Antimony
by jibrailis

Summary

Dreamshare goes legal, Arthur goes corporate, Eames goes and (against his better judgement) falls in love.

Notes

Written for the Inception Big Bang.

This fic is illustrated by bluelittlepig. You can find the master post for the art here!

See the end of the work for more notes.
This is a funny story, if you know where to laugh.

In the beginning there is the Word, and the Word is found in a narrow alleyway in Manchester where dustbins line the walls. The walls were once a respectable sequence of bricks, or at the very least a neutral shade of industrial concrete, but are now covered in graffiti. Huge balloon letters in blue and
red and orange explode in pinwheel bursts, taller than Eames himself. They act like sign posts, their curlicues guiding him along the dustbins with their plastic bags poking through rubber lids, and to the back door of what is a New Age shop during the day, and still a New Age shop at night, but something quite different during the in-between hours.

Eames doesn't remember the exact year. He can if he tries, but he finds these days he doesn't want to. All he cares to remember is that it was on the other side of the new millennium, and there was a book an old friend of his wanted him to appraise.

"It's a Doves Press Bible," Charles Lyle says when he opens the back door and lets Eames in from the alley. "At least I think it's a Doves Press Bible. It's giving me every impression of being one, devilish thing."

"They're notoriously rare," Eames says, which is a type of courtesy comment, really. Charles knows it's rare; everybody who operates out of the back room of Madame Tarot's Specialty Shop knows exactly how rare a Doves Press Bible is, and what it's worth on the market. "But they show up sometimes. Old family heirlooms, books stuffed in attics, that sort of thing," he goes on. Another exercise in obviousness, like telling a physicist about velocity, but that's what friends are for. Eames doesn't have enough friends to annoy with his obnoxious statement of facts; he cultivates them, like hothouse orchids.

Charles has poxed skin but perfect teeth. He bares them in a grin. "Yes, well, come in. Tea? I've got some biscuits. Tinned, I'm afraid."

Eames takes the tea and refuses the biscuits. Or at least, he will when all this is over. First, he wants what he's traveled from Wessex for: the book. He has Charles bring it out from its acid-free slipcase, all three volumes, and they spread them over a table decorated with an abundance of incense until Eames sweeps them off. There's a book bound in the Safavid style beside the incense. Eames displaces that one more carefully, with proper respect.

"It certainly looks like a Doves Press Bible," Eames says, opening to the first page of the first volume. "First glance, you can see the long red letter I that travels down the page. And the typography looks like it's in the right family, not to mention the quality of the paper. The binding too," he says, hefting the boards and the spine. "Where did you get it?"

"An enterprising individual," Charles says, laughing.

"You didn't go steal this from the Bodleian, did you?" Eames asks. "Some librarian, melting at the sight of your dewy eyes, didn't walk into the special collections and hand this over just because you asked her out for dinner?"

"J'accuse?" Charles asks.

"Always," says Eames. He takes a closer look at the type and wishes that Charles could have been less secretive and just told him what it was beforehand. It would have saved him a lot of bloody time because amazingly, he doesn't carry around the memory of the Doves Type for comparison in his head like precious luggage. He's going to need to examine another Doves Bible, or at least a facsimile, before he can make any final judgments.

Two days later, he straightens his back, rubs the ache in his shoulder from an old shrapnel wound, and says, "It's real."

"My word!" Charles exclaims, playing up the old British gentleman for every ha'penny that he's got. "Are you sure?"
"It shares all the same printing features as the other Doves Bibles, the same typesetting, evidence of the same frame, the same paper and ink and binding..." Eames ticks them off on his fingers. "And it's bloody well difficult to forge Doves Type, because the two printers loathed each other so much that one of them threw the font into the Thames in a fit of rage."

"Bloody well difficult, but not impossible?" Charles asks.

Eames looks at his friend. "I find there's very little in the world that's truly impossible, with the right amount of imagination and the right application of bullets," he finally says, and Charles smiles and smiles and looks like a fond old uncle ready to spring the Christmas ham.

"There's someone I want you to meet," he says. "I think the two of you will get along very well."

And a scrawny nineteen-year-old slinks out of the kitchen with a cigarette and a scowl, darkest hair Eames has ever seen, but brightest eyes. "Terrence, this is Eames, the best appraiser I know and consequently the best forger," Charles says proudly. "Eames, this is Terrence Moran. He was raised by Benedictine nuns at the Stanbrook Abbey, where they print some of the finest books this side of the Atlantic Ocean."

"Only sort of," Terrence says, stamping out his cigarette.

"No, their books are entirely good," Eames says dryly. "Or do you mean you were only sort of raised by nuns?"

"It's complicated," Terrence replies with the lifting of a shoulder. "So hey, Charles says you might have a job for me?"

"You did mention you were looking for another forger to work with you on a project," Charles reminds Eames. "You said you wanted someone as absolutely brilliant as you are. Well, here he is. Present and future standing right in front of me. Isn't this a glorious day!"

"I'll take that tea now," Eames says. He looks at Terrence and smiles, lips pulled over his teeth. "Let's see how good you really are."

This isn't a story about Terrence Moran, however, though Eames has plenty of those. He has them shored up in his mind where typography could have been instead, but then, he didn't spend five years training typography to follow in his footsteps (and yes, even at age twenty-six, Eames was already making some pretty damn deep grooves in the ground he walked on). He didn't spend another two years running heists and missions with typography. He didn't teach typography how to shoot and how to take point, how to walk and talk, and how to dream. No, that he gave to skinny, quick-tongued Terrence Moran, who had the patience to forge one of the most beautiful Bibles in the history of the English language, but who couldn't listen to Eames just the once when it counted.

Terrence is the beginning of the story, but Arthur is its end.

In the meantime, there is the Word, and the Word is WikiLeaks. Actually, to be perfectly precise, there are thirty thousand words in a document leaked out of the American military establishment, and every thirty thousand of those words (from the little ones like 'the' to the big ones with friends linking arms like 'somnacin peptide correlation') is on the subject of the once-shadowy practice of dreamshare. The 'once' part of it starts to look extremely lovely to Eames, so bathed in nostalgia is he
when the public sinks their teeth into the WikiLeak and CNN and the BBC start broadcasting stories
with titles like 'GOVERNMENT CONTROLLED DREAMING?' There are panels and panels,
Stephen Colbert makes a musical episode out of it, the American president is forced to deliver
speeches, alongside press conferences with upper military personnel, and Eames goes to hide in
Liverpool for a while.

