt is ripped at the neck (showing an impressive collection of inkwork that Arthur can't quite focus on), whose fly's unbuttoned (he's not wearing underwear), who's stretching out to trap or catch or snag Arthur as he falls, flies, falls.

Arthur can't remember the last time sex made him laugh. (That's a lie. It was with Eames, that time where Eames' face kept changing: Arthur laughed so much he lost his erection, but Eames kept on fucking him anyway until he'd gotten hard again. But that doesn't count. Or shouldn't count.) He's not even sure he can remember the last time he was in bed — awake, up there, in the world that doesn't change — with someone who he actually liked.

They're not exactly fucking, just fooling around, but Arthur's pretty sure he's going to come soon, and he has an uneasy premonition that it's going to kick him out of the dream. Right now he'd rather stay here with Eames. It doesn't matter if Eames isn't real. It doesn't matter that there's a real Eames too. It doesn't —

Distantly, as if from a badly-tuned radio in another room, come the soft arpeggio chords of that familiar song.

He's out of time.

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Eames and Yusuf are, fortunately, professionals. They both look tired on Tuesday morning, and Yusuf's eyes are bloodshot, but they show up before nine o'clock (separately: Arthur firmly suppresses any thoughts about the nature of their reunion) and they don't waste his time telling him what an excellent evening they had. As soon as Nash gets back with the coffee, the four of them
drag their chairs into the middle of the room and get down to business.

"I might be able to interest Ms Tegraeus in a new blend of somnacin," suggests Yusuf. "Lovely to see you, what a coincidence that we're both in Paris, I've been working on an exciting formula that involves, I don't know, a recently-discovered Amazonian herb."

Nash snorts. "If that's the stuff I had in Berlin, it's a rip-off. I was out of—"

"I don't know," says Arthur, determined not to let Nash derail the job. "If she's not interested — or if she's suspicious of you suddenly showing up in a foreign city — she'll just blow you off, and then she'll be on the lookout for trouble."

"Yusuf," says Eames. (Arthur's projection never said anyone's name with such relish, excepting Arthur's.) "D'you think she's liable to leap at the chance of an untested new drug?"

Yusuf shrugs. "It could happen."

"She's not a college kid. She's not a junkie," says Arthur testily. Nash scowls at him. "She's a middle-aged writer who doesn't even want to be in Paris. She —"

"More fool her," says Eames. "How long is she in town for, do you know?"

This isn't his Eames: that casual query, with its implication that he's missed something obvious, isn't meant to rile him. "Until Friday," says Arthur. "Then she's heading for Barcelona."

"Frightful place," says Eames. "Full of fat-fingered pickpockets and hen parties from Newcastle. Let's do it while she's here in the City of Light."

"We need something better than Yusuf trying to sell her a cheap high," says Arthur.

"Saito's paying us. He's gotta be able to sort something," says Nash.

"Proclus' publicity department controls everything she does while she's on tour," says Arthur. "I've gotten hold of a copy of her schedule," he holds up a printout, "and if we want to approach her when she's not surrounded by her fans, the options are limited."

"May I?" says Eames. He's rolled his chair closer to Arthur's, and he reaches for the paper, waiting for Arthur's nod before he grabs it.

"Lunch at the Jules Verne, Eiffel Tower; nah, we'd have to get her down in the lift and then whisk her off. Photo call in the Bois de Boulogne: too many people around, too high a risk of our cover being blown. We do have a cover?" This last to Arthur.

"Yusuf can play himself," says Arthur. "Her pusher."

"I resent that remark!"

"Her supplier, then. Would you be willing to play the seducer, Mr Eames?"

"You're assuming she's heterosexual," says Eames. (It's not, Arthur notes, a refusal.) "That she'd be interested."

Arthur bites back his automatic response to that, and hopes his poker face is intact. "There's nothing to indicate she's gay," he retorts. "And all her relationships have been with men."

"Inconclusive," says Eames. "But yes, Arthur, I am perfectly willing to pretend to seduce Ms
Tegraeus for the purposes of getting inside her ... head." There's a bitter twist to his smile.

"That really shouldn't be necessary," interjects Yusuf. "If I can make contact — bump into her in the street, or telephone her at her hotel — I'm certain she'll agree to see me. She's always interested in my work."

"She only wants you for your formulae," says Eames, with a sly grin. Yusuf smirks back.

"Okay," says Arthur, before this can get too cosy. "Yusuf, you get in touch with her: set up a meeting with her in private. She's staying at La Fenice. Saito can arrange it so you're not disturbed. Give her something that'll knock her out and ease her into the dream. She doesn't need to see the rest of us."

"And what will ... the rest of us ... be doing?" enquires Eames, crumpling his coffee cup and tossing it in the direction of the trash can.

"Nash, I want you to design a level that Ms Tegraeus will find inspirational," says Arthur. "There's no way we can replicate her own dreams, but if we come up with something that's credibly a product of her time here in Paris, and on the road —"

"If I might make a suggestion?" says Eames. Again, he waits for Arthur's grudging nod. "She spent a morning at the Musée de Cluny: the staff were up in arms about having to close off the Lady and the Unicorn so she could have a private viewing without being pestered by legions of adoring —"

"Get to the point, can't you?" snaps Nash.

"The point," says Eames, and Arthur would swear his eyes just changed colour, from warm blue to steely grey, "is that a dream that starts in the Musée de Cluny — which is a bloody maze, half the rooms are dead ends and the stairs never lead where you expect — could lead anywhere."

"Where were you thinking it should lead?" says Arthur.

Eames exchanges a glance with Yusuf, who says, "The bar we went to last night was opposite the entrance to the Catacombs. Catacombs: caves. It all fits."

"Cave rhymes with grave," intones Nash, hand lifted in what he probably thinks is some occult sign. "You're going to bury her alive? Subtle, man: subtle."

Arthur snorts. "Vivian Tegraeus wrote a book called The Cave," he said. "It's the fourth in the —"

"Fifth, actually," says Eames, staring intensely at his shoelaces. "The fourth one is The Crossroads."

"The fifth in the series, thank you, Mr Eames. Okay." Arthur taps his pen on the arm of his chair, thinking aloud. "So, Nash, you design a dream that leads the mark down into the depths of her own subconscious. Yusuf, we'll need a blend that'll give that sense of going underground, descent. Maybe tie it in with crossroads, too: the catacombs are one big maze, right? Eames, any thoughts on whether you'll be able to forge a character from the books?"

"I'll be Nyx," says Eames. His expression is inscrutable.

"Nyx? That's the heroine, right?"

"I don't think we're ever going to find out if Nyx is a girl or a boy," says Yusuf regretfully.

"Then how the hell —"
"I'll be happy to demonstrate, Nash," says Eames, nodding at the silver case under the table.

Arthur is seized by a sudden violent anxiety regarding the somnacin levels. Did he top them up last night, after he'd come out of the dream? Of course he did. He always does.

And why's it so important that the others don't know he went under last night?

§

It's a beautifully sunny morning, and Mal is stranded in the middle of a wide open space.

She's followed the path out of the forest and across the bridge. In the forest, she saw shadows moving between the trees, fairytale figures from the stories she recounts to Philippa. As she crossed the bridge, she heard something huge and stony moving below it, like a big dog turning over and whimpering in its sleep. But the sun is shining, the birds are singing a song she's never heard before ...

... and here she is at the crossroads, not knowing which way to turn.

The path she's been following is only wide enough for a single person to walk. There are footprints in the sandy soil: she is not the first to come this way. Crossing it is a cart-track, the grass between the wheel-ruts vividly green and grown knee-high. Above her — and she can't believe that she did not notice it as she walked towards the crossroads — is a gibbet, swaying gently in the spring breeze: a cage of iron for miscreants and criminals. When she glances at it, it's empty, not even a weathered bone as warning. When she looks away, back at the river and the forest beyond, a man's voice says, "Hullo, Mal."

The gibbet isn't empty any more.

There's a man crouching in the iron cage, hunched from his confinement but otherwise appearing quite at ease. His eyes are a beguiling blue-grey, his lips are kissably full, his hair (and the stubble on his chin) is light brown. He grins at Mal, and winks.

"Who are you?" says Mal politely, while her mind rifles through a veritable encyclopaedia of myth and legend. Who does one meet at the crossroads? The devil; demons; suicides and murderers. And this man, who does not seem malevolent at all.

"I'm a friend of your daughter's — oh, no, not like that, darling! I assure you there's nothing unwholesome about our association. I visit her from time to time, that's all. She gets lonely when you don't come."

"Is this how she sees you?" asks Mal, because demons can look like anyone at all.

"Course not," says the man in the gibbet-cage. His accent, she notes belatedly, is cut-glass English.

"Are you her other mother?"

In the distance, faintly, she hears the slow dark chords of a Piaf song.

"Sometimes," says the man quickly, as though he too can hear the music. (Which, unless he were hooked up to the same PASIV as her — in the same room — he can't.) "Doesn't matter. I need a favour, Mal. I need you to tell your husband about Philippa."

"Dom? But he —"
"He'll ask you about your daughter," says the man. (Mal *hates* English: is that 'your' meant to be singular or plural? Her daughter, or hers and Dom's?) "He'll ask you soon. Please, Mal: please tell him."

"I —" says Mal, and blinks awake.

§

There's something unsettling about this place. Déjà vu, except he *hasn't*, he'd swear he's never been anywhere this tacky in his life. Unless he wiped all memory of it with liberal applications of alcohol? The decor's certainly enough to drive anyone to drink: road signs, a stuffed crocodile or two, some ersatz aboriginal art, a plethora of marsupial-related tat.

"Cafe Oz," says Yusuf, delighted. "It's bigger than I remember."

"Welcome down under, mate," says a husky tenor voice in an appalling Australian accent. "Everything's ... bigger, in dreams."

Arthur doesn't need to turn around to know that, whatever face he's wearing, it's Eames speaking. He doesn't need to turn round anyway, because there's a mirror angled over the dark, deserted length of the bar, showing him the empty dance floor behind him, and Nash peering at the photos pinned to the wall, and ...

Okay, that must be Nyx. Eames' version of Nyx. He — she? — is a couple of inches shorter than Arthur, narrow-hipped but with surprisingly broad shoulders. Nyx has reddish hair, high cheekbones, a nose like a knife blade above a mouth that looks as though it'd be uncomfortable to kiss. Wide-set eyes that are somewhere between blue and green and grey (no, wait, it's not a trick of the light: one eye's green, one's blue). Faded black jeans, black Converse All-Stars with rainbow laces, a baggy white button-down that hides breasts or the lack of them.

"I honestly can't tell," says Yusuf, walking round Eames — Nyx — as though he's admiring a statue. "Unless you want to undress for us?"

Nyx scowls at him. It's nothing like the slight, reproving frown that Arthur's observed several times this morning. It's a child's scowl, every feature twisting and morphing to form a fearsome mask. "Fuck off," says Nyx, and it's the same voice as before (absent the Aussie accent) but it's suddenly nothing at all like Eames.

This isn't Eames, realises Arthur. He's never felt that disconnect, that difference between forger and forge, so strongly around any other forger.

"Get 'em off, darlin'," drawls Nash, with a leer, patting Nyx's ass.

Nyx decks him.

It's fast and flailing and nothing at all like Eames' usual —

Arthur reminds himself that he's never actually seen Eames, this Eames, in a fight. Hell, they only met yesterday. And he's never seen that *other* Eames fight in earnest: just wrestling Arthur down, shadow-boxing, feint and tap and flashing amusement.

"Fuck!" says Nash, sprawled on the beer-stained floorboards, rubbing his cheek.

"Don't touch me," says Nyx tightly, turning away from Nash with theatrical disdain. She, or he — Nyx — steps up to Arthur, head back to meet his gaze, and says coolly, "Will I do?"
"It's not me you need to convince," says Arthur, trying not to sound either freaked out or turned on. "I never read the books."

§

There's a guy Yusuf knows from college, *un cataphile*, who got them into the Catacombs via a maintenance door at the nearest Metro station, neatly bypassing the hours-long queues and the guided tours. Arthur admires the artistry of the carefully-arranged skulls and tibias, but he prefers the passageways through bare rock, the occasional graffito, the signs of long occupation.

The dream that Nash constructs after their research trip is more of a labyrinth than a maze. There's a single path (all turnings lead, eventually, back to the main route) that leads from the Lady and the Unicorn, down through galleries displaying artefacts from the mark's novels (Eames has proved surprisingly opinionated on these) and from her own life. At the end of the museum section there's a door that looks more ancient than anything that came before, banded in black iron and weathered by centuries of Parisian seasons. ("So the door's in a basement," Nash had explained. "Doesn't mean it was *always* a basement.") The door stands open, and beyond is blackness.

"I'll need somewhere well-lit, with mirrors, for the meeting," Eames instructs Nash. "Make it feel like the centre of a maze, even if it's the only place she can access."

Nash snarls — he's always on edge around Eames, and Arthur is still trying to figure that one: is it simply because Eames-as-Nyx punched him? — but by their final walk-through, on Thursday afternoon, he's designed a sprawling tangle of tunnels that bring the four of them, via different routes, to the heart of the dream.

Yusuf will be staying behind — 'trip-sitting', he calls it — and keeping an eye on the dreamers. He's come down this afternoon to see Nash's creation. Now he turns on his heel, full circle, taking everything in.

"And you'll sit here in your revolving chair, petting your white Persian cat?" he says to Eames.

It's true, thinks Arthur: there's an undeniable Seventies supervillain vibe to the room, with its jagged rock walls and its touches of extravagance. Spherical lampshades of frosted glass hang at different levels, casting a warm soft light over the red shag-pile carpet and the moulded white plastic furniture. There are mirror tiles everywhere.

A long-haired white cat wanders out, on cue, from behind an overstuffed couch, and Eames scoops it up and tickles under its chin. The cat begins to purr like an engine revving. Arthur can't blame it.

Okay, so maybe this isn't his Eames, isn't the guy he's been dreaming of for so long. (How long? He can't even remember: *that's* how long.) But he's hot like burning, and he *looks* like Arthur's projection, and he flirts — in an easy, meaningless way — with everyone, but especially with Arthur, and —

Actually that's untrue. Eames flirts with three classes of people. He flirts with waiters, shop assistants, baristas; he flirts with people who might otherwise obstruct his work, such as the officious security guard at the Metro station and the gallery attendants at the Musée de Cluny. And he flirts with Arthur.

(Okay, he occasionally bestows a smouldering look or an innuendo-laden remark upon Nash, but apparently that's just to yank the guy's chain: it's entertaining to watch.)

"Okay, you've got Ernst Blofeld's pussy," says Nash. "You get the mark down here. Then what?"
"Then," says Eames, still petting the cat, "I convince her that if she doesn't finish the story she'll never really leave the cave."

"Is that gonna work?" says Arthur. "I mean, The Cave isn't even the last book — the last published book — in the series. Wouldn't we be better off going with, I don't know, fountains or something?"

"The first rule of dreaming, Arthur," says Eames, tipping the cat onto the nearest chair. "Work with what's already there. Vivian Tegraeus set part of The Cave here in Paris — in the Catacombs — for a reason. I'm sure you've read your Jung. He had plenty to say about caves and their purpose."

"Wombs?" says Yusuf, with faint distaste. "Graves?"

"Hidden treasures," says Eames. "Diamonds in the dark." He gestures at the mirrors that glitter on every surface. "Oracles, too."

"Don't oracles just come out with mystic bullshit that doesn't even relate to what you want to know?" says Nash. He's smoking a cigarette. It smells surprisingly real.

"Oracles always tell the truth," says Eames. "But they might not mean the same thing that the querent thinks they do."

"So you are playing the oracle?" says Yusuf, sitting down beside the cat, which promptly climbs onto his lap and butts its head against his bearded chin. "I thought you would be Nyx."

"Oh, I'll be Nyx," says Eames. He saunters over to Arthur, who's examining the books stacked on a low smoked-glass table. "Nyx, after all, is prone to seeing things that aren't exactly real, and pointing them out to others."