"It's the end," groans Vaughan, an extractor that he knows and makes the mistake of going out for
drinks with. "It's the end of our world as we know it."

Eames wishes Vaughan would stop squirming with misery, as he is currently trying to stick his hands
into Vaughan's trousers. You'd think some people would be more appreciative of a handjob.
"Hardly," he says. "It's the end of shaken not stirred, and secret handshakes with ten different
signals; and drawers full of fake passports, every one of which has a rubbish photo with bad hair.
Now we've gone surface top, like legalizing abortion. Next thing you know, we'll be running out of
bright and shiny clinics. We'll have receptionists."

"Receptionists I could deal with," Vaughan says. "But they're not going to legalize dreamshare."

"Maybe not," Eames acknowledges, rubbing Vaughan and wishing halfheartedly that he would just
shut up and enjoy sex like a regular bloke. Eames' opinion on the general catastrophe is this: now
that it's public knowledge, there's going to be demand, and even if governments do ban dreamshare,
it's never going to be entirely successful. There will always be at least one struggling country, one
nation with ambitions for money and tourism, who will make it legal, or turn a blind eye to it, and
boom, professionals in their field are just going to continue on the way they always are. Cloak and
daggers at the ready, perhaps, but then it'll be no different than it was before.

As it turns out, the British government sanctions it, but with heavy limitations. The American
government can't seem to make up its mind. They're quick enough to criminalize non-consensual
dreamshare, not so quick with deciding what to do with the other aspects of it: the sleep treatments,
the psychotherapy, the entertainment opportunities. The medical industry can lobby like it's no one's
business, and never underestimate Hollywood with its hookers and blow. As Congress and the
Senate spin in centrifugal circles, colleagues of Eames quietly rent buildings and set up consultation
hours.

It's a new golden age, Eames thinks, and there's a whole lot of gold to be made, what with
everybody and their best friend now wanting to dream of silk and diamonds instead of showing up to
maths naked.

"You should start up an agency of your own," Dom Cobb says to Eames the one and only time they
run into each other after the Fischer inception. It's completely coincidental, in a Parisian florist shop,
and it's the anniversary of Mal's death. Cobb is buying her flowers. Eames considers hiding when he
sees him, but decides to be a better man for once. "I'd do it," Cobb continues, "except I've got a
pretty good job, teaching architecture at the local college. I think it's better for my kids if I stay there."

"This is why I plan never to spawn," Eames says. "Well, I might consider it if some scientist came up
to me and said they had the eggs of a Nobel laureate, and would I mind fusing my genetic material
with hers, and by the way our future offspring will go on to cure cancer. I might consider it then. But
not likely."

Cobb ignores him in that deliberate way, which is why Eames thinks Cobb is a terrible person to
work with, and a terrible person to be half-assed friends with. It's too bad Cobb is also so brilliant.

"You mean your boy can actually walk two steps without you holding his hand?" Eames says. "And
why would Arthur furnish an office and go legitimate? Not with all the fun he's had."

"You don't know Arthur at all," says Cobb. "He's got this, I don't know, this desire for respect. Not just from people like us, but from everybody."

"You mean deep in that pinstriped heart of his, Arthur is like a Victorian governess. He might toy with his multiplication tables when no one's looking, but he wants to wear white at his wedding."

"He wants everything. The wedding, the dress, shaking the mayor's hand," Cobb says bluntly.

It's a brave new world, and in it, Dom Cobb has a sense of humour. Eames thinks: *I can get used to anything now.*

Eames prepares to leave. He has the thick-petaled irises he came in for, a gift to woo a mark. There's no more reason to stand here making chitchat and being sentimental. *All the crimes we've committed and the people we've swindled* might be decent parlour talk in another century, but not this one yet. Except, first he looks at the roses in Cobb's hand, the crispness of their shade against the white speckled paper. "My condolences," he says. "I met her once. She yelled at me."

"Me too," Cobb says. "But you probably deserved it."

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Eames dreams of fire, of books burning, of locked rooms.

Arthur comes for him in December, in the middle of ashy snow, when Eames is wearing three jumpers and a pair of fuzzy slippers given to him by his grandmother. Arthur shows up at the doorstep of his flat, sleek and elegant, looking like a Queen's ransom even with his hair dampened by English weather. Next to him, Eames seems positively dowdy, and this makes him incredibly happy in ways that no doubt can be attributed to his perverse nature and general lack of character.

Arthur is a lot like the snow. Not London snow, not the way it is after it's been run over by cars and filtered through the greying air, but like snow in an Arctic expanse, as wide and as sharp to the eyelids as tattoo needles. Eames once spent two weeks in Canada, within hearing range of the Arctic Circle, and he thinks of Arthur in the same way: a sort of stark, dangerous stillness that lasts until the wind comes and stirs it into action. Eames knows the words for snow in sixteen different languages, and he also knows that snow is what you make of it, at what temperature you choose.

"I may or may not have accidentally stolen some of your pens during our last jaunt together," Eames says, leading Arthur to the kitchen, where there's crockery everywhere, and a pot of Italian wedding soup half-burning on the stove. "It's no reason to track me down halfway across the world for bloody vengeance."

Arthur makes a sound between amusement and disdain. He once told Eames that he could be so good if he weren't half-insufferable. Eames had replied that to be good at anything was to be insufferable, if only to suffer the envious pangs of wretched inferiors. And half meant he wasn't trying hard enough.

Eames would ask how Arthur's managed to find his flat, his own private address, but he already knows the answer. Put it this way: if Arthur was ever the hero of a romance novel, that novel would be titled *Research Methods: A Love Story.*
Instead he remarks, "Ah, I think I know what this is about. Don't tell me. Cobb finally died, crushed under the weight of his self-importance, and he left me his collection of French pornography in his will. How sweet! I shall treasure this moment forever."

"Eames," Arthur says. "I've just gotten off an eleven hour flight, and before that, I was on another flight, and before that I was at a conference where no less than twenty civilians asked me if I could design them a dream where they were fucking a porn star. I can be charming, or I can be blunt. Take your pick."