The book on top of the stack is a Harry Potter novel — the last in the series, if Arthur recalls rightly. "Subtle," he says. "Remind her that other writers finish what they started, and make a shitload of money doing it."

Eames snags the thick paperback from him, scanning the blurb with a puzzled expression. "Never heard of 'em," he says lightly. "Ah, that's more like it." He sets The Deathly Hallows aside and reaches for the next book: The Hero's Journey, Joseph Campbell. "This is where it all comes from, Arthur …"

And he's off, talking about fairytales and myths: but Arthur's not taking it in, because he's trying to place the last time he heard someone claim ignorance of the world's most successful kids' books.

"Arthur?"

He's zoned out, and Eames has noticed. "Sorry," he says. "You were saying? About the oracle?"

"I'll tell her what she needs to hear," says Eames. "That until she finishes the final book, she'll always be trapped down here with the ghosts."

"Ghosts?" says Arthur blankly. "There aren't any ghosts."

"That's because we don't have them," says Eames matter-of-factly. "Vivian will be accompanied by her entourage: trust me on that."

§

—Tell me about when I was born, maman.
—It was the first day of spring. I was huge with you, like a whale. I'd barely begun to show. I came into the forest and laid myself down by a sparkling stream so that it could sing to me. There was blossom on the branches, and sometimes a gentle breeze would make the trees tremble, and petals would fall all around me like snow. It had rained in the morning, and the breeze shook loose raindrops from the leaves. They glittered in the sunlight like gold curtains.

—Can I have gold curtains, maman? I'm bored of the pink ones.

—Of course, darling. Next time I come... So there I was, lying on the moss beside the stream, and it was like green velvet cold hard tiles with the pattern laid wrong and I could hear the birds singing in the trees to welcome you into the world.

—What did they sing?

—I'll sing it to you later, darling. So I lay there on the moss like a big beached whale like a fish hooked and convulsing, the pain like sharp iron in my womb, my heart tearing apart to bleed out into the swirling cooling pool of water I cramped and curled in. The shower was on its strongest setting, and I hoped it would drown out the noises that were coming out of me. I sounded like a sick animal. I was all animal.

—I'm sorry, chérie. I was just remembering... And there by the sparkling stream there under the shower, coming down cold on me with the scent of spring flowers of artificial pine and cleaning fluid and the sound of birds singing of a hard rain falling and the brook babbling merrily the blood sticky on my thighs you came out of me a clotted mass came out of me, as though someone had reached up inside me and ripped out my whole heart as though my heart had been born into spring sunlight.

—And what happened after that, maman?

—I fell asleep, Phil, and I dreamt that seven swans came flying down out of the sky that Dom found me lying there in the cold water, crying; that he called an ambulance; that we fought at the hospital, that he said I should have told him and carried you away to a place where you'd be safe, where you could grow up as fast as you wanted, where the sun would shine all day and the stars would dance for you every night, where no one could ever hurt you.

—Am I safe, maman?

—Yes, Philippa darling: you're safe here.

—Are you safe?

—Yes ... yes, darling, I'm safe too.

§

Friday dawns green and red: winter is coming, and Arthur hopes he'll have time to get over to Lanvin for that cashmere overcoat he's been eyeing.

Yusuf's headed out for his tightly-choreographed encounter with the mark. The rest of them have to
sit and wait until he lets them know she's under. Saito's arranged a suite at the Fenice, so at least they're waiting in comfort. Nash is reading *The Crossroads*; Arthur's got a couple of spreadsheets open, but is mostly focussed on some deep-level searches that he's been running in an attempt to uncover Eames' history. Occasionally he glances up to watch Eames, who's standing in front of the ornate dressing-table, making faces at himself. His reflection winks at Arthur, and Arthur ducks his head, annoyed at having been caught looking.

The thing is, Eames is very much his type. Would be even if it weren't for all that dream-history, which Arthur tries to set aside because it's going to trip him into making a mistake — acting too familiarly, smiling too warmly, touching Eames. Maybe he'll let himself touch, once the job's over. Or maybe he'll take his PASIV and go under again — something he hasn't done since the night Eames showed up in Paris. Maybe —

His phone rings: it's Yusuf. "She's asleep," he reports. "We're ready."

They head out separately (better not to be seen arriving together): Arthur, with the PASIV, gets a taxi, leaving Eames and Nash to make their way by other means.

Yusuf opens the door to Vivian Tegraeus' suite before Arthur's even knocked: he's already arranged chairs and cushions for the three dreamers. Vivian Tegraeus lies on the bed, arms stretched above her head. Unlike most people, she doesn't seem younger or more innocent when she sleeps. Her face looks like a mask.

Arthur secures the room and settles himself in an armchair, eyes closed, reviewing the plan. Sooner than he'd expected, someone taps on the door: Arthur opens his eyes, hand on his gun, but it's only Nash and Eames.

"Here we go," says Nash, sliding the needle into his arm. Arthur glances over at Eames. "See you on the other side."

"When you least expect me, darling," says Eames, and his words follow Arthur into the dream, swarming like bees.

Arthur's role in the dream is simple damage limitation. His dark suit helps him blend in with the projections: he stares intently at an old, chipped goblet as Vivian Tegraeus wanders obliviously past him, intent on a slim red-headed figure in the next room. Nash is at the bottom of the staircase, the epitome of a bored security guard. He's reading a newspaper: the headline (in English, goddammit) reads "LONG-AWAITED FINALE TOPS BESTSELLER CHART".

"Subtle," murmurs Arthur as he passes, gesturing at the newspaper. Nash shrugs, and leaves it on his chair as he gets up to follow Arthur and the mark.

The catacombs are dark and full of echoes. Arthur has to admit that Nash has done a good job here: the atmosphere's more menacing than he remembers from the walkthrough, and he's ready to believe that the maze — the labyrinth — is haunted.

All paths lead to the centre of labyrinth: it doesn't matter which way they turn, which way Vivian turns, which way Nyx (Eames, leading them all into the darkness) chooses to go. And perhaps time, in this dream, is contracting and expanding, playing games with them all. Nash is the dreamer, and he's usually got a good handle on temporal flow, but Yusuf's latest mix might be affecting his mind. Anyway, Arthur's at the supervillain lair more quickly than he'd anticipated,
and from the look of it Vivian Tegraeus has been here for a while already. She's sitting in the revolving chair, her legs tucked beneath her, and she has no attention to spare for Arthur and Nash where they stand in the shadows. She's staring at Nyx, who's kneeling at her feet.

"I need you to finish my story," Nyx is saying, husky and fervent. "I need you to set me —"

Somewhere in the dark tunnels behind Arthur something is moving. A bellowing roar echoes against the rocky walls. It's not a human noise. The echoes don't fade, but modulate. Arthur can almost distinguish the words, identify the accent. He tilts his head, listening harder.

Nyx's head snaps round as though recognising the sound. One hand lifts to cover the right eye. Arthur can't remember which eye's which, but one sees stuff the other doesn't, or something. Whatever Nyx sees is, apparently, terrifying.

Arthur takes a moment to remind himself that it's Eames kneeling there. He'd almost forgotten that Nyx isn't real.

"The ghosts! The ghosts are coming!"

"Nonsense," says Vivian Tegraeus briskly. "If there are ghosts here, they're in my power. I know their names. You —"

There's an animal reek in the cavern suddenly. The lights dim. Arthur gets his back against the wall, gun in his hand, ready to defend the mark and the forger against whatever's coming. And where the fuck is Nash? He's the dreamer: he was right behind Arthur: he needs to —

The sound of hooves on stone, rough and arrhythmic: a terrible noise like chalk on a blackboard. And suddenly there's a monster in the room, its horns scraping the low ceiling, its eyes glowing red, panting out stale gusts of breath that smell of blood and decay. It's too real, too present to be any kind of ghost.

Vivian Tegraeus shrieks, and huddles into the chair, shrinking back against the fat white cushions as though she can hide behind them. There's a flicker of movement in the mirror behind her, a glimpse of a face that Arthur doesn't recognise. The monster itself is not reflected. It doesn't seem to move, but it's next to her, reaching out, and even as Arthur pulls the trigger he hears the graunching noise of her neck being snapped.

Arthur's sure his aim was good, but the monster doesn't react at all. Nyx yells something, and produces a long shining knife, of all things: but the air around Nyx is thickening, roiling, like a speeded-up film of stormclouds. Nyx writhes and contorts, trying to escape something invisible: head thrown back, screaming, and it's like there's a wall of glass between them, because Arthur can't hear a thing. Can see though, in flashing instants like lightning-strikes: Nyx fading like over-exposed film, Nyx twisting in ways that'd break anyone's bones, Nyx (Eames, it's Eames, though the face never changes) somehow squashed to two dimensions, an endless silent cry —

"Nash!" yells Arthur, but he's pretty sure that Nash is already dead. The walls are trembling like they're made out of cardboard. There's no sound from outside the cave, not even the distant wailing whispers of Vivian's ghosts. The dream's collapsing.

The Minotaur — of course it's a Minotaur, they're in a labyrinth, Arthur should've known — bounds towards him. (Its knees bend the wrong way; that explains the gait.) Behind it, more monsters crowd into the room. The theme is clearly Classical: Medusa with her snakes, a three-headed canine the size of a large wolf, a one-eyed giant. There's not enough air for all of them.
Arthur empties a clip into it, deafening gunfire drowning out Nyx's sobs. The thing's invulnerable. It's gotten hold of a knife, it's carrying Nyx's knife, the knife goes in at his navel and rips upward to his chin, and Arthur's last thought in the labyrinth is, *it wants me to die slowly.*

§

In the still moment after waking, Arthur stays perfectly still and assesses the situation. His eyes are closed, but he's got ears, and he can more or less sense the topography of the room. There are more people here than there were when he went under. Someone makes an inarticulate, confused noise from the direction of the bed. (The mark.) Someone else, closer to Arthur, groans. (Eames? Nash?) Outside the room he can hear Yusuf arguing, though he can't make out the words.

"You're awake now," somebody says. "And you're under arrest."

Caught. Okay. Arthur opens his eyes slowly, playing possum — or, more accurately, playing dazed and disoriented dreamworker — while his mind works a mile a minute, weighing the situation.

Item: the guy cuffing him is wearing a plain dark suit, of a cut and fabric that suggests uniform.

Item: the blond guy, with his peculiarly intense blue gaze, said 'arrest', like a legal thing.

Item: Vivian Tegraeus is still asleep on the bed, incongruously peaceful,

Item: Yusuf is arguing with someone in the hallway.

Item: Nash is no longer in the room. Nor is Eames. Their PASIV leads have been left loose, trailing over the arms of their chairs. There's no blood on either chair, no signs of struggle.

Arthur's pretty sure he's been betrayed. He just can't figure out who, or why.

Their captors are as unexceptional as clones. As projections, though Arthur's pretty certain this isn't a dream. (He'd check his die, but that would attract attention.) One of the clones hands him a cup of water and watches, silently, as he drinks.

"Let me tell you how this is going to work," says the blond guy, drawing up a stool and sitting down opposite Arthur. "I'm Dominick Cobb: I'm an extractor, and my job is to extract your secrets."

"Who wants 'em?"

"I'm currently under contract to a government agency," says Cobb.

"Yeah, well, that tells me precisely nothing," says Arthur.

"You've been identified as a threat to national security," Cobb tells him. "We've been after you since you sabotaged the development of Ted Smith's LHD."

Sabotage is a bit of an exaggeration, thinks Arthur. Nobody could've predicted that the mark would sink his goddamn ship rather than reveal the plans. "The what?" he says. "Sorry, I'm not familiar with all the acronyms you people like to use."

"You people?" says Cobb. "You sound like you've had previous run-ins with the law."

"Me? Hell, no," says Arthur. "I like to read thrillers. My job means I spend a lot of time on the road: gotta do something to wind down in the evenings."
"Your job," echoes Cobb. "What do you do for a living, Mr Morris?"

'Morris' makes Arthur relax. If they're after him as Morris he's got a ton of documentation — most of it authentic — to back up his cover. "IP auditing," he says, ready to go into a wealth of detail about intellectual property, patent infringement and counterfeiting.

"Great," says Dominick Cobb. "And you'll be willing to testify in court that your audit work is wholly legitimate, Mr Morris?"

"Sure," says Arthur. "I mean, anyone can make mistakes: I know it's not easy for you guys, in the current climate, but —"

"And you were hooked up to a PASIV, along with a best-selling author and a known criminal, for the purposes of auditing?"

The 'known criminal' has to be Nash: if Arthur couldn't dig up anything on Eames, he's willing to bet (he is betting) that the government couldn't either. So they're not mentioning Eames at all. Why? Because he wasn't on their radar till now? Because he's made a getaway? Because he's their inside man?

"Passive?" says Arthur, frowning.

"The dream machine," says Cobb. His gaze is piercingly blue, intense enough to be a weapon in its own right. Arthur obligingly blinks, flinches, looks down at the florid carpet table. "You were sharing a dream with Ms Vivian Tegraeus and Mr Alan Nash. Why was that, Mr Morris?"

No mention of Eames or Yusuf. Arthur fiddles with a hangnail. "They told me it'd be cool," he mutters. "They told me I'd be able to fly, in the dream. I'm a — hey, I told you I read a lot. Those books mean a lot to me."

"How much do you know about shared dreaming?"

Arthur shrugs. "What I read in Time magazine," he says. "It's not like a real dream. It's scripted and designed." Just like this conversation. "You take a sedative or something, and you start dreaming, and someone's controlling what you see down there."

"So you're saying you don't know anything about extraction?"

"That's when you pull someone out of a situation, right? It was in Black Hawk Down," Arthur adds helpfully.

"Extraction is what we call it when someone goes into your dreams and steals information from you," says Cobb.

Arthur produces a frown. "I don't see what — oh!"

Cobb's squint doesn't bode well for the credibility of Arthur's feigned ignorance, but he forges ahead anyway. They've got to be videoing this (whoever 'they' are: Arthur's 99% convinced it's really some government agency, just like Alex hinted back in the bar in New York, but he hasn't yet figured out which one). He's playing to an audience of unknowns.

"Oh?" prompts Cobb.

"You think they were trying to steal something? Out of my mind?"
Cobb huffs a laugh. "You're good, Mr Morris, I'll give you that. No: I think that you were there to steal something from Vivian Tegraeus."

"What would I steal?" says Arthur, honestly baffled. "She's a writer. It's not like she has secrets."

He almost wants to confess: no, we weren't there to steal anything, we were just trying to convince her to finish the stuff she's been paid to write.

"Mr Morris," says Cobb. "I put it to you that you're a thief, and you had an agenda when you drugged an innocent woman and hooked her up to that PASIV, same as you had an agenda when you abducted Professor Kung at Boston University and extracted the theory behind his latest paper; same as you had an agenda when you leaked Tala's new fabric print on the internet a week before the season started; same as you had an agenda when —"

"You've got me mixed up with someone else, Mr Cobb," says Arthur steadily. If those are the worst of the charges, there's a reasonable chance he'll get out of this one.

"I don't think so," says Cobb. "And there are ways I can be sure of it."

§

The signs are wrong. They make no sense. I don't even recognise the letters, though I've been in this rainy grey city for many days. (How many? I can't remember: I can't tally them in my head. The day when I met a vagrant who waxed oracular over a flask of belly-burning spirit, and told me that my journey was not yet at an end. The day when I removed my eyepatch and saw a shining city built on the rubble of the real. The day when I slept the morning through in a wide warm bed, curled up against a broad muscular back.) Everyone around me — a hustling jostling hurrying mill of humanity — seems to know exactly where they're going. It's only me who is stationary, lost.

When I uncover my left eye it's even worse. There are snakes, or things that might be snakes, coiled around the ornate pillars. There's something huge draped over the criss-cross girders high above me, basking in the artificial light, and the sudden weight of its attention makes me look away quickly before the cold stillness can creep over me. And worst of all, in each direction there are demons beckoning me.