Eames says, "You want me to work for your new agency." He walks over to the counter and takes the pot of soup off the stove. He turns off the heat. "An email would have been enough. Ring me up, if you were feeling adventurous. No need to come here yourself."

"It would have been a chilly sort of offer if I'd asked by email," Arthur replies, tracking Eames with his dark eyes. "I respect you, so—"

Eames laughs.

"You think I'm lying?" Arthur asks.

"I automatically assume everyone is lying," Eames informs him. "It's like Pascal's wager. It's much more efficient that way."

"So you don't like me," Arthur says.

Eames smiles, neither friendly nor mean. If Eames wants to smile meanly at someone (and he loves the rough thrust of that word, 'meanly', all schoolyard bravado and elongated vowels), they know it. "I like you fine, Arthur. It's too much energy otherwise. I save that for the people who really deserve it. But being your civilian lapdog? Not my idea of a good time."

Arthur has a smile of his own, a gunmetal smile. "Never quite got the hang of being a civilian," he says, and Eames' eyes flick in memory to the dogtags that are no doubt lying under Arthur's Scottish wool vest. "And you haven't even heard my offer. You should, or you'll always end up wondering what you turned down."

"Your offer then," Eames says, and waits.

It's clear that Arthur's thought about this, even disregarding the unlikelihood of Arthur having come all this way and not meticulously preparing for it. The way he delivers his next words tells Eames everything. It's firm, but slightly rote; the cadences have the impression of a long flight with little to do except think and think again. "My agency's called the Somnus Entertainment Agency. We're based out of Los Angeles. We specialize in designer dreams for high-paying clientele. It's a small company. I don't want to bring too many people in. Ariadne's agreed to be my architect and designer, and I've got Yusuf to outsource us our pharmaceuticals. I'm the chief of operations, the one who goes into the dream with the client, but I can't do it alone. I need someone else as backup, as partner, particularly someone who's good at forging but whose skill set can have him take point for me as well."

"There are plenty of people who fit that description out there," Eames says. "Or, well, not plenty, but enough. Have you asked Blumenthal? Or what about Jayantilal? I've heard she's willing to go legit for the right price, and she's a spectacular forger. I don't mind admitting that."

"I'm interested in you," Arthur says, and Eames raises his eyebrows. "I know what's out there. I know the market. Give me some credit here."
"I'm not a bank," Eames says. "Most of the time, I'm fresh out of credit."

"We work well together," Arthur says. Going off script, he seems more human, willing to lean his hip against the counter. "We haven't always gotten along, but hell, that's true of anybody in a high-pressure situation. I don't know Jayantilal. I know you. And I'm willing to pay you the salary that you deserve."

He names a price. Eames says nothing.

"Okay, I figured you wouldn't jump into my arms the moment I asked," Arthur says. He slips his hand into his vest pocket and pulls out a business card. Eames can see the creaminess of the expensive linen paper, and the India ink with Somnus's name printed on top. "Call me with an answer," Arthur says, gathering his coat. "Take your time if you really need to. I can wait."

"If you're running a business, then no, you really can't. Haven't you heard? Tick tock. Time is money," Eames calls after him.

Arthur pauses in the hall, pivots, and looks at him. "This is how it's going to be, isn't it? You bossing me around, giving me lip."

"I'm sorry, is that not what you wanted?" Eames asks.

Arthur doesn't smile this time, and there's a tiger wariness in his eyes that Eames knows all too well. "Haven't you heard? What I want is to sell out," he says.

Eames doesn't dream that night. He takes two sleeping pills, and wakes up with a dry throat and the sound of mice running through the pipes. The night after that, he doesn't sleep at all. He climbs to the rooftop of his flat, moving through the wet clumps of snow on cheap shingles, and smokes a cigarette in a crouching position, his scarf winding around his neck like the most insistent kind of hangman's noose, the kind that isn't even courteous enough to leave you dead.

There's a letter from Charles on his coffee table. Charles doesn't believe in email, and he's one of the few people Eames trusts enough to leave an address with, just in case. This time, his just in case measures have led to Charles sending him a jolly holiday's card full of vim and good wishes, with a postscript scribbled in tiny writing like Charles hopes Eames won't actually see it.

Our mutual friend is in London again, but I doubt he'll stay for long.

People say that forgers can't be trusted, but this is incorrect. Forgers need to be trusted more than anybody else, at least if they want to do business with fellow human beings, because nobody's going to pay for a forgery that'll wind up biting them in the arse. No one wants to go to jail because the forger they hired sold them out, or did shoddy work, or talked to the wrong person. There's a natural suspicion towards Eames' kind, and Eames has to work against that. If he wants repeat business, he has to make sure that his forgeries are rock solid, that he's dependable in a way that people just don't understand is key to crime. Crime may be illegal and morally questionable, sure, but if you want to make a living out of it, you've got to run it like a school cafeteria line. Same quality, same service, every single time.

Eames knew a contract killer once. Eames dated a contract killer once, and while it turned out to be an awful idea (no, really, he thinks to himself, what an absolutely stunning surprise), he did glean
one important bit of advice: you've got to kill twice. First their doubts, and then their enemies.

Eames knows how many times Terrence Moran killed on a cold winter's midnight in Oslo.

The world moves on, he thinks. On and on, and it's a wonder no one starts banging against the doors, yelling stop the ride right now, you sadistic motherfucker.

So he goes to Kenya.

"Eames, you missed my wedding and now you show up during my honeymoon?" Yusuf says when Eames slouches against his door. "I should pop you one in the face right now, but I won't, because I am a good person and I am kind to the needy."

Eames grins at Priyanka, moving through the rooms with a stack of books in her arms. Priyanka is a University of Chicago anthropologist studying modern African notions of family, and she has huge glasses that gleam like periscopes in the dim lighting. "You took your blushing bride on a honeymoon to your drug den? What in the world is wrong with you? What, was Paris too crowded this time of the year?"

"Neither of us thought we needed a gaudy, stereotyped honeymoon," Yusuf says primly. "Happiness is where the home is."

"So what you're trying to say is that you're both workaholics, and you can't bear to be out of the loop for even one week."

"Pretty much," Yusuf says. When Priyanka finally finds a place to stuff her books (on a shelf where there is barely any room for more), she comes over to offer her greetings. Yusuf slips his arm around her waist and nuzzles her neck. Newlyweds.

"Hello Eames," Priyanka says solemnly, but there's an understated mischief dancing behind her eyes. There needs to be, if she gazed at the wide, wide sea of potential suitors and picked Yusuf to be her helpmeet, forever and forever till death do us part. Eames says as much out loud. Yusuf glares.

"Well," Priyanka considers. "Having free prescriptions for the rest of your life isn't something to scoff at."

"I'm scoffing," Yusuf protests. "This is my scoffing face, right here. It might look like my hungry-for-crackers face, but that's just a trick to fool people!"

Inside, once Priyanka goes back to her books and Yusuf checks in on his customers, he and Eames settle into a back room. There are fly papers on the wall, mildew yellow with age, and an overwhelming smell of turmeric, recently cooked. Sheaves of annotated notes from Priyanka's next paper line the table where Yusuf pours them both a cup of oolong tea, and offers a cigar. Eames turns it down, so Yusuf shrugs and lights one up for himself.

"What's this about?" Yusuf asks patiently. "I'm getting the sense that it's not about a job."

"It is about a job, actually," Eames says. He swirls the tea in the cup, and adds, "It's about going to Los Angeles and working for Arthur, of all people."

"What do you mean, 'of all people'?" Yusuf wonders. "Arthur's great. I'm already helping him with his agency, that's how great he is. And I know you don't care about the moving to Los Angeles part. Packing up your bags has never bothered you. You don't have a wife and kids on the way or anything."
Eames's gaze darts to where they left Priyanka. Yusuf smiles.

"Congratulations," Eames says.

"I'm fucking terrified," Yusuf says, "but thanks. My sperm, you know, they did the real work. Good job, buddies!"

"I think Priyanka might have been somewhat involved too," Eames says.

"Obviously," Yusuf replies, rolling his eyes. "So what's the problem with working with Arthur? If you're not into going legit, that's completely fair. But you're acting like it's Arthur you have a problem with, and I don't think it's that, unless there's a story here I don't know. And I know a lot of stories." He lifts his cup ironically. "People talk when they're drugged out of their minds. Who'd have thought."

If Eames hadn't decided to be friends with Yusuf because of the amiable companionship angle, he'd have been friends with him anyway. Because despite rumours to the contrary, Eames is clever enough to be charming to people who have the ability to make him wake up in a cockfighting ring, in a thong, unsure of how and why he got there.

"Arthur wears his trousers too tight. It offends me," Eames says.

"Oh, I'm sure it does," Yusuf says. "Wait, is this a sex thing? Is there a sex thing between you and Arthur? Don't tell me it's a sex thing."

"No," says Eames.

"Not that I'm not cool with that," Yusuf says. "I'm so cool with it that I'd buy front row seats, except not, because that's kind of disgusting. But it's just, I can't imagine you and Arthur. For one, you don't have a dead wife on you like a tax trail. I feel like that's -50 attractiveness points in Arthur's book already."

Eames loves gossip like marmalade on toast, or the latest episodes of Coronation Street. "You don't actually think he was pining passionately for Cobb, do you?"

Yusuf's mouth twitches. "He did wear very tight pants."

"Which has nothing to do with our professional interests," Eames says, relaxing into the sofa.

"Speak for yourself," Yusuf says. "Do you know how hard it is to give someone an injection in the thigh who's wearing skintight clothing? I am extremely interested in Arthur's pants, professionally."

"Wanker."

"I beg your pardon, I'm married," Yusuf says. "And if you want my opinion, which I'm assuming you do because remember, you just barged into my honeymoon, I'd say, try it out. Give Arthur's agency a test run. He's doing some interesting, experimental things. I think you'll like it. And if you don't, and being on the legal side of dreamshare bothers you too much, well, you're a fast runner."

Yusuf shrugs. "Arthur's not going to put a bullet in your back."

"No, he'll just call me into his office for a performance evaluation," Eames contemplates. "And not let me take any of the company mugs when I leave. Because that's what dreamshare is reduced to nowadays. Consent forms and sticky notes and two weeks notice."

"You can live with that," Yusuf says.
"Maybe," Eames says mildly. He reaches over and plucks a cigar out of the case; he's decided that he does have a craving after all. "But to be fair, I can live with a lot of things that other people find generally unpleasant."

"This must be true," Yusuf replies, "as you live with yourself."

Edinburgh was where Eames first shot a man. Los Angeles was where Eames first killed one. That's what he remembers the city the best for, no matter how many times he's been here in the years since that first year; it's the bloom of adrenaline through his nerves, dangerous recklessness, blood turning the tips of his fingers red from where he presses them against the airplane window as they descend into LAX. The man's name had been Samuel Kemp, and Eames had shot him three times in the chest (this was before Eames got better, when he learned to fire the one bullet that counted, keeping it neat and tidy, like his mutual funds). Kemp had been long in dying. Eames remembers that, remembers the December heat of Los Angeles as Kemp lay gasping on the concrete, the warmth of the day so fundamentally bizarre to him. Los Angeles weather can be temperamental, and so can the human body in pain.

When the johnny-come-latelies gather around the PASIV and swap macho stories of their first kill, they'll inevitably turn to Eames in their testosterone sweat, and Eames will smile like a benevolent older brother and say, "I don't remember, it was kind of a while ago."

(Eames was born two weeks late, taking his own good time about it. He was, essentially, born a liar).

So here he is in Los Angeles with his two bags, his shades hooked into his collar, and a plastic-wrapped mint from the airplane tucked in the back pocket of his jeans. His boarding pass is wrinkled, and he tosses it out at the same time he rips the tags from his luggage, an old habit born from his paranoia about anyone seeing where he's come from, that information too precious to divulge. Ariadne is waiting for him at the arrivals gate, and Eames is genuinely surprised to see her. He knows from Arthur that she works for Somnus now and so of course he's going to be seeing her, but he hadn't expected it to be so soon. He'd figured Arthur had her holed up in a cubicle somewhere, churning the gears of her brilliant brain. But here she is, in a white chiffon blouse and clean black slacks, and all Eames can think is blood is going to be a bitch to clean from that blouse.