I don't believe in demons. I don't believe in this woman who is sidling up to me, promising a good time and trying to pull me away with her. I don't believe in the dark figure — bat-winged, black-cloaked? — who stands there at the top of the escalator, her gaze promising — I don't know what she's promising, but it's not a deal I dare accept. I know what she wants. She wants my heart.

And shan't have it. My heart is not mine to bestow.

I have to make a choice, and whatever I choose will cost me something.

I adjust my sunglasses again so that I can't see the changing world. The fixed world is quite as chaotic, but its dangers are simpler. Someone shoves me: someone else brushes past me and looks back over his shoulder with an apologetic smile.

His cologne — notes of cinnamon, spikenard and bitter myrrh — trails behind him like a silk scarf. Like a baited hook.

I don't know where he's going, but I find that I am following.
The Cave

It's bad.

Arthur didn't expect it to be a walk in the park. He's been taught to resist invasion, trained to fight
back. By any means necessary was the mantra, and he knows his subconscious fights dirty. It's not
exactly militarisation: there's nothing military about the monsters that rise out of his internal
landscapes.

He's pretty sure that tentacled, batwinged horror ripping the FBI agent's body apart — with
horribly precise sound effects: yeah, Arthur knows the popping sound of a limb being pulled
off, and he's going to have nightmares about this afterwards, assuming that there actually is an
afterwards — is Eames. Eames, or the dream version of him, has been with him throughout this
brutal interrogation. Not constantly, and never as his real self. Though who knows what his real
self is? Arthur's getting hazy (he's drugged, for fuck's sake) and he's never been able to figure
Eames: is the guy who strolled into that Parisian patisserie the real Eames? What's real? What's —

"Shit, we're losing him again," he hears vaguely, over the disquietingly wet sounds of the melting
buildings. Okay, he's zoning out. He's getting metaphysical. Who cares? Arthur doesn't care. If it
makes it harder for them to catch him, it's all good.

(Back in the waking world, the changeless world, he's aware that his body is in considerable
distress. Of course the FBI doesn't stoop to actual physical torture, not if the victim's an American
citizen. No waterboarding here, no sirree. No electrodes or thumbscrews or window ledges. But his
body's restrained, and the dream is vivid and painful enough that up there he knows he has to be
contorting, fighting back against the straps and ties. The pain — which is like a cold acid drizzle in
the dream — distracts him, barely. He's trained to endure this. He's trained to survive.)

"Darling," comes a whisper from behind him. Arthur turns quickly, but there's nobody there.
Nothing, except the oozing melt of stone into dreamstuff, the improbable sprawl of wild roses over
the rubble. He knows Eames is close to him. "Darling, you can't last forever. Time to stop fighting.
You can't win like this."

"Fuck you," Arthur snarls. Right, so it's not Eames, because even now, even seeing what the guy
can do, he has difficulty believing that Eames would turn against him. It's got to be that FBI agent
— Cobb — trying to trick him into surrendering.

Arthur doesn't surrender.

"I'm not suggesting you give up," says Eames' voice from nowhere and everywhere. There's that
familiar note of exasperation: Arthur can almost see the slight frown, the twist of that mobile
mouth. Arthur wishes he could see —

"I know you don't fold easily. As a matter of fact, it's part of your charm. And I'm the last person
who wants to see you banged up for years, cut out of the dreaming. Hardly in my best interest, is it
now?"

Arthur says nothing. His elbows ache. He spreads his hands, palm up: go on.

"I'm suggesting that you cut a deal," says Eames. "Give Mr Cobb something he wants, and he'll set
you free."

"Set me free how? A shot to the back of the head? Or is he just gonna scrag me legally? I —"
"Arthur. Will you bloody well listen to me? You give Dominick Cobb something he wants, and I swear he'll drop the charges, fix the paperwork, make it so you're as free — freer — than you were before this kicked off."

"You sound like Eames," muses Arthur, distracted by an unpleasant sensation of floating. Is it a kick? Have they injected him with something else?

"Oh, for — Remember the bridge? I told you I'd see you when you least expected me," snaps Eames, and for a moment it means nothing. Then Arthur remembers *wild bees nesting under the parapet, lorem ipsum scribbled on the stone, crimson velvet curtains in a shack of flotsam, Eames above him, Eames under—*: and there is no way that Cobb could have extracted that from him; that's a dream, a memory from a dream, it's not even stored in the same part of the brain as —

"Okay," he says. His mouth's very dry. "Okay. What do I have that I can sell him?"

"It's not what you have," says Eames, and Arthur imagines he can see him, right there at the edge of his peripheral vision, not tentacled or monstrous or anything but himself. "It's what *I* have."

"What?" says Arthur. He can feel himself fading. Parts of him aren't there any more. Parts of him hurt so much that he wishes they'd go away too.

"Tell him," says Eames, quick and soft and precise. "Tell him you can give him back his daughter."

"Daughter?" Arthur says. Tries to say. No sound comes out. There's no sound anywhere, he realises. No sound, no light. Everything is monochrome, darkening. The dream's collapsed.

"Philippa," comes a faint anonymous voice from somewhere high above and far below. "Her name's Philippa."

§

"I dunno, Mal. I don't think we're going to win this one."

Dom is tired: it shows in every line of his body, in the greyness of his skin and the dullness of his eyes.

"You caught him," says Mal. "Your Mr X. He took the bait: he abducted Vivian Tegraeus, and you arrested him."

"His name's Arthur," says her husband inconsequentially. "Arthur Morris. He's ..." Dom pinches the bridge of his nose. "He's too good," he admits, almost inaudible. "His sub-security is ... awesome. Terrifying." He laughs a little. "He's better than me."

"You cannot break him?"

"Sure, we can break him." He glances askance at Mal. "We can destroy him. We can make it so he'll never work again, never *dream* again."

"Isn't that the point?" says Mal sweetly, goading him.

"No!" Dom begins to pace again. "The point is to get him to tell us about the jobs he's pulled, the people he's worked with. The point — the point is, Mal, that we need someone this good on our side."

"He is a criminal," says Mal. "Why would he want to, to go legit?" At Dom's puzzled look, she
Dom chuckles. "You've been watching too many gangster movies, honey. But to answer your question: he'll go legit if it's that or spending the rest of his natural life in maximum security."

"He wouldn't be able to dream," says Mal softly. For the first time this Mr X, this Arthur, is real to her. The man she's helped to catch. The man whose fate is in the balance. "He would hate that. Not dreaming."

"He's an artist," says Dom. "More than that: he's brilliant, Mal. And if I push too hard, he's going to break, and I'll have destroyed something marvellous."

“That’s what they pay you for, thinks Mal bitterly.

"Is there nothing you can offer him that will make him concede?"

"Honestly? I don't know." The set of Dom's shoulders is stubborn, slumped, bearing the burden of his frustration. "I'm afraid we're going to have to neutralise him, Mal. I can't see a way for him to come out of this."

"Come out sane, you mean?"

"Come out alive," says Dom. He won't meet her eyes.

§

"Mr Cobb," says Arthur.

He's constructed the perfect setting for this discussion. Instead of the windowless basement that he keeps flashing back to, they're in a light bright office: blond wood panelling, floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides of the room, a big plasma screen, big-leaved potted palms that are humming with vegetable life. There's a huge pine desk, empty except for a sleek laptop. At the desk sits Arthur's secretary, a pneumatic blonde with impractically long, red-lacquered fingernails. She wears a neat black suit; her white silk blouse is simple and severe. She winks at Arthur while Cobb's admiring the skyline (the Chrysler Tower, the Gherkin, a spire or two from Sagrada Familia) beyond the glass. The sky above the towers is blue, unmarred by clouds or contrails. Everything is clean and smooth and elegant.

"I'd like to propose a mutually beneficial deal," says Arthur.

"I'm listening," says Cobb.

This is the first time Arthur's had leisure and liberty to really look at the guy. Cobb's solidly built, blond and blue-eyed in an all-American mode: his smile is calculated to win people over, and his eyes have a twinkle that belies the stone-cold ruthlessness that Arthur recalls from his interrogation.

He's good, is Cobb, and it's a shame he's so firmly on the side of law and order. He'd be an asset, in Arthur's line of work. For a moment Arthur contemplates working with Cobb, instead of against him. (It's not like he's been mano-a-mano, or psyche-to-psyche, with Cobb till very recently: but Cobb stands for all the law enforcement and federal agencies that Arthur's spent the last decade eluding.) Together, he and Cobb would be unstoppable.

Never gonna happen, Arthur tells himself firmly.
"Mr Cobb," he says, "you probably know by now that it's going to take a lot to crack me open. Even then, there's no guarantee that what you find will be useful. I'm kind of keen on self-destructs." He offers a deprecating smile. "Why not spare us both the time and effort?"

The secretary's fingernails tap busily on the keyboard, recording their conversation.

"You're saying I should let you go?" Cobb laughs. Shoves his hands in his pockets, leans proprietorially on the corner of the desk (the secretary scowls at him behind his back) and cocks his head. "What could you possibly have that'd make that a viable option?"

"Mr Cobb?" says the secretary. (Her accent is British.) Cobb straightens up, turning to face her. "Would you care to take a look at this?"

She plugs in a cable, taps a button on the laptop, and a Powerpoint presentation begins to play across the far wall. "A Fairytale for Mr Cobb" scrolls across the first slide, in a fussily ornate font. It fades to black, which fades to a photograph of a little blonde girl sitting on the grass, making daisy-chains. She's laughing. Her smile, her eyes, are Cobb's.

"This is Philippa," says Arthur, though he's never seen the picture before. The kid looks happy, wherever she is. "She's your daughter. I can —"

"I don't have a daughter," says Cobb, and his voice is bleak.

"She's your daughter," Arthur goes on, "and I can help you get her back." He wishes Eames'd told him more about the girl: though, hang on, wasn't there —

"I don't know who told you about— Have you gotten to my wife?" Cobb's angry now. "Who the fuck do you think —"

"Your daughter is growing up without you, Mr Cobb," says the secretary. "She lives in dreams right now, but we can help her be born into the waking world."

Cobb shakes his head. His eyes are wide and panicky. "Mal — the baby died. It was too soon. She can't —"

"Ask Mallorie to introduce you," says the secretary sweetly. "You deserve the chance to see your daughter, to interact with her, before you make your decision."

Arthur wants to protest, but Eames knows what he's doing. No way is Cobb going to turn down the opportunity to recover this dead child. And if he wavers, Arthur thinks, his wife will sway the balance.

Okay, it's playing dirty. But it's all they've got.

§

"Mal," says her husband, staring at her as though he's seen a ghost. "Mal, who is Philippa?"

Into Mal's mind comes the image of a wild, fast-flowing river that has been dammed, tamed, controlled. Now the dam has broken and the waters rush through.

She begins to cry.

* *

"Don't you remember, Dominick? Don't you remember when we conceived her?"
"There's no way to tell when conception happened, Mal: you can't —"

"I knew, Dom. I knew that you'd planted a spark in me. Like the idea, the dream, of a baby. Our baby. Don't you remember? That cold grey day in January, where we went down into the dream — two levels down — and made a tropical island for ourselves. We were there for a week, two castaways in paradise. There was a little cottage by the beach, a cottage I remembered from my childhood. We made love every night in the big soft bed, and every day we wandered on the beach and swam in the ocean and let the dreamt sun scorch our nakedness."

"It was paradise," agrees Dom. "The sun didn't burn!"

Mal smiles up at him. "It was the perfect vacation. We were together, and we were in love, and it was as though invisible spirits tended us."


"It was paradise," says Mal. "And then when we woke up —"

"I couldn't keep my hands off you. We did it right there in the lab —"

"We hadn't locked the door, anyone could have walked in —"

"Someone did walk in: my TA came by to check on us, and my pants were round my ankles."

"She could not look me in the eye for weeks. Weeks!"

"Mal," says Dom. "Mal, why — what makes you think that was the time I got you pregnant?"

"I know it," say Mal, suddenly fierce. "I knew it even before we left the room."

"You were on the pill —"

"I'd missed a day," says Mal. "We'd been dreaming so much that I lost my sense of time."

"You never told me," says Dom, and now he's pulling away from her, looking at her with such bitter betrayal —

"I wanted to be sure!" cries Mal. "I knew it would be dangerous to keep dreaming: I invented reasons not to dream for a while. I would tell you that I had a headache, and you know that makes the dream strange. Or I had a fever, and the dream would burn us all."

"I should have noticed. I should have known."

"Dominick," says Mal. "Darling. I would have told you that night, if I hadn't ... if it didn't —"

"If you hadn't miscarried in the bathroom," says Dom. "Mal, you could have died. When I found you — there was so much blood, and you were hardly even breathing, just making those horrible —"

"I could not bear to dream, afterwards," says Mal. "Not for weeks. I was afraid that I would dream of ... of losing her. Of losing our baby."

"You say 'her', but you can't have known — it was too soon to tell —"

Mal sits up, leans in and sets her hands on Dom's shoulders. Now she can feel that he's shaking,
shivering, a fine tremor like a frightened animal. She squeezes, the way she'd reassure Philippa.

"Dom, I know the baby would have been a girl, because when at last I went back into the dreaming, I met her."

"You met her," echoes Dom.

"I was walking in the forest. I hadn't constructed the dream beyond that: I would find myself in a forest, walking, and in the forest I would find what I needed."

"Dangerous, Mal: the unstructured dream —"

"— was structured by my subconscious mind," says Mal. "I walked in the forest — it was an ancient forest, the trees vast and old, the cries of birds like children lost in the wood. And then I saw a glint of gold between the trees, and I came to a tower. A fairytale tower, Dom: a tower where a princess might be imprisoned. I knocked on the door, and the door opened, and there was Philippa looking up at me. There was our daughter."

"You named her?"

"She told me her name," says Mal. "She knew I was her maman: she ran into my arms, weeping because she was so happy, because I had come to see her."

"She ran," repeats Dom. "She spoke. Mal, how old was she? How old was the girl in the tower?"

"Three years old," says Mal. "And yet it had not been a month since ... I was surprised, Dom. I said to her, 'What a big girl you are!', and she said she had been waiting for a long time and it was very dull being a baby." Mal chuckles at the memory. Dom's hand comes up to brush her face, and she realises that she's weeping again.

"Time doesn't flow the same in dreams," murmurs Dom. The bitterness has gone from his eyes. "The girl knew who you were? And you didn't question this?"

"Of course I questioned it! But only afterwards, when I had woken. When I was there in the tower with Philippa, I let the dream carry me where it would." She holds his gaze. "Where I needed to go."

§

"Mr Saito assured me that his request was genuine," says Yusuf. "That all he wanted was for Vivian to complete her work." He sounds sincere, and Arthur trusts him insofar as he trusts anyone: Yusuf's never lied to him before. But Yusuf's the one the FBI left behind, the one who wasn't locked up or charged or ... questioned.

"I don't see Nash calling in the FBI," says Arthur. "Seems to me he's got more to lose than any of us."

"I do not believe that Eames would betray us," says Yusuf. He's frowning.

"Tell me about Eames," says Arthur.

Yusuf smirks at him, and winks.

"Fuck you," says Arthur without rancour. "I want to know how you met him. Where you met him. Whether you're completely certain that you weren't dreaming."
"Eames is not —" begins Yusuf: then doubt sets in, and he lets the sentence die. "You think he is a plant? Government?"

"I think he's good at slipping into people's subconsciouses," says Arthur: qualifies it (before Yusuf can misinterpret him) by adding, "in the dreamscape, not in natural dreams."

"Remote dreaming?" says Yusuf.

"Maybe he's got a backdoor into the PASIV," says Arthur. "Maybe he's just a real persistent projection."

Yusuf's frown deepens. He snags a legal pad from Arthur's desk, uncaps his fountain pen and begins to scribble rapidly.

"You got something?" says Arthur after a while, when it becomes obvious that Yusuf's disengaged from their discussion.

"Something Vivian said," murmurs Yusuf without looking up from the page. "Something about projections that kept turning up."