Ariadne waves when she sees him. She looks hesitant. They haven't spoken since the Fischer job. Why should they? Ariadne had school and Eames had his comfortable life of intrigue and debauchery, and there were usually oceans between them at any given moment. She's done freelance work for Arthur and some of Cobb's other contacts, true. Enough that her name gets dropped every now and then within the community as someone to watch for, to snatch up when she finishes her PhD and starts looking for employment. Well, she's graduated now, and she has employment, and Eames can see those changes in her. It's not just her business casual clothes. It's in the line of her jaw, the deftness of her fingers as she tries to tug one of Eames' bags away from him.

"Here, let me take that," she says, while Eames tugs it back, and they stare at each other for a moment, the suitcase a DMZ zone between their two bodies. But then Ariadne ducks her head and laughs softly. "Okay, see if I offer you help ever again."

"Didn't think you'd be the one to pick me up," Eames says. "Thought Arthur would send an assistant or something. Not that I'm incapable of calling a taxi myself. Arthur and I seem to disagree on that point."
"He wants someone to take you to the office before you can change your mind and dash," Ariadne says. "You should see him. He's cleaned the entire place top to bottom. He's brought air freshener. He's convinced that if you see one speck of dust, you're going to flee for the hills, screaming."

"You have seen my workspace, right?" Eames asks archly.

"We want to make a good impression on you," Ariadne says. "We really, really want you to come and work with us."

"Work with you, or work for you?" Eames asks as they find their way out of the airport, dodging weary travelers and reunited families, and huge carts laden down so much they deserve a physicist to study their gravity-defying properties. "I can't say I'm too comfortable with this corporate environment. It's a trial run. Show me what you've got, and we'll see."

"It's not really corporate," Ariadne says. "That's what it says on the tin, but Somnus is just me, and Arthur, and Ae Sook the receptionist. Triple A is what I call us. We're more like a commune, but without the folk music." She grins. "Or with the folk music too. Arthur gets to decide the music in the reception area, but now that you're here, I'm hoping we can gang up against him and his Burt Ives obsession."

"This sounds promising already," Eames says.

"I like it," is all she says, and there's a quiet maturity, a force of will to her voice now that didn't once exist. It's been nearly five years since the Fischer inception; when Ariadne tilts her head as they enter into the sunlight, she looks like someone else entirely. They move for the parking lot, Eames following her cues. They arrive at a Prius, which she unlocks with a flourish of her keys. "Tada! It's new," she says. "You can just throw the fast food wrappers onto the backseat. That's what I do."

"You're driving?" Eames asks. "You can drive?"

"Hey, I'm not thirteen," she replies. "I can sign my own permission slips and everything."

Ariadne's list of accomplishments also includes the ability to drive like a hyperactive mouse in a lab maze sensing cheese. Eames throws the McDonalds wrappers in the backseat, but then they come bouncing back when Ariadne slams on the brake, barely stopping in time for a red light. "Oops!" she says cheerfully, and Eames slants her a look of horror when the light turns green and Ariadne guns the gas, making a left turn that cuts through three lanes of traffic.

"I hope Arthur is paying you a lot," Eames tells her, "because you're going to need it for your insurance."

"Are you kidding me? He pays me peanuts. He's been saving all the big bucks for you, because unlike me, you might actually say no."

"And you're willing to work for peanuts?" Eames says. "That was a yield sign by the way."

"Was it?" Ariadne says. "Signage can be so philosophically ambiguous, can't it? And yeah, as long as it covers my bills and feeds my fish, I'm willing to work for what Arthur pays me. We're — we're a new company. Money's got to be tight until we get established." She pauses, drums her fingers on the steering wheel. Her nails are French-manicured but her cuticles are hopelessly ragged, something else that keeps pulling at Eames' attention. "It's not like Arthur isn't making sacrifices either."

"What happened to all the millions he's saved from his old jobs?" Eames asks.

Ariadne gives him a look like this is geography class and he's just asked where Mexico is. "Do you
know how much rent is in downtown Los Angeles?"

"Normally I just house-squat," Eames says.

"You're really fishy, you know that?" Ariadne replies. "I used to be super impressed by you, but um, right now I'm just giving you the side-eye."

"I'd like to think I have a rugged charm. I call it Homosexual Hobo," Eames says magnanimously, and Ariadne snorts-giggles as she barrels them through the chaotic traffic of downtown Los Angeles, a pinball-frantic drive, her smooth grip on the wheel belied by the jerky pattern of her feet on the brake. Eames begins to recognize bits and pieces of buildings as they pass them, and when Ariadne announces that they're getting close to the agency, he can see they're in South Park, within view of L.A Live. Ariadne pulls them down a side street, where there's a row of tall office buildings, testaments to the postmodern love affair with glass, two short and one taller building, who shines science-fiction green underneath the glare of the sun.

Somnus Entertainment Agency is located in Suite 5 on the 22nd floor of the green building, called the Meridia Complex. Inside the chrome-shiny lobby, Eames experiences that old street kid urge to nick everything that he can, partly because he might just be able to use an ornate magnolia fixture in his flat, and partly because it'll piss some rich person off. He smirks at the thought, and Ariadne looks at him inquisitively. "Nothing," Eames says. "Just wondering how much TNT it'd take to blow this place up."

"Oh god, you're in America now, don't say that so loudly," she says.

"You like this part too?" Eames asks, running his finger along the polished elevator buttons, designed to look like real gold, except real gold is never so perfect.

"I like..." Ariadne sighs. "Look, the kind of people we're catering to, they eat offices like this up. They want it fancy, they want us to pretend like we're Hollywood. It's just the face we put on for the public. The actual stuff we do is pretty cool, you'll see."

"I never said I didn't like it," Eames says. "Maybe I'm just an absurdly destructive person."

"Check and check," Ariadne mutters, and then she's practically shoving him into the elevator and jabbing the close button as soon as she can. Arthur is hardly the only one who's afraid he'll escape, Eames thinks, and he's amused by the idea. It's never an unpleasant feeling to be the one holding the cards. He's been in enough situations where the opposite was true, some of them involving Arthur, so he'll take what he can get and ask for more when no one expects it.

Arthur is waiting for them in the reception area, chatting with a woman with very red nails. "Eames," he says, straightening when Ariadne and Eames walk through the suite doors. "This is Ae Sook."

Arthur gestures towards the red-nailed woman, who looks at Eames in frank appraisal, running her eyes up and down. Eames smirks at her, desultory. "I got your office ready," Arthur adds, no additional hellos, no inquiries into the comfort of his flight, no offers of food or naps to deal with jet lag — and Eames sort of loves him for that.

"Show me," Eames says, and Arthur does.

It's a pleasant office, nondescript business casual, with wide wooden shelves bolstered into the egg white walls. There are books on the shelves, and Eames walks to them right away. A lot of sleep science books, he notices, and psychology tomes, probably designed to impress clients. Arthur watches him with a rueful air. "If you don't like them, we can get rid of them," he says, but Eames has no desire to get rid of them. It's not as if he brought his own books, which aren't on any shelves
like these but are scattered all over the world, a few boxes of Zane Grey he keeps with Yusuf, a few more in Mexico City, bits and fragments scattered wherever he goes.

"Do you want the tour?" Arthur asks.

"Sure," Eames says, and if Arthur is bothered by his lack of enthusiasm... well, Eames doesn't mean for it to offend, and Arthur's expression doesn't change. Arthur is genial and bland as he leads Eames around Somnus, showing him his office (dark, elegant, almost too old-fashioned, with paintings of the sea), Ariadne's (a mess), their conference room (an oval table, a tray of tepid Earl Grey no doubt from a morning meeting), the washrooms, the dream labs. They remind him of dentist offices, these labs with their sterile sofas and scrubbed down counters with clearly labeled drugs. Dentists, or every sleep clinic Eames has ever been in — the effects of gentrification.

He turns around in time to see Arthur rubbing his cheek. Arthur's skin is storybook flawless, and Eames suddenly feels a little sick with desire.

"I'm almost too afraid to hear your opinion," says Arthur, which is bullshit because he's never been afraid of Eames' anything, such a shame. "So let's just get it out of way. Lay it on me."

"I really don't think the Hieronymus Bosch piece looks good in your office," Eames informs him. "You're at least thirty years too young for that. Switch it out for something modern." His skin feels tight and pricked, but that's not news. He knows he reacts to Arthur in this particular way. Not all the time, thank god, because Eames is quite good at controlling himself, but occasionally Arthur will do something, or make a gesture, and it will slip through Eames' veins like a virus.

"Did you bring the forms?" Arthur asks.

"I signed them with one of my legal names, even," Eames says. He can hear Ae Sook down the hall say something in a low voice, surprisingly husky, and Ariadne laughs and threatens her nose with a stapler. Then there's the sound of the door opening, someone coming in. He can see him from this angle if he cranes his neck right. An elderly man, dark skin, polo shirt, neatly trimmed beard.

Arthur follows his gaze, and he grins. "Positions, everyone. We've got business."

What Benjamin Olsen wants is cabaret. He wants song and dance, women in short skirts, romantic lighting and Paris fantasies. He also wants, he admits with a shy chuckle, one particular cabaret dancer that he once saw on a stage. He brings a sketch of her, done during his art school days, and Eames studies the wrinkled piece of paper in his hands. He sees a young woman, blonde with slender features, eyes a little too wide apart, making her look gamine (which is, he supposes, a kink for some people). He thinks about where this woman is now, how old she is, whether she knows that in a Los Angeles office a young man she once impressed on a stage wants to dream about her.

"You realize that we're an entertainment agency," Arthur tells Benjamin Olsen. "We don't do sentimental dreams. Nobody you might have an actual relationship with. No deep, dark, cathartic secrets. You want this woman? All right, we can get her for you. But we're going to have to make sure she won't cause problems inside your head."

"Not at all," Olsen says, blinking, and Eames thinks of Charles Lyle in his back alley palace. "I, uh, I don't see what kind of problems she would cause. I'm a bit too old for any hanky panky, unless you're a true miracle worker."
"Yes," Eames says to Ariadne later, "that's Arthur, all right. Helping solve erectile dysfunctions everywhere."

She snorts as she hunches over her sketches of a cabaret hall.

"It's a good policy though," Eames says. "No sentimental dreams. Makes everything so much simpler that way. Arthur's learned a lot from working with Cobb, hasn't he?" He looks at Ariadne cannily for a reaction, because he's heard those rumours too, but she just blinks and licks the end of her pen.

"—do you think this is a better layout?" she asks, pointing at the first sketch. "Or this one?" She flips over to the second page.

Designing dreams for the general public in some ways is easier than what they used to do, Eames comes to learn in the following days. Working with a compliant, friendly mark who wants you inside their head solves a lot of the more dangerous irritations of trying to break into unwelcome spaces. Plus, marks (sorry, clients) are much more up front in delivering their history. Arthur makes them fill out long, complicated forms that ask them if they've ever had subconscious military training, if they've ever had panic attacks, if they've ever been diagnosed with depression or suspect they would be diagnosed with depression. He also subjects them to psychological analysis, where he sits them in an interview, and after, he compiles a character profile so that they know exactly what sort of psyche they're going into. Dreamshare agents used to have to work for that information. Now, it's just given to them gladly.

It's also much, much more difficult because now people are paying for the opportunity to be infiltrated, and they want it done exactly right. They're so goddamn picky, Eames thinks, and even though Olsen is a fairly genial man, all meek smiles and awkward suggestions, he's not afraid to undercut Arthur during one of their meetings when Arthur shows him design plans, or goes over particular details.

It's a lot of work, for what's going to end up being a three to four hour dream, Eames reflects, but this is the thing he's come to realize: dreams matter to people. Fantasies matter. Nightmares matter more. And Arthur gets that, because he listens to Olsen's concerns patiently, and if he gets frustrated, he shows it only after, when it's just the four of them in the office.

"You're good with people," Eames says to Arthur. "I can see why Cobb wanted to partner with you so much. Cobb's... not so good with people, or at least, not so good with certain kinds of people. He's a limited comfort zone. I'm sure he can charm bored soccer moms pretty easily, but you—" He pauses. "You're what he used when he wanted to go big."

"Is that meant to be a compliment?" Arthur asks, re-examining a detail in Olsen's file. Eames leans against the doorway of his office, and flicks a rubber band at Arthur's head.

"Never ask, never tell," he replies.

"I could have sworn you had work to do," Arthur says. "Or have you forgotten about the cabaret dancer you're supposed to be forging?"

"How many practice sessions do you think it takes for me to get it right?" Eames asks.

Arthur hesitates.