"It was a joke," says Arthur, and okay, it sounds kind of defensive. Because it's one thing to have a face from a dream show up in real life — and he must have seen Eames somewhere in the waking world before, or even just in someone else's dream — and quite another to accept that a projection's come to life. It's like something out of a fairytale, an idea out of a pastel-covered New Age tract on embracing your inner self. (Yeah: if Eames is Arthur's inner self, he's been doing okay on the embracing.)

"Maybe not," says Yusuf abstractedly. He's drawing a diagram now, a map or a molecule. "Maybe —"

The door opens, and Cobb walks in. Arthur stiffens: that's enough for Yusuf, whose back is to the door, to recognise the potential for complication.

"Agent Cobb," says Arthur. Out of the corner of his eye he watches as Yusuf calmly and quietly separates the top sheet from Arthur's legal pad — he uses his thumbnail to detach the paper — and makes the folded page disappear into his jacket.

"I'm not an agent," says Cobb testily. "I told you, I'm just a contractor."

Yusuf slides Arthur's legal pad back over the desk to him. "But you have the authority," he says over his shoulder to Cobb. "We are simply reminding ourselves of your loyalties."

"About that," says Cobb, rubbing the back of his neck. "The Bureau has elected not to press charges, in the absence of any evidence to suggest either physical damage or financial remuneration."

"How is Miss Tegraeus?" asks Yusuf, turning his chair so he's facing Cobb. "I trust she has not suffered any ... adverse effects."

"What makes you think that's a possibility?" retorts Cobb. "And why do you care?"

Yusuf inclines his head. "Miss Tegraeus is an acquaintance of long standing," he says. "And I understand the session did not go as planned."

Arthur keeps his expression carefully blank. That's an understatement if ever he heard one.
"Miss Tegraeus is resting," says Cobb. "Your colleague will be rejoining you shortly, Mr Morris." Yusuf blinks at the mention of Arthur's (current) surname. "After that, there'll be a quick debriefing session." He fixes Arthur with a meaningful stare. "We'd welcome your input on a separate matter."

The daughter, thinks Arthur. The daughter who —

The door opens again, and in comes Eames.

Eames is obnoxiously relaxed and cheerful, no worse the wear for the hours (days?) he's spent locked up. From the sound of it, neither he nor Yusuf suffered anything worse than boredom and bad coffee during their detention. Arthur doesn't say much about his own interrogation — it's over and done with — but the lenient treatment of his teammates is further evidence that it was him, all along, whom Cobb was targeting.

"Tell me something, Mr Cobb," he says, while Eames is getting coffee and Yusuf has excused himself for a comfort break. "Was the Tegraeus job just an excuse to get in touch with me?"

"Mr Saito is keen for her to finish that damn book," says Cobb mendaciously. "And we heard you were the best."

"Thanks," says Arthur. "But that doesn't actually answer my question."

"Yes," says Cobb, turning abruptly from the coffee machine. For a moment Arthur thinks — hopes? — Cobb's going to take a swing at him, get physical. But though Cobb's fists are clenched, he doesn't raise them. "Yes," he says again, less fiercely. "It was a trap: I've been after you for a long while, Mr Morris — or maybe I'll just call you 'Arthur', since Morris isn't your real name — and I knew this was the kind of job you wouldn't be able to refuse."

"So Vivian Tegraeus was just bait?"

"Yeah," says Cobb. "Yes, she was. Though I have to tell you, Mr Saito insists that you complete the job. He's gone to a lot of trouble to arrange matters." He squints at Arthur with what looks like genuine curiosity. "Think you can pull it off?"

"Yeah," says Arthur, though honestly, he's not at all sure. "What about Nash?" he goes on, before Cobb can start fishing for details. "What's gonna happen to him?"

"There's only so much I can do," says Cobb defensively. "The other guy — Mr Eames — he's clean. We've no reason to detain him. And Mr Saito stipulated that Yusuf, here, should not be the subject of any legal action. But Mr Nash — well, I'm afraid we've been looking for Mr. Nash for some time."

It's not like Nash has ever been hard to find, thinks Arthur. A lingering sense of team spirit, rather than actually giving a shit what happens to the guy, makes him ask, "Anything I can say that'll let him walk out of here?"

Cobb shrugs. "I need something to show for all the work I've put into catching you, Mr Morris."

Me? gestures Arthur.

"You," says Cobb, and he's suddenly in Arthur's space. "Tala. Tadashi. Smith. You might've impressed Mr Saito with —"
"Saito? I don't even know who that is!"

"— with your untraceable extractions and your trick of being in the right place in the right time, but if I wanna take you in, Mr Morris, not even Saito is gonna be able to get you out again."

Arthur meets Cobb's piercing blue gaze steadily. The guy has charisma in trumps; Arthur simply acknowledges it and doesn't let it get in his way. Eames, now: Eames' brand of persuasion is much more effective when it comes to Arthur. Eames said —


"You fight dirty, Mr Morris."

"Thanks," says Arthur. "Any chance I can get out of here?"

"Why? You got a hot date?"

Arthur really hopes there's no visible sign of the heat that rushes through him. "Just a business meeting," he says smoothly. "Set me up in a decent room at a good hotel and I promise I'll stay put, but I need to consult with my associate, Mr Eames."

§

"Why didn't you tell me, Mal? About ... about our daughter?"

They're in the forest, on the broad sun-dappled path that leads to the tower. Birds sing in the trees. (Mal knows music better than she knows ornithology, and the birdsong is scored by Rossini.) Dom is walking beside her, his hand in hers, but she feels as though he's very far away. His hand in hers, though: they're reaching out to one another across the void.

"I thought you would not believe me," she says. "I thought you would say that I was mad, or sick, or foolish."

"No!" says Dom. Then, more quietly, "No. I wouldn't say that. I know what the mind —"

For a moment he's even further away. Perhaps he's returned to that dungeon (which Mal knows, objectively, is just another bland grey room), tormenting that dreamthief, that Arthur, who knows too much. Who knows about Phil. How does Arthur know? How was he so sure that knowledge would save him? She squeezes Dom's hand, feeling the tendons and the bones grind, to bring him back to her.

"I don't think you're mad or stupid, Mal," he says. "I think you've created something very special here. Someone very special, from what you've told me. I — does your father know?"

Mal shakes her head furiously. "He would not understand. And it was too soon to tell him, before I —"

"You're right," says Dom. "Is that the ... the tower?"

Of course it's the tower. There's nothing else here except trees. "It is," says Mal.

"I like the curtains," says Dom, and there's laughter bubbling up beneath his studied meekness.

"Philippa wanted them," says Mal. "I — I don't want to spoil her, to give her whatever she wants, but sometimes ..."
She's weeping again, and angry at her tears, because she can't, she can't, let Philippa see her so distraught. "Why are you crying, maman?" Mal imagines her daughter asking. Imagines herself replying, "Because you're dead. Because —"

"Hey, hey, Mal. C'mon. Don't cry, darling." Dom's enfolding her in his arms, and she has missed this. She has missed the sheer animal comfort of it. Bravery is not always enough, especially when you're carrying the weight of loss all alone. "Mal, honey ... I'm with you, and we're going to see our daughter."

Dom pats her shoulder, rubs her back, holds her close. It's enough for now. Mal calms herself enough to draw back, brushing the tears from her cheeks. They've reached the edge of the forest, the end of the path. The sunlight, no longer softened by leaves and branches, slants into her eyes like a migraine.

"I'm fine," she says. "Let's hurry. We don't want Philippa to think we're not coming."

Dom is staring at her. "Mal —"

"She's waiting for us, Dom," says Mal, striding off across the green, flower-speckled meadow towards the door of the tower.

The pawprints are not on the door any more. Mal wonders who cleaned them away. Phil's not tall enough, and —

She opens the door and they stand for a moment on the threshold. Dom is staring at the stained-glass window, the lilies that smell of violets, the tapestry.

"It's pretty," he says huskily.

"It's a fairytale," murmurs Mal, hearing a patter of slippered feet on the stairs. "Oh, Dom…"

Philippa stops short when she sees Dom: for a moment Mal thinks she'll fall over her own feet and tumble downstairs. But she keeps her balance and simply gazes, a single frown line between her eyebrows.

"Philippa," says Mal gently, "this is your papa."

"Papa?" echoes Philippa blankly. Then, sudden as a summer storm, it's tears and laughter. Phil rushing downstairs and leaping at Dom. Dom's face: his face. The light in his eyes, that blurs with Mal's tears.

§

Arthur closes the door of his hotel room, locks it and leans back on it, hands loose, deceptively casual.

"Arthur?" Eames is clearly not deceived. He halts just beyond Arthur, propping himself against the wall opposite the full-length mirror.

"I think it's time you came clean," says Arthur. "You need to tell me who you really are." He makes himself meet Eames' languid gaze. "What you are."

"You told me that yourself. I'm a projection, remember?" Eames says with relish. "I'm a figment of your extraordinarily vivid and flexible imagination."
"The hell you are," says Arthur. "Projections don't emerge from dreams and turn up unannounced as old college pals of experimental chemists. Projections don't sit in meetings arguing with the guy whose subconscious they crawled out of. Projections don't —"

"Projections don't fuck you till you scream?" says Eames, sliding along the wall towards him.

Arthur laughs. "Actually, yeah: yeah, they do." If you let them. If you invite them. "But you do a lot more than that."

He lets Eames box him against the door, fit his broad warm bulk against Arthur's body, lean in until his breath's hot on Arthur's face.

"Tell me," murmurs Arthur. "Tell me where you came from, if it wasn't my subconscious."

"I don't actually know," says Eames. "And before you break out the sarcasm, Arthur, tell me where you came from, right from the beginning, and —"

"I was born in —"

"— and if you'd let me finish," says Eames sweetly, "I was going to stipulate that it all had to be from memory. So, unless you can actually remember the moment you slithered out from your mamma's womb, it doesn't count."

"Okay," says Arthur eventually. "Right. What's the first thing you remember?"

Eames shrugs: Arthur finds himself fascinated by the smooth flex of muscle under his hands. "I'm not sure. A house with a library, but half the books were blank inside. Or maybe it was the city where the roads were jammed with horse-drawn carriages. Or the palace where there was always a great deal of music, and a distinct lack of clothing." He leers at Arthur, but it's more reflex than anything. "Or —"

"What about your childhood, Mr Eames?" says Arthur. "You were a child?"

"Now and again," says Eames, drawing back from Arthur as if caught out in some small misdemeanour. "It's a part of myself I'd be loath to lose touch with." He steps back, holding onto Arthur's hands to draw him towards the picture window. "And if I hadn't been willing to play games with a lost little girl, Arthur, you and I wouldn't be here now."

"Cobb's — Philippa? You made friends with Philippa?" Arthur's brain is suddenly in overdrive, presenting him with suppositions and notions and a hundred questions that he hopes he'll have time to ask.

Eames settles himself on the couch, patting the cushion beside him invitingly. "I made friends with Philippa. She was very lonely, when her mother wasn't there."

"I don't get how she was there at all," says Arthur.

Eames shrugged. "Her parents are both dreamworkers. They had to've spent a lot of time in the dreamscape. And maybe, if her mother blamed the miscarriage on dreaming ... There would be a place for her in dreams. Philippa, I mean: not Mallorie. All Mal could do was visit her daughter."

"I wonder why she didn't tell Cobb," muses Arthur.

"Cobb?" Eames laughs, without warmth. "Cobb lacks a certain something when it comes to dreams. He doesn't have the imagination. He doesn't realise that the dreaming can't be quantified,
measured, controlled."

"He doesn't realise there are people like you — Eames?"

"Mmm?"

"Are there people like you? Other projections who —"

"For the last time, darling, I'm not a bloody projection. Not your projection, at any rate. If —"

"Are you Vivian Tegraeus' projection?"

Eames pauses, his gaze suddenly keener. "No," he says, drawing out the vowel. "Not — no."

Arthur wants to explore that hesitation, too: wants to know if Eames knew Viv Tegraeus before he knew Arthur. Wants to know whether Vivian's ever asked Eames to be somebody. Wants to know if Eames has ever put on a new persona just to inspire ...

But he has other priorities right now. "You came out of the dreamscape, yeah?"

Eames blinks. "I suppose so."

"And the little girl — Philippa — she came out of the dreamscape?"

"No," says Eames, "because she's still trapped inside the dream. But I think I know how to bring her into the fixed world."

"The what?" says Arthur, diverted. (He hasn't forgotten, though, that Eames never actually answered his question. Are there more ... more entities like Eames, lurking in the shadows of the dream?)

"The world that doesn't change with each new dreamer," says Eames. "The world we're in right now. The world you brought me into, Arthur, by making a place for me."

"I didn't bring you," says Arthur, brutally tactless. "You brought yourself."

Eames leans in, close enough that Arthur can see the greenish streaks in his irises. "You invited me," he murmurs. "By word and deed."

"You didn't seem to need much of an invitation," says Arthur.

"Never have, darling," says Eames, and kisses him.

§

Mal is on a train, and she doesn't know where the train is going but the landscape that rushes past the windows is strangely familiar. That's the Eiffel Tower, of course; but that is surely the New York skyline. The train makes a lazy turn, curving round the base of a mountain, and Mal sees towering trees, forming a tunnel of green like the woodland trails of her childhood but much, much larger. To Scale, she thinks, and bites back a laugh that could too easily become hysterical.

"Maman?"

Philippa is sitting in the seat opposite her, holding onto the armrest with both hands to steady herself, legs stretched straight against the chequered fabric. She's wearing a pink dress that Mal remembers looking at while she was still — while she was pregnant with Philippa.
This Philippa doesn't have her father's blond hair or her mother's eyes. Her hair is a blaze of copper, and her wide-set eyes are greenish-blue. No, that's not quite right, Mal sees. How peculiar! One of the child's eyes is green, the other is blue. But, in the way of dreams, Mal knows that this is Philippa.

"Maman," says the child again, more confidently. Though she can't be more than four years old, her voice is surprisingly mature. "You need to be the Oracle, maman. You need to tell them how everything is going to be."

"I don't understand, cherie," says Mal. She leans forward, crossing her arms over her chest, so that her face is much closer to the girl's. "What do I need to tell them?"

"Just that the story ends in fire," says the little girl. "But fire is not the end."

"Who should I tell?" says Mal.

"Look! Oh, look!" cries the child, pointing out of the window at something beyond the train. Mal turns, without thinking, to see what she's pointing at. The train is crossing a causeway across a vast, calm sea of an improbably blue. Off to their right, an island rises from the waves like a child's drawing: a single perfect peak, snow-topped and cloaked in verdant green. There's a glimmer of gold where the white surf roils: beaches, thinks Mal. A tropical paradise.

She turns back to the little girl, but the seat opposite her is empty.

§

Arthur's problem (though he doesn't permit it to be a problem) is that, underneath all the efficiency and hard work and lateral thinking, he's actually kind of lazy. He's the kid who made it through school doing the bare minimum that'd get him decent grades. He worked harder to graduate college because his degree offered him something he wanted — the opportunity to fund a comfortable life without working ridiculous hours. The criminal underworld gave him more, and better, opportunities for that. And when he discovered dream-sharing, with its lucrative payouts and artificial hours ... well. Arthur finally understood the word 'vocation'.

He's always been pretty lazy in bed, too. When he picks up a guy in a bar, he's inclined to bottom unless the other party's especially determined on the subject. Arthur would generally rather lie back and get fucked than do all the hard work.

Problem is, there are times when the only way to get a job done properly is to do it yourself.

Arthur cannot believe the, the gap between dream and reality. Eames had to have gotten his considerable sexual repertoire from somewhere, right?

(Arthur doesn't want to think about Vivian Tegraeus in a sexual context, especially when that context involves dicks in asses and messy blowjobs. But Eames got it from somewhere. Maybe Ms Tegraeus isn't as much of a prude as she looks. Maybe she's nursing a well-hidden love of bad gay porn.)

Apparently sex is another skill, like folding landscapes or flying above them, that doesn't transfer from dream to reality.