"No, really, I'm curious," Eames coaxes. "You've worked with me before. How many times does it take for me to get it right?"
"Not long enough," Arthur says under his breath.

"Jealousy," Eames proclaims. "I hear one becomes accustomed to other people being wildly envious of one's wondrous skills, but I've mostly found that to be untrue." He sees Ariadne poke her head out of her own office. She looks harried, and there's a piece of tape stuck to her hair. "You want to go for lunch?" he calls to her. "Our fearless leader here has loads of work to do, but you and I needn't go hungry for his sake."

Ariadne considers his proposition. "Can it be pizza? With pineapple on top?"

"If you want," Eames says, and if that's a forlorn expression on Arthur's face, brought about by an intense desire for pineapple-covered pizza, Eames will never know, because Arthur shuffles his papers and then tells him to get the hell out of his office. "We'll bring you back a few slices!" Eames says as he follows Ariadne's quick footsteps down the hall.

"I'm allergic to pineapple!" Arthur shouts back.

They go out for drinks the night before the Olsen commission goes live. Ae Sook swears by Villains Tavern on Palmetto, and if there's one characteristic Eames can pin on Ae Sook (who is notoriously mysterious, with her rouged lips and her dark nails, and her penchant for flirting with Ariadne like some regal madame), it's that she knows her bars. So the night before the Olsen job, the four of them are squeezed around a table, and Eames has a Glenfiddich single malt cradled in his hands while Arthur sips at his ale, looking contemplative and not entirely with them.

"Arthur." Eames snaps his fingers twice. "Arthur, you there?"

"Yes," Arthur says immediately. He blinks and then looks confused. "I mean, what did you say?"

"Stop worrying about Olsen," Ariadne says. "Come on. If I have to be the one telling you that you've got loads of experience in this sort of thing, and this can't be nearly as dangerous as the jobs you pulled before — if I've got to say that to you, then there's something really wrong."

"I'm not worried," says Arthur. Ae Sook raises an immaculate eyebrow. "Okay, maybe I am, a little bit," Arthur says, "but that's just called being cautious. Anyway, let's drink." Eames looks at Arthur's fingers. He can't help it, he's a hands person. His gaze is always pulled back to that one particular spot, a true magnetic north. Arthur's hands reveal more about him than his carefully chosen words ever will. He knows Arthur is a worrier; he's seen it before. The night before Fischer, he'd been out prowling the streets, looking for something to do, some way to get rid of excess energy, and he'd caught Arthur doing the same thing. It's why they're good at what they do, and it must be strange for Arthur not to have Cobb anymore. Arthur doesn't need Cobb, but still, a partnership like that is a wound that heals back thicker and different than the skin was before.

He thinks of Terrence, and then he makes himself stop.

"Drinks!" Ariadne announces brightly, and lifts her glass.

"Drinks!" Eames agrees. The bubbles in his glass catch the light. "May there be many unhappy sods who come to us because they don't have the imagination to create decent dreams themselves!"

"God, Eames," Ariadne says, "you aren't supposed to say that out loud."
"But you're going to drink to it anyway," he says.

"Well, yeah!"

A few drinks later, after Ae Sook leaves to pick up her girlfriend from being stranded somewhere on the south side, Arthur gets a text message. Eames knows this because he's sitting close enough to Arthur that their thighs brush, and he can feel the vibration of Arthur's mobile — a pleasant buzz in his relaxed state. Arthur reads his text and then he sort of laughs before grimacing. "It's Saito," he says. Ariadne perks up. "He says good luck for tomorrow. Huh. He's got nerve, treating us like we're the newbies."

"His company is doing amazing in Japan," Ariadne says. "To be fair. Which I am. I'm always fair. I'm as fair as a whistle."

"You would make a very fair whistle, true," Eames says, patting her on her sleek, shiny head. Ariadne can't hold her alcohol at all, to the surprise of no one.

"He keeps on making offers to buy Somnus out from me," Arthur says, leaning back in the booth. His eyelids look heavy now, like he's tired, and Eames can't help but imagine at least ten different sexual scenarios to tire Arthur out like that. Unfortunately, each of these scenarios keep on slipping back to the more familiar image of Arthur staying a late night in his office, double checking their day's work when he should be heading out, partying, doing tequila shots off a svelte flight attendant's stomach, or whatever it is that handsome, young, red-blooded American men do. Eames can't profess to know — Eames was always sort of an odd duck, his own mother said. His idea of a good night is a hot water bottle, Lady Chatterley's Lover flipped open to the dirty bits, and absolute silence so that he doesn't have to talk to anyone.

"Buying Somnus? What a terrible idea," Eames says. "Somnus isn't even worth anything yet, it's so new."

"He just wants to see me fail," Arthur groans. "In a friendly way, apparently. He says I'm no good as a businessman. But I'm a man! And I'm in business! Hence, I'm a businessman."

"That would be the logical conclusion," Eames says agreeably.

"Fuck Saito," Arthur says.

"Didn't you once—" Ariadne begins.

"No," says Arthur, and hands her another drink. Ariadne reaches for it happily, but then Arthur makes a split second decision and yanks it back. Beer sloshes over both their hands, and Ariadne looks like her cat has just been run over. "On second thought, maybe not," Arthur says. "You're going into the field with us tomorrow, so no more drinks." Ariadne, in a fit of reckless animal cunning, lunges for the drink, but Arthur is faster. This is why you should never go drinking with your boss, except Eames is here too, so what does that say about him? Never mind that he tries not to think about Arthur as his boss. He technically is, but at the same time, he's not. Eames is a special case, the one they're still trying to lure in. If he's smart, he'll play it that way as long as he can.

"If I was still a penniless student, you would totally give me that drink!" Ariadne protests in outrage. "Having a career? It sucks."
"Do you know who makes the best kind of forger?" Eames had once said to Terrence when they were in Bucharest, drinking coffee in a brazier-heated room while outside the sky was steely with rain. "I'll tell you. The kind of person who's absolutely comfortable in their own skin, or the kind that's absolutely not."

He'd waited for Terrence to say, well, which one are you? except Terrence never did. Terrence would never budge an inch if he could withhold a mile, and that was what had drawn Eames to him, in the end, that glimpse of awareness that might as well be called self-conceit.