Arthur grunts as Eames' elbow catches him under the ribs. They're both sweating like wrestlers, sliding against each other's skin in a way that's decidedly sub-optimal. Eames' dick, nudging somewhere in the vicinity of Arthur's perineum, is maybe not as, not as solid, as it was when Arthur got tired of watching Eames trying to put on a condom, and helped him with it.
"Sorry," gasps Eames wetly above him. "I just ... I just need a moment, okay?"

He reaches down between them to jack himself, and snags Arthur's dick (which is also losing enthusiasm) with the edge of a fingernail.

Arthur hisses, and shoves at Eames. "Fuck this!"

"What? I said —"

Arthur shoves again, and rolls them so he's on top. (Eames, thrashing, knocks over the bottle, and lube spills over the sheets; but that's probably safer than letting Eames and his ragged fingernails anywhere near Arthur's ass.)

"Arthur, I —"

Now he's in control, Arthur can see the humour in it. "Allow me," he says.

There's enough lube in the bottle that Arthur can slick up his own fingers and work Eames open. Eames's breath is light and quick, almost panicky, and —

"Hey," says Arthur, scissoring his fingers. "I might be mistaken, but it seems to me this is the first time we've done this awake."

"I —" objects Eames. He squeaks (there's no other word for it) when Arthur's fingers curl.

"Every time we've fucked, it's been in dreams," says Arthur. "And yeah, it was awesome, but …"

Eames' gaze unfocusses for a moment, though that has to be at least partly because Arthur's fingertip has found his prostate. He has to swallow twice — Arthur wants to bite at his Adam's apple — before he says, "You may have a point."

Arthur sets aside the problem of why, exactly, Eames is so good at dream-sex and so abysmally bad at the real-world version. He grabs a new condom (the floor beside the bed is littered with discards, torn and limp) and puts it on himself, batting away Eames' hesitant hand and apologising with a kiss. (Eames' mouth still tastes, a bit, of the way it did in dreams. Arthur wonders irrelevantly how Eames found out about toothpaste. He's pretty sure projections never need to brush their teeth.)

Then he's pressing in, pushing in, against considerable resistance, and Eames is shaking —

"Relax," soothes Arthur, one hand under Eames' knee (he can feel sweat springing against the backs of his fingers), one hand brushing Eames' hair away from his face. "Just relax, let me —"

"This was easier when we were dreaming," grumbles Eames. Arthur can feel him slacken his muscles, his whole body going limp and malleable under Arthur's weight.

Fuck, if being on top had always felt this good, he'd've done it a lot more.

But it's not worth even thinking about whether he's sufficiently practiced at fucking a man. He's gonna give Eames the first real-world fuck of his ... of his existence. He's gonna make Eames come hard, with Arthur's name on his lips and his skin flushed red from throat to navel. (Yeah, Eames has a navel. Arthur had his tongue in it half an hour ago.) He's gonna —

"Yeah," says Eames, and his ass tightens around Arthur's dick. "Do it, Arthur. Please do it."

Arthur does it.
It's over — he's shoving even deeper into Eames, jerking with his climax, Eames shaking to pieces around him — rather more quickly than Arthur intended. What the hell. There'll be plenty of opportunities to practice, and if Eames' blissed-out expression is any indication, he's only too happy to help with Arthur's repertoire.

Arthur pulls out, discards the condom, grabs a handful of tissues and swipes half-heartedly at Eames' come-smeared abs. "Tomorrow," he promises, sliding his fingers through Eames' and squeezing, "I'm taking you for a manicure."

§

Mal watches as the three dream-criminals come in. "We don't need the architect," Dom had told her. "You and Ariadne can come up with a far better environment."

She's seen pictures of each of them in Dom's files. Arthur Morris, Dom's Mr X, is even younger than he looks in photographs. There are dark shadows beneath his eyes (he probably hasn't had a decent night's sleep since he was arrested) but he's aware, alert, checking the room as a matter of course. He's a beautiful young man, which Mal had already known. She hadn't expected the tangible aura of danger that surrounds him.

Next comes the chemist, Nithin Yusuf. There are laughter lines creasing his face and he seems amiable, relieved, eager to please. Mal isn't fooled. There's a fiendishly intelligent and creative mind beneath this jovial exterior. She's read some of his papers; she's heard Dom speak of the exceptional sharpness of the dream in which he finally caught up with Arthur. Yusuf is extremely good at what he does. All three of them are.

The third man — Thomas Eames — is more of a mystery. Dom wasn't able to determine his role in the dream, and he'd maintained, calmly, that he was only present as an interested observer. "I'm a great fan of Ms Tegraeus' work," he'd told Maria, his interrogator. ("Flirts constantly," Maria had noted.) He'd quoted passages from the books. Try as they might, they couldn't find anything to charge him with.

Eames saunters in after Yusuf. Like Arthur, he's dressed smartly for business: a good suit, a shirt that brings out the blue in his eyes, a plain silk tie. He looks as though he's suppressing the memory of a very good joke. When he catches Mal's eye, he winks.

"Thanks for joining us, gentlemen," says Dom. He's at the head of the table, of course. Mal is at his left, Ariadne across from her. Arthur takes the chair at the other end of the table, and Eames comes to sit beside Mal. She smiles at him in greeting. There's something —

"I've got a proposition for the three of you," says Dom, once the formal introductions are over. (He's introduced Mal as Doctor Mallorie Miles, which shouldn't concern her since it's the name under which she publishes: and yet, and yet …)

Arthur glances at Eames, and at Yusuf. "We're listening," he says.

"I've been talking to my ... associates, here," Dom tells them. "Full disclosure: Dr Miles is my wife. We have some theories about the nature of Vivian Tegraeus's writer's block," he sketches the air quotes, "and we'd like to work with you on a second iteration of the project."

"Excellent," says Eames, and his mouth is smiling but his eyes are cold. "So you arrest us, lock us up, threaten us with the full weight of the law, and by the way could we lend a hand?"

Dom has the grace to look bashful. (Mal knows him well enough to recognise when he's being
"I'll say you did," remarks Yusuf. "You set us up, and you used an innocent woman as bait. Tell me, Mr Cobb: how is Miss Tegraeus? Has she fully recovered from your invasion of her dream?"

"It was necessary," snaps Dom. "We —"

"Viv Tegraeus' well-being is totally on our agenda," interrupts Ariadne. She leans forward, frowning slightly, holding Yusuf's gaze. "It's important to me — to all of us — that any damage is undone. We want to finish what you started. Don't you see? We're on the same side!"

"What my colleague is saying," says Mal, "is that the question of Miss Tegraeus' creative block remains unresolved. Your ideas were good ones, but perhaps they did not go far enough. Surely you'd like to see the project through to a successful conclusion? Don't you wonder about what lies undiscovered in her dreams?"

"Well, of course," begins Arthur testily. "But —"

"As far as I'm concerned, we're starting with a clean slate," says Dom. "All charges have been dropped: your employer is cooperation fully."

Mal stares down at the grain of the polished wooden table, in case something in her expression gives away her husband's duplicity. Of course Mr Saito is cooperating, as he has done from the beginning. None of this would have happened without him.

"He hopes that the original job be completed," Dom goes on. "He wants us all to work together to resolve Ms Tegraeus's creative block, and maybe learn a bit more about the nature of an artist's projections while we do so."

Arthur is hiding something: Mal sees it in his expression. She cannot imagine what it might be. Something about projections? Something that he saw when he invaded Vivian Tegraeus' dreams?

"What are you proposing, Mr Cobb?" enquires Eames, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands in front of him. His fingernails, Mal notes, are freshly manicured.

"We want to team up with you," says Dom. "With our combined skillsets, I truly believe we can convince Ms Tegraeus to complete her novel."

"You're pretty convincing without any help," says Arthur blandly, and Dom winces.

"I don't have the experience that you do, Mr Morris," he says, with a note of humility that's almost credible even to Mal.

"What if we say no?" says Arthur.

Mal has not spoken Philippa's name. She has not begged, or wept, or raged. She will do whatever is necessary. She holds her breath, waiting for the moment.

"Mr Saito —"

"Never mind Saito, Mr Cobb," says Arthur. "What are you going to threaten us with?"

"I —"

"We'll do it," says Eames, apparently immune to the fearsome scowl that Arthur's turning on him. "What? I want to know what happens at the end." And he smiles, broad and cheerful, as though this
is the best joke ever.

§

I slip through the barred steel gate and close it behind me as silently as I can. Here, away from the well-lit tourist trail, the bones are jumbled, piled together anyhow. Half a skull stares up at me. Someone lived inside that cage of bone, once.

One day perhaps my bones will rest here amidst the anonymous dead. Not yet, though. The Oracle, from her cloud of clove-scented smoke, told me that I still had miles to go. Those miles will be underground, I think.

I am no longer pursued: I have a quest of my own, and now I am the hunter. Down here, underground, I have the advantage. I have — I am — the map, and I do not fear the ghosts.

I turn away, into the dark. My right eye is blind, but the memory of life that clings, still, to the age-browned bones shines bright enough (to my left eye) to light my way as I venture deeper into the maze beneath the glorious city.

I wonder how far I have to go.
Mal nurses deep, bracing herself. It isn't that she fears confrontation. She knows that Vivian Tegraeus, in a forty-minute meeting with her publisher Mr Saito, has been informed that dream-therapy, as recently practiced upon her without her explicit consent, will facilitate the completion of that final book. (Mal, who was not permitted to attend the meeting, suspects that Ms Tegraeus's feelings on the subject were deemed irrelevant. She'd feel angry on the woman's behalf, if her own happiness was not inextricably tangled up in the matter.) Ms Tegraeus has, furthermore, been persuaded — despite the dismal failure of that first, criminal attempt — to permit a second subconscious invasion, of which Mal is the vanguard.

Dom attended a different meeting with Mr Saito, accompanied by a politely indignant Yusuf and Arthur Morris — who is apparently as fearsomely competent in a business setting as he is in dreamspace — and came away with Saito's agreement to sign over to the consortium a portion of the royalties from *The Island*. (Assuming, of course, that it ever sees print.) The money is nothing. What matters is that Saito gets what he wants, so that he gives Arthur what *he* wants: his freedom.

And when Arthur's free, then Philippa —

"Dr Miles?"

They're in her father's house: it takes Mal a heartbeat to realise that the man's speaking to her, rather than to her father (who is, after all, a professor these days). Miles is keen to keep his distance from this project, though it was he who put Dom in touch with a legal team well-versed in the legalities of dreamwork. Mal hasn't had the opportunity to tell him about … about the deal that Dom's made. She tells herself it's from lack of opportunity, and not of courage.

"Dr Miles?" The voice again, closer. "Ms Tegraeus is ready to see you now. Mr Cobb and his assistant have already gone in."

"Thank you," says Mal. She rises slowly, on a long inhalation. What's the worst that can happen in the waking world?

*"

"If I finish *The Island*, I'll die," says Vivian Tegraeus defiantly. "It'll be the end of me. It's a Grail story, you know," she adds, with the air of someone bestowing a confidence. "And people who write about the Holy Grail tend to die as soon as they finish the tale. Sometimes before they're done."

Mellow autumn light slants in from the window of Miles' study, making Ms Tegraeus' hennaed hair glow like a coppery halo. Her eyes are clear: her hand, holding one of Mal's mother's best porcelain cups, is quite steady. She looks right at Mal. "You can't, under the circumstances, expect me to greet the prospect with joy."

"I … see," says Mal, sipping her coffee and wishing there was a shot of brandy in it.

"You don't believe me." It's a statement, not an accusation. It's perfectly true.

"Miss Tegraeus," says Dominick, leaning forward and clasping his hands together. Every line of his posture says 'trust me' and 'informal' and 'I want to help'. "Maybe this idea that you'll die — this parasitic idea that's hooked itself into your mind, that's stopping you completing the work you've put so much into — can be … cured."
"I'm not mad," snaps Tegraeus.

"When did you first begin to think this way?" says Ariadne. Vivian Tegraeus might be her favourite writer, but Ariadne's maintaining a professional attitude which Mal has to admire.

"I don't know," says Ms Tegraeus. "For a long time now."

"But, see, it might only seem like a long time," says Dom. "Perhaps the idea ... came to you — was given to you — more recently."

"You're trying to convince me that it's all because of those thieves," says Vivian Tegraeus contemptuously. "Ha! Mr Cobb, I know my own mind better than that. And besides, what they were trying, down in the dungeon, to convince me of — no more successfully than you're convincing me of anything here and now, in this room — was that I'd be trapped, haunted, buried until I finished the book. They weren't the ones who told me that I'd die."

"Then who did?" says Ariadne.

It's an honest question, and a reasonable one. Mal sips her coffee and watches the other three.

"I ... don't remember," says Vivian Tegraeus at last.

§

"So, we'll build her a dream where she can follow Nyx's journey: tower to forest to crossroads —"


"Fine," says Arthur, grabbing the whiteboard eraser and scrubbing out 'crossroads'. He carries on writing. "Tower to forest to bridge to crossroads to cave to fountain to ... the island. Any idea what she had in mind for that?"

"Islands are places of isolation, of renewal," says Eames, leaning back in his chair, as casually as though he's discussing where to have dinner. "In myth, they're where you go to learn something — to acquire magic, to be taught some occult skill."


"The Isle of Glass," he says. "The Isle of Avalon, where King ... Arthur," he winks at Arthur, "was taken after suffering his death-wound. Yeats and his Lake Isle of Innisfree."

"What about Atlantis?" says Yusuf, grinning.

"Never mind ancient legends," says Arthur, forestalling another interjection from Eames. "We're not running a New Age retreat here. We're going into the mind — going back into the mind — of a clever, successful author who thinks she'll die if she finishes the final book."

"Sounds pretty mythic to me," says Cobb.

"And where do you suppose she finds her ideas?" says Eames, head tilted in a way that he possibly thinks makes him look guileless. It doesn't work on Arthur, not any more. "Vivian Tegraeus spent her childhood reading every book of myth and legend and fairytale she could lay hands on. Then she squashed it all up and rolled it out again to make Nyx's story."

"You were the one trying to convince me it was real-world, contemporary," argues Arthur, trying
not to stare at Eames' expressive hands. Or at least not to be caught staring.

"A thing can be magical and realistic at once," says Eames. Is his raised eyebrow inviting Arthur to consider Eames' own nature? Or is it simply his familiar mockery? "The books are about someone who sees the magic in the mundane. Someone who believes that magic is forcing its way back into the quotidian realm, who thinks that they're a conduit for it. And who knows?" He winks. "Maybe by finishing The Island, Vivian Tegraeus will be bringing a little more magic into the world."

"So, what? It's all going to be sparkles and unicorns?"

Eames winces: opens his mouth to argue, but Yusuf's there first.

"As you say, the books are drawn from myth and legend," he says. "And my work with Miss Tegraeus has been an exploration of how best to, to connect to the mythic space that lives within us all."

"You had a point?" says Arthur.

But Yusuf won't be rushed. "It's all in the blend," he says, leaning back and lacing his fingers together over his stomach. "For tens of thousands of years, humans have been using psychotropic compounds to enhance their spiritual and religious rituals. The ancient shamans knew a thing or two. They mixed up blends that brought the whole tribe together on the same mythic journey."

"You're saying we should get her high?" exclaims Ariadne.

"Are you sure you're a college student?" says Arthur.

Yusuf beams at them all. "What I am saying is that, with judicious use of naturally-occuring substances, we can heighten certain aspects of the dream."

"We can make her live the myth," says Cobb. "We can send her on a journey of her own —"

"Isn't this where we came in?" says Arthur. "Like Ariadne said, we take her on a journey through her own books, and by the time she gets to the last one, the island, she's ready to wake up and finish the story."

"Or keep dreaming," says Eames thoughtfully, "and live the story for herself."

§

"So," Arthur's saying to Ariadne, "I guess you like those Peter Jackson movies, huh?"

Mal frowns: but she has to concede that Arthur has a point. This particular corner of Ariadne's architecture would remind anyone of Rivendell, as seen in The Fellowship of the Ring: white marble everywhere, pillars fine as filigree, terraces open to the air, a frozen waterfall tumbling endlessly down a distant cliff. The fountains, of course, are borrowed from the Chateau de Versailles. (Mal should know: it was she who suggested to Ariadne that they might visit the Palace.)

Ariadne flushes. Is she flirting with Arthur? Perhaps. She's saying something about Eames — "he said I should make it magical, so she'd be more amenable to suggestion" — and Mal chuckles to herself when Arthur ducks his head and scratches the back of his neck. Can Ariadne truly be blind to the frisson between the two men?
It's not Mal's business. She wanders across the terrace, pausing to admire the tall, slender trees. They're more than a little like fountains themselves. Ariadne has captured the jubilant burst of water and mirrored it in the height of the cypresses, the arc of their branches.

There's somebody seated upon a marble bench, reading: Mal knows at once that it's no projection, for the book in the figure's hand is a shabby paperback. As if aware of her gaze, he — she? — tilts the cover so that Mal can see the title. *When Real Things happen to Imaginary People*. His hair — she'll go with the male pronoun for now, because she's sure that beneath the mask there's a man — is red, and his skin's paler and more translucent than usual. His features are unsettlingly androgynous, caught somewhere between handsomeness and beauty without committing to either. He's as slender as a schoolgirl. He winks at Mal, and Mal notices that his eyes are odd-coloured: the left is much greener than the right.

"Oh my god," says Ariadne joyfully, coming up behind Mal. "You're Nyx."

"Lady, I am," says Eames, and even his voice is different. There's a trace of his usual accent, but it's overlaid with a lilting inflection, a note of suppressed laughter.

"Will she recognise you?" says Arthur brusquely.

Eames — Nyx, Mal must learn to think of him when he's like this — frowns a little, as though he's disappointed by Arthur's reaction. But he answers readily enough. "Vivian Tegraeus will know me as she knows herself: I can assure you of that."

Arthur nods, and turns to Ariadne. "Tone down the Tolkien stuff a bit," he says. "It's great, but it's a bit too derivative, and from what you told me no fantasy author wants to be reminded of Tolkien."

"Sure, okay," says Ariadne. She spins on her heel, gazing up at the fountains and the trees. "I've dreamt of this," she murmurs. "I grew up on those films, you know? And I've always thought Vivian Tegraeus' books have … okay, maybe an echo of *The Lord of the Rings*. I dreamed of Nyx lost in Fangorn, finding a way to Rivendell. But if I dream of it again, I won't know if it's here or … there."

Mal knows what she means. It's another hazard of dreamwork: build from memory, and everything becomes muddled.

"You won't dream," she tells Ariadne. "If you work with the PASIV, you'll lose your true dreams."

Ariadne looks as though Mal's ripped out her heart.

"I won't dream?"

"Not naturally," says Arthur gently. "Somnacin suppresses your ability to dream."

"Or maybe just to remember your dreams," says Eames. "But so many people would rather forget."

He's not looking at Ariadne at all. He's looking at Arthur.

§

Arthur, crouching in the shadows beneath a dainty lacework balcony, takes a moment to consider apologising to Mallorie Cobb. Only a moment, because he's kind of busy here. But he has to admit that she was right when she'd warned them that it was too soon to take Vivian Tegraeus down into the dreamscape again.
"She is not ready," Mal had said. "She is still angry. And you," she'd gestured at Ariadne, Arthur, Eames, "you are not ready either."

"What's wrong with the level?" Ariadne had asked before Arthur could start arguing.

"I don't know," Mal had confessed. "But there is something … unfinished. I can feel it."

"And I suppose you think that Nyx is unfinished, too?" Eames had folded his arms across his chest, smiling toothily at Mal.

"Your Nyx is very lovely, Mr Eames," said Mal. "But … she will know, yes? She will recognise you from that other dream."

"You mean the one where you and your husband set a trap for us?" Arthur'd bitten out. "Just because we fucked up and got ourselves caught, doesn't mean that Eames' forgery is flawed."

"I can fine-tune it," Eames'd assured them all. "I can be truer to the essence of Nyx."

Which, Arthur guesses, is what Eames is doing now, wherever he is: being true to Vivian Tegraeus' fantasy, while the writer herself roams the ravaged landscape like some demonic huntress.

She's terrifying. She's gigantic, twenty feet tall or more, and she stalks through Ariadne's pretty landscape like a tornado, smashing and splashing, slaughtering projections as though they're cardboard cutouts. Arthur watched as she ground her heel down on a screaming elf until the screaming stopped; saw her bite the head off a tiny, shrill-voiced humanoid; saw her stoop down and scoop up Cobb like a woman capturing a stray puppy. She stared off into the distance as she snapped Cobb's neck, her expression changeless, as though this small violence was of no more moment than swatting a fly.

Cobb's out of the dream. Arthur firmly squashes down the little voice in his head that's hoping he himself will be her next victim. He's the dreamer, because his dreams are always stable; because he can keep the dream from collapsing even when he's dying slowly, in agony; because he doesn't trust any of the rest of them to get it right.

"Arthur?"

It's Ariadne, hoarse and gasping. There are tears on her face. She drops down from the balcony, grimacing as she lands awkwardly, and crawls in beside him.

"Where's she got to?"

"She's looking for Nyx," says Ariadne. "Eames. She's looking —"

"What about Mal? She trusted Mal."

"Mal kicked herself out of the dream as soon as Cobb —" Ariadne gulps. "She had, Mal, she had a gun, I never knew —"

"Hey," says Arthur gently. "Sometimes it's better to get while the getting's good." In his right hand, where Ariadne can't see, there's a Glock. He weighs the pros and cons of shooting Ariadne out of the dream. She's distraught; the job's a disaster; the sound of her voice, or the flavour of her tears on the air — hey, Arthur has plenty of imagination, and something Eames said —

There's a crashing noise behind them, and the ground shakes.
"She's kind of like that tyrannosaurus in *Jurassic Park,*" whispers Arthur to Ariadne, and while she's trying not to giggle he brings up his right hand and nails her right between the eyes.

"You," breathes Vivian Tegraeus.

She's looming over him, blocking out the light, huge and predatory despite the fact — the not-at-all-apparent fact — that she's a dumpy middle-aged fantasy writer with some serious hangups.

"Me," agrees Arthur. "Look, it doesn't have to be this way. We —"

He's plucked out of his hidey-hole by a massive hand, Glock falling somewhere out of sight as she brings him up to the level of her face. He lets himself go limp, doesn't fight. For one thing, it's less undignified than squirming and kicking. For another, she might drop —

*Oh fuck is she going to eat me?*

"I'm saving you for last," breathes Vivian Tegraeus. Her breath smells of coffee, tobacco and cinnamon pastries. "I've an imposter to deal with, first."

Arthur barely has time to feel relief at being set down, with care, on the cracked flagstones before Vivian Tegraeus gestures and mutters and conjures a cage of thin black rods.

"Stay there," she says, grinning. (Oh fuck, her *eyes.*) "I'll be back."

Arthur has no intention of remaining imprisoned for a second longer than he needs to. Not while Eames is out there — and he's the only one of them left, apart from Arthur — and Vivian Tegraeus is on the warpath.

The black rods feel like hot iron, just about to glow red, when he touches them. He whips back his burnt hand, cursing. Hmmm. If he squints through the tears of pain, the rods blur until they're more like the thin charcoal blinds at the penthouse bar in La Fenice. Arthur concentrates until they *are* those blinds, rough-textured but easily swept aside.

He has a forger to find.

*#

He finds Eames — Nyx — by tailing Vivian Tegraeus, who leaves a trail of destruction worthy of a vengeful goddess. It's not, thinks Arthur, an inaccurate metaphor. This is her world: they're the invaders, he and Eames. (And Dom, Mal, Ariadne: the defeated.)

Vivian turns like a tiger, liquid muscle and sharp-taloned strength; looms like a fairytale giant, peering down at where Nyx stands like a defiant child, arms folded and knuckles visibly white. The goddess sighs, her breath a gale that sends dust and dead leaves swirling like dervishes.

"Have you not had enough pretending?" she says, almost tenderly. "Little liar."

Nyx (Eames, Arthur has to remind himself: it's a fucking brilliant forge, nothing of the man he knows visible in this scrawny youth of indeterminate gender) scowls. "I assure you, madam, I'm —"

"You're not Nyx." Vivian crouches, leaning towards ... No, she's shrinking, deliberately matching her height to that of her quarry. Arthur breathes out long and slow. If she's back to her normal size, he's got a fair chance of fighting her.
"Lady, I've been Nyx for a long time. And you need to finish my story. You need to let me go."

"You're an imposter!" cries Vivian. Her accent is stronger now. "You're only pretending!"

"It wasn't always a pretence. I remember you, Moira." Nyx's voice darkens: abruptly, without moving or morphing, the slight youth has become a menacing figure. Vivian sits with her fists balled tight at her sides, staring. "I remember when you were fifteen and your mamma burnt your notebooks in the back garden because they were full of filth. I remember when you started to wonder if Nyx was a girl or a boy. I remember when you read about people who were both, and you were suddenly so sure that that's what you'd meant all along. I remember when you drew Nyx in your art class and Miss Griffin said you had to make up your mind whether —"

"Stop it!" shrieks Vivian. "Stop!"

She's crying — 'weeping' would be the wrong word, thinks Arthur, for it implies something feminine and gentle and this is neither. The sobs are wrenched out of her. Eames has hit a nerve, or worse: he's struck a blow straight to the heart.

"I remember it all," says Nyx, stepping away like someone who's just defused an IED and is hoping they've cut the right wires.

"Then you know," says Vivian harshly through her tears, "that I can destroy you."

Arthur decides that's his cue. He's been standing off to one side, half-hidden behind a standing stone: there didn't seem much point in interrupting the two of them, and he has a lot of faith in Eames' powers of persuasion.

Though maybe the person standing there isn't Eames. Not entirely Eames, anyway.

Now Arthur steps out from behind the stone, the familiar weight of a Glock suddenly dragging at his hand. Is a Glock any good against a goddess?

"Time to go," he says. "Ms Tegraeus, we —"

Nyx screams.

The light is suddenly red, and it takes Arthur a moment to realise that the ground beneath them — beneath Nyx — is burning, flames leaping up to caress and redden Nyx's fine fair skin, to catch at pants and shirt and hair. Nyx is a column of fire, veiled in flame, head back in a soundless scream of sheer agony.

Arthur shoots, and is sickly relieved that his imagination has provided him with a gun that never misses, and never needs reloading. Three shots for Eames or Nyx or whatever it is that's burning there; three shots for Vivian Tegraeus, the bitch, and he makes sure the first two are going to hurt like fuck. And, once the flames have flickered out and there's nothing left behind, he puts the barrel in his mouth and fires the seventh shot.

§

"This is our last chance," says Mal, hoping that her own desperation is well-hidden.

The men won't notice, anyway: they have their own concerns. She isn't clear on how the dream ended, but Eames woke white and shaking, and Arthur, quietly furious, had actually growled at Mal when she offered to help him get Eames to bed.
A night's sleep (or perhaps a night of shared wakefulness, thinks Mal with wistful fondness) and they're more composed. But Arthur sits closer to Eames than is usual for him, and Eames is considerably less vocal than Mal has come to expect.

"I don't know if I can get her to agree to a third dream," says Dominick. "Not after the last two."

"We could wait a while?" suggests Ariadne.

"She's only in Paris for a few more days," says Yusuf. "And Mr Saito will not indulge us again. We must act now, or not at all."

"Act how?" says Arthur. "That last dream was a fuck-up, and I'm not going in again without a complete assessment of what we're up against."

"Why go in at all?" enquires Eames. He sounds bitter.

Arthur turns to him. "You know why," he says softly, as if they're alone. "To finish it."

Mal swallows.

"Assuming we can get her to go under," says Dom, apparently oblivious to the tension between Arthur and Eames.

"It's easier to get forgiveness than permission," says Arthur, after a moment of sheer blank distraction. He raises his eyebrows at Dom's incredulous look. "What? You got some moral boundaries from somewhere since we had our conversation?"

Dom flinches.

"It's not the same situation," says Mal fiercely. "Vivian Tegraeus is not a criminal."

Arthur, curse him, simply shrugs. "Whatever," he says. "And here I was thinking that you'd be right behind us getting the job done. By any means necessary."

"We shouldn't need to coerce her," says Dominick stubbornly.

"What? The only reason she hasn't cut and run is Yusuf's sedatives," snaps Arthur.

"Gentlemen," says Mal, voice raised. "This argument achieves nothing. Ariadne and I, we have discussed this." She gestures between Ariadne and herself. "We need a way to show her that Nyx's end is a new beginning."

"Okay," says Arthur, and she can't read his expression at all. "Talk us through it."

"It has to be the Spring," says Ariadne. "But not the way I designed it before. The Spring's the last book she finished. We lead her to the Spring, but we let her reveal it."

"Lead her how?" says Eames. It's the first thing he's said since they gathered in Miles' sitting room.

"She's following Nyx. You can forge Nyx again, right?"

Eames pales. "About that," he says, swallowing. "No."

"But you're our trump card! You're —"

"I'm the bloody joker, Ariadne! And I shan't forge Nyx again. You weren't there: you don't know
…" He breaks off, lifts his glass to his mouth, sips water. Mal can see his hand trembling.

"She destroyed him," says Arthur flatly.

"But she created — created Nyx, I mean. Why would she —"

"Destruction is the flip side of creation," says Arthur. He cracks a smile, though it's half-hearted. "You wouldn't believe how many people would sooner destroy their work than have someone see how far short it falls of what they meant."

Mal remembers Ted Smith, the marine engineer, and the way he'd forgotten everything about the warship he'd spent years designing. The way that Arthur, trying to steal those plans, had left an empty space behind him. Later, she must remember to talk to Dom about that.

"She'd destroy me completely," says Eames as though Arthur hasn't spoken, staring down at the blank legal pad in front of him.

"Nyx," says Arthur, nudging Eames' arm with his elbow. "She'd destroy Nyx."

Eames looks up at him, blinking. "Yes," he says irritably. "That's — yes."

"How do we take her on her journey without Nyx?" says Ariadne. Mal can tell she's trying to sound objective: still, it comes out like an accusation. "Or — wait. If the dream needs Nyx, and Nyx is an archetype ... will a new Nyx be born?"

Arthur opens his mouth to speak: frowns, and glances at Eames, who's staring at Ariadne.

"That ..." he says slowly. "Ariadne. That's bloody brilliant."

"Wait, what?" says Dom.

"It's like buses," says Eames, inexplicably amused. "There'll be another one along in a moment. Nyx is a ... a character, an archetype. Just because I'm not forging him — her — it, that doesn't mean there won't be a Nyx in the dreamscape if that's what the dream requires."

"You mean one of us will project her?"

"Maybe," says Eames. "Or maybe Vivian Tegraeus will find another Nyx inside her mind."

"So what we need to create," says Mal slowly, "is a place where Nyx can be reborn. Death isn't enough: but rebirth, gentlemen, rebirth will mean that Nyx was never just a lie."

"The spring," says Ariadne with sudden certainty. "The spring is where it has to happen."

§

The three of them are drinking coffee in Miles' lounge: Arthur, Eames and the woman whose dreams have brought them here.

Eames, for some reason, imagines that he can persuade Vivian Tegraeus to enter into yet another dream with Arthur and himself. Arthur's not inclined to argue with him: Eames has been strangely quiet, almost melancholy, since this woman set him on fire in yesterday's nightmare. If talking to her in the real world is any kind of help, Arthur's perfectly willing to sit back, sipping his coffee, and listen to Eames' particular brand of persuasion.

"Vivian," Eames is saying gently, "you need to finish Nyx's story."
"Ah, so you're not pretending to be Nyx any more," says Vivian Tegraeus archly.

"Pretending?" says Eames, politely amused. "It wasn't always a pretence. I told you, Moira: I remember everything."

"You might have started off as Nyx," snaps Vivian, "but you're forging someone else now. A man." Her gaze slides to Arthur, amused. "A lover. Nyx never knew what it was to be a lover, to be half of —"

"I know," says Eames, setting down his cup hard enough that the porcelain chimes. "I told you, I remember it all: but Nyx is more than me, and I am more than Nyx."

"Nyx isn't real," whispers Vivian Tegraeus. "You can't be Nyx. I can feel —"

"Nyx is as real as you or I," says Eames. "More real, perhaps. And you must finish the story. Let us go. Let Nyx go."

"And if I don't?"

Vivian Tegraeus's defiance is raddled and wrecked and beautiful. Arthur has to admire her now.

"If you don't, Nyx will haunt you. And I will haunt you. Do you dream, lady? When you do, I shall be there."

"I don't dream naturally any more," says Vivian. "Your man here will tell you that. Arthur, isn't it? Tell him. Tell him how the somnacin keeps real dreams at bay."

"Yet here we all are," says Eames, gently reproving.

"I'm not dreaming!"

"You sound very sure of that," says Eames.

Arthur wants to speak. He wants — why? — to defend the woman. But Eames has to know what he's doing.

"I know when I'm awake," says Vivian.

"And yet you know that Nyx is near," says Eames, with a rueful twist of his mouth at the alliteration. "And Nyx comes from dreams. I come from dreams."

"I brought you out into the real world," says Vivian.

"Actually," Arthur feels compelled to point out, "that was me."

Vivian looks at him as though she'd forgotten that he could speak. "You and Nyx? I —"

"You're both wrong," says Eames, staring down at the intricate geometries of the carpet. "I'm not wholly in the world. Not yet. He looks up and meets Vivian's gaze.

"Because I made you!" spits Vivian, narrow-eyed. She picks up her coffee cup, takes a sip: her hand is shaking enough to spill coffee over her skirt.

"He's not Nyx, Ms Tegraeus," says Arthur, deliberately calm. "I don't know who — what — Nyx is. But I'm certain that you don't want to cross either of them."
"You can't make me write," says Vivian to Eames.

"No," says Eames amiably. "But I can haunt you till the day you die."

"In dreams? I've already told you, I don't dream naturally any more. And you can't come into an artificial dream unless I invite —"

"Really?" says Eames. The amusement in his voice makes Arthur feel slightly sick. "Would you care to wager your sanity on that supposition?"

§

Mal doesn't know what Arthur and Eames said to Vivian Tegraeus, but she's huddled in the big armchair — Mal's mother's favourite chair — and holding onto Anna Freud as though the cat's her only comfort. (Mal remembers how Anna tolerated her own miseries as a teenager, purring and kneading and happy to be held.)

"I'm sorry if they were harsh with you," she says, settling herself on the sofa. "But I need you to go into the dream once more."

"Why?" demands Vivian. She's been crying. "Why does it matter to you?"

"They have something that I need," says Mal carefully. "And they won't give it to me until the job's complete."

For a moment Vivian's face softens, and Mal thinks: I have her. But all she says is, "I'm sorry, my dear, but that's your problem, not mine."

"It's yours too," says Mal, implacability a mask over the sudden mindless rage she feels at this woman's disinterest. "Remember that you're afraid you'll die."

"Or I'll live," says Vivian, almost whispering. "Live and be mad."

Mal bites her lip. If that is what Arthur and Eames have been telling her, they've sunk in her estimation.

But she can't let that show, because of Philippa.

Philippa, she thinks helplessly. Remembering that last dream, before Arthur and Eames annexed the PASIV. Philippa on the train. Philippa saying "You need to be the Oracle, maman. You need to tell them how everything is going to be." Eames saying that another projection, another Nyx, would appear in Vivian's dreams. Ariadne saying that it had to happen at the spring.

Arthur speaking of fire.

"What if you could rework that idea?" Mal says. "What if you could rewrite the scene so the emphasis is different?"

"Rework it into what?" says Vivian.

"It's not death," says Mal slowly. "It's rebirth. Sometimes you have to go through the fire first."

And for a moment she thinks she's dreaming, because it's almost as though she can see the spark of that idea flare between the two of them. And there's something — the fragment, the flavour, of a half-forgotten dream. For a moment she feels as if she is the Oracle, as though something old and clever is speaking through her. (As though the words don't mean what she thinks they mean.)
"The story ends in fire," she says, suddenly certain. "But fire is not the end."

§

They're not in Rivendell any more.

Since Arthur came to consciousness in the reception area of the old hotel, he hasn't seen another person — projection or otherwise — and he's got to admit he doesn't remember any of this from Ariadne's layouts.

The hotel feels European, faded grandeur and rococo detail. The deserted bar is full of mirrors (which, reassuringly, reflect only Arthur himself, sharp in a tuxedo and bow tie, and the deep blue carpet). The sun-terrace is light and airy, dotted with cane chairs and huge potted palms. There's one of those old-fashioned signposts, a pointing hand, indicating a door that leads to "The Health-Giving & Regenerative Spa Baths".

Arthur figures that's where he's supposed to be heading.

The spa's down a flight of stairs — two flights, actually, the second staircase of undressed stone — and it has a subterranean feel to it: windowless, its rough walls verdigris-coloured and gleaming with abstract patches of gilt, its floor of dark stone. There's a big mahogany desk with an old-fashioned cash register, and a turnstile. Since nobody's around to take the money that he hasn't bothered to dream up, Arthur pushes through the turnstile without taking a ticket.

There are two doors ahead of him. The sign over the right-hand door reads 'Storm Room', which isn't right, though he can't quite work out why not. The room on the left is labelled 'Spring', which is irritating for no readily apparent reason.

He opens the door on the right, and immediately he's caught up, drawn in, pelted with cold stinging water and deafened by a roaring turbulence of air. (If he were outdoors, he'd call it a gale.) Violet light crackles through the air, and there's a strong smell of ozone.

"Arthur," says Eames' voice, right behind him. The doorway, yeah. Arthur turns round (getting a faceful of what feels very much like hailstones), but instead of the warm light of the hallway he sees hammering water, crackling lightning, Eames naked with his tattoos — Arthur blinks the hail out of his eyes, because for a moment it looked as though Eames' ink was moving, forming and reforming as though lashed by the weather (it's weather, okay, because he honestly doesn't think he's indoors any more) that's beating down on the two of them.

"Eames," says Arthur helplessly. "I guess I picked the wrong door, hey?"

Eames rolls his eyes. Arthur feels warmer than he did a moment before. "This way," he says, a firm hand on Arthur's shoulder to guide him.

Arthur's bare shoulder. "What the fuck?"

"Oh," says Eames, opening a door that wasn't there a moment ago, "don't get dressed on my account, darling."

"Too late," says Arthur, smirking. He's dressed himself in a button-down shirt and chinos. Eames, he notices, is now wearing jeans and a t-shirt, the latter of which proclaims him 'Punk Princess'. While it's a shame to hide all that skin, Arthur can't help smirking.

Then he turns around and sees the Spring.
It makes Arthur's spine feel liquid. It's not like a fountain, not even like the geysers he saw on that childhood trip to Yellowstone. (He's willing to put money on Ariadne, too, having seen Old Faithful up close and personal at an impressionable age.) It's like watching something grow, the sheer force of nature that pushes weeds up through pavement, but speeded up a million times. The water (and it's not quite water: it *glows*, and if he couldn't feel the cool spray on his face he might think it was lava or molten metal) surges up out of the rocky floor of the cavern like something solid, like a ten-foot pillar of light and motion. It's not *huge*, but it dwarfs them all, makes them insignificant.

"Turbulent water," murmurs Eames from just behind Arthur's left shoulder. Arthur never lets anyone stand that close to him when he's working. Never till now.

The spring — he wants to, has to, capitalise it — the Spring is taking shape. Taking *a* shape. It's a body that Arthur has seen before: but then it was Eames, and now ... now it's simply Nyx.

"Born again," comes that light voice, deep for a woman, high for a man, louder than the rushing force of the waters. "Born again and again and again and again."

Nyx is standing at the edge of the Spring. Naked, but the light's bad, or something: Arthur's eyes automatically swerve to the figure's groin, but he can't make out anything except a reddish bush of pubic hair which could be hiding anything or nothing.

"You," says Nyx to Eames. "You were me, weren't you? You were me from time to time."

"I was," says Eames. His voice is hoarse. "When I wasn't being other people."

"You were me for her."

"For —"

There's a gun in Arthur's hand that wasn't there a moment ago: off to their left, facing Nyx through the Spring, stands Vivian Tegraeus, who's blinked into existence like a stop-motion animation.

"It doesn't mean anything," says Nyx to Eames, light and acid. Nyx isn't naked any more, but is wearing a long ivory silk tunic, clasped at the neck with gold. It's not remotely feminine. "You're not me."

"Not any more, no," agrees Eames.

"You were never truly me! You don't know me. You don't understand me. You're just a series of masks, forger. There's nothing underneath. No heart."

Arthur can feel Eames trembling beside him. He nudge closer: *I'm here. I know you have a heart. I'm still here.*

"And you," breathes Nyx, pacing slowly around the edge of the Spring towards Vivian. "You."

Vivian's face is bright, as though all her dreams — all the dreams she's had since she was five — have come to life at once, in front of her. She's opening her mouth, joyous amazement, ready to greet —

Nyx slaps her, hard.
There's an elastic moment where nobody moves but everyone has to be thinking, reacting, reworking. Then Arthur steps forward and grabs Nyx's bony shoulder, pulling her — him — pulling the projection back from Vivian.

Vivian's crying again. Her fair skin is blotched red, becoming more piebald even as Arthur looks at her. She gulps and sobs, an ugly childish sound. Eames is there at her side, throwing his arm around her shoulders as though he truly cared, and Vivian leans into him like ... like a small child cowering into a parent's supportive embrace.

"I know you," says Nyx.

"Of course you know me." Vivian's voice is gravelly. She's cried and yelled and railed against fate: she's weathered the storm, and come into calm waters, but the scars are still raw. "I created you."

Nyx laughs. "Of course you did, darling." The tone is vicious: this is not the Nyx, vulnerable and full of hope, whom Eames had forged. This is something elemental and ancient, and Arthur isn't ashamed to admit that he's afraid. "If you feel safer thinking so."

"I don't —"

"I am not your imaginary friend," spits Nyx. The accent is more heavily Irish than Vivian's own. "I am not your alter ego. I am not your dream lover: I am not your crisis of sexuality."

Arthur keeps glancing at Nyx, and it's like looking at one of those optical illusions. One moment she's a pretty girl, with odd-coloured eyes that are set slightly too wide above good cheekbones. Next time he looks, he's seeing a young man, sharp-featured and red-haired. Arthur's watching Nyx carefully — not least to try and catch Nyx in the act of changing, though he never can — and he can't identify the features that make Nyx one thing or the other: but then, Nyx isn't either/or. Nyx is both.

"I am not yours, and you can't cage me," says Nyx, bitter as blood, to the weeping Vivian. "You have to let me go, Moira. You have —"

"Don't call me by that name," snaps Vivian.

"Why not?" says Nyx sweetly. "It's what you are. It's your nature."

"It's what I was. What I was given. Not what I made myself. You know about making yourself and remaking yourself."

"Me? I'm what you made me," says Nyx. "A girl when you were lonely and wanted a friend. A boy when your body started to wake to itself. A conundrum who made you feel less freakish. A prisoner while you refuse to finish my story."

"But if I finish The Island, you'll be gone."

"I return," says Nyx. "I endure."

"Not to me," sobs Vivian. "Not for me."

"You need to finish my story," says Nyx to Vivian. "You need to let me go. I've been chained to you for too long."

"Chained? I gave you life!"
"You?" Nyx laughs again, and it's a cruel ugly sound. The spring rises and falls in time with it, and now the water (which isn't water) is shot with darker hues, blood-red and night-black and the poison-green of woodland in the moments before a summer storm. "You gave me nothing. You tied me into your stories, made me your puppet, left me hanging here in the void."

The cave around them has fallen away. Arthur's still standing on something, but he can't see it, can't feel the rock pressing up against his weight. There's a distant murmur of voices, quarrelling, reciting, pleading. Everything beyond the flickering pool of Spring-light is blank.

Eames leans into him a little more, and he's pathetically grateful for the human closeness. Even if Eames isn't exactly human.

"Finish my story," Nyx tells Vivian. "Let me die, and I'll leave you in peace."

"I don't ..." says Vivian. She visibly gathers her courage, stands straighter. "I don't want to kill you. I don't want to lose you."

"Never for ever, love," says Nyx, oddly tender. "Just for a little while. Just until I come around again."

§

"I understand now," says Vivian Tegraeus. She's staring at Arthur. "Nyx has to confront the dragon, and not care."

Arthur raises an eyebrow. He looks (thinks Mal) unperturbed, slightly amused, slightly bemused. "If that's what it takes," he says, "then I'm glad we've gotten you there."

Ariadne is beaming, as though she's waking from the happiest dream of her life. Dominick is watching Arthur and Eames intently: Mal tries to remember if they did anything in the dream that might make Dom suspicious, might give him grounds to renege on the deal they've struck.

*Philippa*, she thinks suddenly. It's like hunger, the craving that she feels.

"It worked?" says Yusuf eagerly. He's sliding the needle from Vivian's wrist, blotting her blood with a cotton pad, handing her a blue paper cup of water.

"I do believe it did, Yusuf," says Vivian. "Thank you. Thank you *all.*"

But there's a sharpness to her smile, a desert in her eyes.

§

The four of them walk in single file along the winding forest path.

"I want you to be with us," Mal had said. "Both of you. This could not happen without you both."

"It was all Eames," Arthur had wanted to protest. "If it wasn't for Eames, I'd be locked up in max security for the rest of my life. Or I'd be —"

He doesn't want to think about what they'd have done to him, if Eames hadn't suggested the deal. "Too dangerous to live," he'd heard Cobb say to someone, back in that windowless room. Perhaps he should have been flattered. Even now, the thought of it makes him cold.

He doesn't say any of it to Mal. Nor does he say, "I'm only here because Eames wouldn't come without me." He just follows Eames and Mal through the forest, acutely aware of Cobb's presence.
behind him, to the fairytale tower with its peaked gold roof glinting in the sunshine. He sees the shiny gold curtains fluttering from the open windows: he sees, too, the deep scars high on the weathered wooden door, as though someone — something — has tried to break in.

He's expecting Eames to change shape when they meet Philippa — he told Arthur that she'd only know him as the little boy who plays in the wood, the calm lady who tells her stories when her mom can't visit — but he doesn't. He does duck down to whisper something to Philippa that makes the little girl erupt into giggles: Arthur has a feeling that it's a joke at his expense, especially when Philippa's laughter starts up again every time she looks at him.

"Darling," says Mal, "we've come to take you home with us."

"You've been here long enough, honey," says Dom awkwardly. "Wouldn't you like to come and live in a house with me and your mommy?"

"She has to say yes," whispers Eames to Arthur, drawing him aside as the three — mother, daughter, father — crouch down in a circle on the floor. They look as though they're going to play a game, or tell a secret. "She has to want to come. It's not enough that they want her to."

"It wasn't enough that I wanted you?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

In the distance, over the treetops, come the slow distorted notes of an old Edith Piaf song. (It's Mal's dream: they're playing her music.) Already? It's too soon. Arthur can feel himself fading. He reaches out, suddenly anxious, and catches hold of Eames' hand as they begin to wake.

Even before he opens his eyes (knowing that he'll see the old-fashioned decor of Professor Miles' sitting room) he can feel Eames' presence, solid and real and unchanging, beside him. He can hear the voiceless, distressed noise that Mal makes, and Dom's bitten-off curse. He can hear someone moving, the sigh of a chair releasing its burden.

Foolish to think it could actually work so easily: stupid to imagine that a child could materialise out of nowhere, out of the dreamscape, into the real world where physics and science and society and reality —

In the distance, he can hear a child's voice. "Maman? Maman, where are you?" In the distance: but nearing quickly.

§

The Spanish night is warm and humid. A crowd has gathered in the Plaça Carles Buïgas to watch the Font màgica bring forth its magic. The constant babble, the noise, the motion, would be exhausting if I were alone.

But I am not alone now. I am not pursued, but questing of my own accord, like some heroic figure from the age of chivalry: and like a knight I have my loyal squire.

Which makes me laugh, and Morgan nudges my shoulder and asks me what's so damn funny.

"I don't make a very good white knight," I tell him.

He looks me up and down. Sometimes I wonder what he sees that I can't. I look at him in the shifting light of the Magic Fountain, and no matter which eye I focus, he is strange. With my right eye I perceive a young man who bears the scars of battle and of deprivation, his maimed hand
curled at his belly as though he's holding something close, his glass eye glinting with inhuman calm. With my left, though, he's a creature of turbulent fire, a roiling mass of love and hate, fear and joy.

I wonder if all mortals carry such a mess inside their hearts. I wonder if that fire's within me too, just waiting for the key to unlock it.

Someone jostles me, and apologises. "Sorry, lady."

I tense, and Morgan puts his hand, his broken hand, on the space between my shoulder blades. For an instant I imagine he is pulling forth ... I don't know. Wings? A heart? A soul?

But no: he is only gentling me, and for once I let myself be calmed.

It doesn't matter how they see me. All that matters is what I see.

I stare into the heart of the fountain, and there in sound and light, illusion without deception, I see my final destination.

"The dragon," I murmur. "The dragon is waiting for me."
"I can't believe you're literally a caveman," says Arthur, admiring the view from Eames' front door.

"If the grunting and the fake-fur loincloth would be a turn-on," says Eames earnestly, "I'm sure I could rustle up something."

"Please don't," says Arthur. He's laughing again. This is honestly not what he'd expected when Eames suggested they "get away from it all, just the two of us, to a sunny island: I've a residence there."

And Arthur played along: didn't ask Eames how long he'd had this place, or how he'd acquired it. (Was it Yusuf's doing? Or did Eames have a whole coterie of friends and acquaintances who'd never questioned his reality, but couldn't ever quite put their finger on where they'd met him?) Because from what Arthur understands — thought he understood — of the metaphysics of dreaming, there was no way that Eames could've taken ownership of a cave-house in a small town on this sun-drenched island.

Eames gives him the tour. It doesn't take long (if the house wasn't carved right into the mountain, it'd be a two-room cottage) and, unsurprisingly, it ends in the bedroom.

And it's weird, because there's no grey London rain battering the roof outside, and the dimensions of the room are quite different to that attic room in the Kew pagoda where Arthur'd spent so many languid hours with Eames. (In dreams, he reminds himself. It wasn't real.) And yet this is ... this feels like the same room. Maybe it's the wide bed with its crimson coverlet; maybe it's the Gothic mirror set opposite that bed; maybe it's the long low shelves, packed with paperbacks, against the half-wall where the ceiling slopes down.

"I feel like I've been here before," Arthur says.

"Déjà vu, Arthur? You need to take it easy with the somnacin, mate."

"Oh, I'm totally over living in dreams," says Arthur. Eames is standing right next to the bed, but Arthur doesn't lunge at him, bear him down. They're grown men: they don't need to rut like teenagers. And they have all the time — no. They have real time. A lifetime. And one thing Arthur knows is, there's never quite enough of that.

"Bed looks comfortable," he observes.

"Perhaps you'd like to try it? Make sure it's suitably supportive?" Eames teases. He sits down, arms open, and Arthur walks into the space Eames has made for him.

The bed, it turns out, is higher than the one in the pagoda room: high enough that Eames can get his mouth on Arthur's dick without contorting himself. High enough that Eames can bend Arthur over it and fuck him hard and steady, Arthur gasping into the crimson quilt and inhaling the smell of Eames — because yeah, this is Eames' bed, those are Eames' things, his books, his, fuck it's weird to think of him having possessions, he came out of Arthur's dreams, out of everyone's dreams, and here he is groaning and sweating and giving it to Arthur just about as hard as he can take it, and it's fuck it's not a dream it's —

"Eames," cries Arthur, and comes all over the bedspread.
"Why a cave?" says Arthur.

They've washed (taking turns in the tiny solar-powered shower) and gotten dressed: now they're sitting on the terrace with bottles of local beer ('Mythos', says the label, which made Arthur snort), looking out over the almond trees that line the valley. He can see plenty of reasons to live here. The house is eminently defensible, with tunnels snaking back into the heart of the mountain; the climate's temperate, without the extremes of New York or LA; the view is breathtaking, red rock and green pine woods sloping down to an ocean like a steel mirror beneath a cloudless sky.

But what made Eames decide to make a home here?

"Read about it in a book," says Eames, and winks. "I'm expecting an Oracle to show up any day now."

Arthur represses a flinch. "If I hang out with you, are things going to get ... supernatural?"

"Fuck, I hope not," says Eames fervently. "All that stuff about magic coming back into the world ... people like Vivian Tegraeus think it's all sparkles and unicorns."

"Didn't notice you sparkling," says Arthur.

Eames sticks out his tongue. (Arthur wants to suck on it again.) "There's worse than me in the dreaming, darling," he says. "Some things that should never come out into the light."

"What d'you mean?" says Arthur, because Eames sounds serious for once.

"Dreams are full of ... conscious entities," says Eames slowly. "I'm not the only one who wants to come through."

"Philippa," observes Arthur.

"She's a special case," says Eames fondly. "Conceived in the dreaming, near enough, and her mamma loved her too much to let her go."

"You made her real," says Arthur.

Eames is shaking his head. "She was already real: you need to understand that, Arthur. It's not that we aren't real until you focus on us. We're always real. We've always been real."

"How long —" Arthur grimaces, reaches for his beer, drains it. "You know what? I don't wanna know."

"Very sensible, mate," says Eames approvingly. "And anyway, it's not as though time in dreams has anything to do with time here." He stares out over the valley, watching the darkness creep up the eastern cliffs as the sun sets somewhere behind the house. "And here, in the fixed world: here we both are, at last."

§

The sun is warm on my shoulders. If I look back (though one must never look back) the sea is a flat steel mirror at the valley's foot. Behind me is summer — not the happy sunny summer of picture postcards, but the harsh blazing drought that the ancients feared. But up here in the hills, it's spring. Around me the trees are heavy with white blossom, and the sunlight flickers gently through the leaves.
I climb steadily through the almond groves, past the dark gaping mouths of caves. They have, for thousands of years, been inhabited — not as dungeons or tombs, but as homes — and they are still dwelling-places for men and women. There are solar panels fixed to the rockface, and cables draped from cave to cave. From one comes a flicker of coloured light; from another, a phrase of music, sweet and haunting. Someone's baking fish. Someone else is eating oranges. Everything is vivid, made sharper and more immediate by my fear.

The dragon is waiting for me at the mountain's peak.

... The dragon is waiting.

It is not as huge as I'd envisaged, perhaps thirty feet from the arched nostrils to the arrow-shaped tip of its tail. It is a thing of beauty, its scales gleaming gold and bronze and palest silver in the sunlight. It's striped and dappled like a tabby cat, and its eyes are feline too: green and slitted, watching me unblinkingly.

I blink. Or, rather, I wink. I close my right eye and observe the dragon with my left. Now it is a creature made wholly of flame, like a beacon signalling out across the ocean to distant lands, like a bonfire blazing on Midsummer's Eve. I bow my head, because what I am facing is my death.

The dragon yawns. Its teeth are surprisingly clean and white: the gust of its breath, warm against my face, is inoffensively mineral.

_I do not devour my prey_, says the dragon to me.

"Why the teeth?" I retort, because honestly, what's the worst that could happen?

The dragon _laughs_, soundlessly: the shock of its amusement sends me sprawling.

_So that I can taste your fear_, it says as I push myself to my knees.

§

They're lying in bed together. They're in the real world: Arthur's die rolls the same number every time, and Eames' reflection in the mirror between the windows doesn't change, no matter how much he scowls at it. They're in the real world, and sooner or later one of them will have to get up and change the sheets, which are sticky and damp. Later, decides Arthur. He's comfortable here, stretched out next to Eames, listening to the birdsong outside, and the music of wind-chimes in the almond grove. The real world is simpler, sometimes: he says as much to Eames.

"Ah, but what's real?"

"Really? You're gonna to get all metaphysical on me every time we fuck?"

"I don't think there's enough metaphysics in the world," says Eames. He turns to lie on his side, head propped on one hand, staring intently at Arthur. "Either world: the changing, or the fixed."

"You still think this world doesn't change?" says Arthur, gesturing vaguely at the half-open window, the messy sheets, the tangle of their clothing on the chair.

"Mmm. The world where things don't . . . No. When things change here, there's a reason for it."

"There's a reason for dreams."

"Not in the same way. There's no _science_ in dreams. I don't mean the science of designing a dream
to extract a secret from somebody. I don't mean constructing landscapes the way that Ariadne does, or Yusuf's work with somnacin and psilocybin. That's science. It's all cause and effect. Down in the dreamscape, you can do something three times and get a different result each time."

"Fairytale logic," says Arthur sleepily. The heat, and his post-coital lethargy, are conspiring against this conversation. "How do you know all this, huh? If you're just a dream?"

"I'm not just anything," says Eames, prodding Arthur under the ribs. "And I've had plenty of opportunity to think about it all."

"The fixed world and the changing world," murmurs Arthur.

"Absolutely. The changing world, the dreamscape, lacks structure. Anything can happen. Anything does happen. And then you come in, Arthur, all sharp lines and science, and try to make it behave. And it won't. We won't."

"I never made you behave," says Arthur.

"Do feel free to try," says Eames with a feral smile. "But I stand by my case. The fixed world doesn't have enough dreams in it. Perhaps we're the first immigrants, Philippa and I. The first of many to cross the border."

It's a whimsical idea — the kind of thing one of Vivian Tegraeus's characters might say, from what little Arthur's read of her work — but Eames' tone isn't whimsical. It's dark, serious, grave. Arthur wonders if he should be worried: if, bringing Eames into the world, he's opened a gate that should have been left locked. Sure, he's helped Eames reunite Cobb and Mal with the daughter they'd mourned. Net result: happiness all round.

But not all dreams are happy. Not all dreams are safe.

§

They are on an island, far from the grey city, far from the files and phone calls of Dom's work. They are on an island, a family holiday, just the three of them.

_Three_. Mal feels deep joy at the simplicity of that notion, even as she stares at her solitary reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Her father had wanted to run tests, hook Philippa up to his machines, find out what she was made of. "No, Papa," Mal had said, and it had been enough: those words, or the tone in which she'd said them, or the fury in her eyes as she held Philippa close against her skirts.

"She's older than I expected," Miles had ventured.

"Time is different in dreams," Mal'd reminded him. "And she told me she was bored of being a baby."

"What will you say to everyone, Mallorie? People back in the States will know you didn't have a child before you came to Paris."

"I'll say ... I'll tell them that this is our beloved Philippa, our beautiful daughter."

"Adopted?"

Mal shrugged. "Perhaps."
"She looks like you. Like both of you."

"Of course she does," Mal had said. "Why wouldn't she?" Not thinking of dreams, or the other mother, or the wolves at the door.

Philippa is hers. "Ours," says Dom, but he'd never even suspected her existence until Mal had ... until Arthur, the dream-thief, had proposed a deal, and provoked her Dominick to ask her. Mal doesn't know, yet, what she thinks about Arthur; about Eames, who can be anyone at all in dreams, and who's as mutable in different ways in the waking world. She can scarcely believe that Dominick has let Arthur walk free without complaint: Arthur who was the focus of so much work, so many long days and wasted efforts! But then she sees Dom playing with his laughing daughter, and thinks that maybe she can believe that Dom weighed the cost and found Phil worthy of any sacrifice.

Some day soon she'll finish her paper on archetypes and how they are generated by dreams. Eames the Trickster; Philippa the Lost Child. There must be others in the dreamscape. Perhaps she will ask Eames to tell her about them. Or perhaps she will pay a call on Vivian Tegraeus once The Island is finally complete, and ask her who else (what else) she might have brought to life in those vivid shamanic dreams of hers.

And there's Ariadne: Mal likes the girl, and Philippa adores her. She and Mal can work together, perhaps. They can ask Yusuf for somnacin blends that enhance the dream, that bring out the layer of myth that underpins every human story.

Mal is not afraid of what she might meet in dreams. So why is she afraid of this simple test? Of her own body?

"Because," she tells herself, "because for now, at least, this will put an end to my dreaming."

Nine months is not so very long. Eight months. It's a month since they brought Philippa into the world. A month since they became three, instead of two. A month since she's turned to Dom, ravenous with want, as soon as they'd watched Phil fall asleep in Mal's childhood bedroom. Already she feels that she knows the answer, knows what the test will show her.

"This is for you, Dom," she murmurs, alone in the bathroom.

§

I may as well be Nyx this one last time.

I don't want to let go. Nyx has been my constant companion for so long: my dearest friend, my oldest ally, the one who's been there for me (with me, within me) through every storm that's battered and whirled through my life, every catastrophe that's crashed down upon me.

But —

Nyx thinks he's my slave. Nyx thinks she's my plaything. Nyx thinks, now, that they are a person in their own right, independent of me.

And what do I know? What right do I have? I've only written it all down, put Nyx into words and into the minds and hearts of thousands — millions? — of readers. I have given Nyx attention. I have given Nyx life.

What, indeed, do I know?
Nothing, apparently.

And yes, I am bitter. It seems that the world's conspiring against me. Mr Saito demands that I finish *The Island*. Those people who stole into my dreams — did they think I wouldn't remember them? I, who've been dreaming lucidly since I was fourteen? *They* mean for me to conclude the story, tie it off neatly, walk away and leave it.

They are the Furies, my own personal furies with whips of thought and fear. They will not let me rest. *He* said that, the Englishman. He said he'd haunt me forever.

Strange to think that he is somewhere out here in the fixed world. Perhaps he's watching me even now as I write these words. Perhaps all of them, my Furies, are still in my head, like the nagging tatters of a dream, persuading me to write, demanding —

I will write. I will finish the story, write it down as it demands to be told, and then I will be free of them.

And I will lose Nyx.

But Nyx will be ... Nyx won't die. Nyx will persist. Nyx will be reborn. And I shall be nothing but a writer whose best work is behind her.

Havoc and Damage, the cats, know that I'm distressed. They have retreated to the sunny patch by the picture-window. They won't pester me while I weep for what I've lost, what I never really had.

Was I only ever a conduit, a pen for Nyx to write the story true?

Will there be other stories, when Nyx is gone?

I don't know. I am very much afraid that I am nothing, have nothing, create nothing. I'm just the person who takes dictation.

Nevertheless.

I want peace.

I open up the document and begin to write.

"*I'm not afraid of you,*" I say to the dragon.

"*Good,*" says the dragon in my mind.

"*You can't destroy me, can you?*"

"*You seem very sure of that,*" says the dragon, amused. "*Are you certain enough to wager your life on it?*"

"*I am,*" I say, though the words taste like heartbreak on my tongue. "*I know myself, now. I know that I'm more than merely mortal. I'm a passageway, a gate for something to enter into this fixed world and bring back change.*"

"*You think the world does not change?*"

"*The changes I speak of are primal changes, changes from the dawn of time,*" I say. "*It's time that magic came back from where it's been driven. It's time that magic came to save this sorry world from its own hubristic pride.*"
"Ah," says the dragon. "You speak like an Oracle, all winding words and great empty promises. What, little creature, will stop me from charring you where you stand?"

"Nothing," I say. "I think ..." And now I falter, because who does not fear pain? "I think," I say hoarsely, "that it's why I had to find you."

"And what use will you be to the poor sad world when you are ash and dust?"

"I am the Phoenix," I say: and it's like a sudden chord, like a chord struck with every sinew in my body, like a piece of music resolving to its dominant or the perfect couplet that ends a sonnet or the thin gilt line that gives a painting light.

Or a name that, spoken aloud, suddenly becomes something new.

"I am the Phoenix," I repeat. "I die in fire, and am reborn."

"Poor child," says the dragon. "Poor bait."

And all is

… I rise from my desk. If I leave the last sentence unfinished, just for now, I

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