Benjamin Olsen lies back on one of the sofas. Arthur has a syringe ready, and when Olsen indicates that he's comfortable, Arthur slides the contents of the syringe into a vein on Olsen's arm. Ariadne stands by, watching with her arms folded; every now and then she winces with her hangover, but she knows how to do her job, and her job right now is to help Arthur in every capacity. They've done this, the two of them, even before Eames came along. Ariadne takes the empty syringe from Arthur, freeing Arthur's hands to hook a drowsy Olsen to the PASIV that is the centerpiece of the dreaming room, blossoming with its wires like a cherry tree.

Arthur injects Ariadne, and then turns to Eames, but Eames shakes his head. He can do it himself.

They go to sleep.

When they're in Olsen's dream, and the music of the theatre is floating lazily through the gleaming mouths of saxophones, Eames goes backstage and slides into the cabaret dancer's body. It isn't difficult. She's similar enough to one of his stock forgeries that he doesn't have to concentrate on it as much as he might another design. This one he wears easily, shaking his hair out and turning to the mirror to make sure it matches Olsen's sketch. He smirks at the woman in the mirror and blows her a kiss.

Ariadne comes backstage to join him. She's left Arthur to watch over Olsen, and this is something they've gone over during their practice runs. Arthur will sit in the back with a gun in his jacket, keeping an eye on Olsen's projections. Eames will deliver the show. Ariadne will handle anything else that either of them are too busy to take care of.

"I'm really glad you're here," she tells him as she does his makeup. Technically he could forge himself already donning the proper maquillage, but why put in that effort when there's time while the first acts perform, and Ariadne's hands are warm and silky over his eyelids. She smells like honeysuckle lotion. "We needed a forger, or we were never gonna be able to offer the really complex dreams. Projections can only do so much, even if you make an effort to control them — and I'm getting better at that. I can make bartender projections and taxi driver projections, but it's not the same as a real person, not for performances like this." Eames listens to her chatter, and opens his eyes when she's done. "There," Ariadne says proudly. "Hey, it's gorgeous."

"Sweetheart, you say that as if I had a doubt," Eames replies. "Now which lipstick, the red one or the plum purple one?"

She laughs. "I love girl talk with you."

"Mmm," says Eames.

"I can't believe you're going to dance for Olsen," she says. "I can't believe you're good at it. Why are you so good at everything? It's not fair."

"I'm going to tell you a story," says Eames, after he's applied the lipstick to his pursed mouth and smacked it for good effort. "Once upon a time, there was a man who was good at everything. He
was handsome and brave and talented, and everybody loved him. I shot him in the middle of the road and stole his identity. The end."

Ariadne says nothing, but he smiles and rises from his chair. "That's the cue," he says, listening to the applause for the New York musician trio. "I'll see you later."

Eames, when he's Eames, moves like nothing in particular. He's neither graceful nor graceless. His body is meant to get him from Point A to Point B without too much fuss. When he's other people, however, he can move in any way he wants. He can walk like he's had military training, he can strut like a model, he can limp like he's got a bullet in his leg, he can shuffle like there's something to hide. This woman he's embodying, this dancer, moves like smoke, every gesture connected to the next until it all seems like one long, sinuous curve when he steps onto the stage and starts dancing.

He used to be uncomfortable about the roles he was asked to play. When he started out in dreamshare, he'd say bloody hell, I'm a book forger and you want me to do what with my hips? In his naivete, he'd assumed being a body-forgers meant control. Since then he's learned that there is no control, except that which he creates for himself.

So he dances. He catches Benjamin Olsen's eye in the crowd, makes sure to pout at him, excite him. Olsen leans forward in his chair eagerly, his hands twisting an embroidered handkerchief on his lap. Eames gives his hips an extra shake in his direction, because why not, Olsen's an old man and he deserves what he's paying through the nose for. Olsen opens his mouth, breathes a word (a name), and suddenly Arthur is getting out of his chair and making his way to Olsen's side.

Olsen blinks up at him, confused. Eames continues dancing, but he eliminates any possible twists or turns, keeping Arthur and Olsen in his line of sight. Arthur hasn't given the sign yet for the dream to be shut down, so Eames' instructions are to keep on going like nothing's wrong. But something is wrong; he can tell by the tense set of Arthur's shoulders underneath his gentleman's peacoat.

Eames shouldn't be able to hear what he's saying, but this is a dream, and Eames is good with those.

"—you said a name," Arthur tells Olsen. "You told me you didn't know her name."

"I... I..." Olsen stammers, and for good reason, because Arthur can be intimidating even to people who've known him for years. Not in the way a linebacker with huge shoulders is intimidating, but in the way of a spider spinning a net, or a slim knife poisoned to assassinate an emperor.

"You called her by name," Arthur presses on. "You lied to us. She wasn't some fantasy pinup of yours. You knew her."

And Eames likes to think, in his more morbid moments, that he's a connoisseur of despair. This vintage he recognizes. Olsen's expression collapses and he turns his eyes wildly to Eames, who stops dancing now and simply stares back, wearing a stranger's body — but she's not a stranger to Olsen, who finally chokes out, "She was my wife."

Eames can see Arthur's face, and he knows this mood as well. Arthur looks firm and icy, but also infinitely compassionate, because he used to work with Dominic Cobb, and besides, who among them doesn't know how it feels to want something that badly and then lose it? Only children and monsters, Eames thinks, and they may be many things in the Somnus Entertainment Agency, but they're not monsters yet.

Arthur grasps Olsen's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he says, "but we have to end it here. I'm not going to take any risks. No sentimental dreams. That's our rule."
Ariadne speaks from the wings. Her voice is halting, unsure. She'll probably be mad at her own weakness later. "Arthur, we're almost through the performance. What's the harm? She's not really here. It's just Eames. This isn't like, this isn't like Mal."

"If we make an exception for one person, word will get out, and we'll have to make an exception for everybody," Arthur says.

"I won't tell! I promise!" Olsen says.

"I'm not talking about you," Arthur says gently. He guides their client back into his seat and then removes his pistol, a dream-version of his trusty Glock 17. "I'm afraid, Mr. Olsen, that it's time to wake up."

Eames doesn't house squat in Los Angeles this time. He does the respectable thing and lives out of a hotel. When Arthur finally gets around to asking where Eames is staying, his only reply is "oh" and then a sort of sideways glance at nothing in particular. Followed by a comment, a few minutes later when they're passing each other in the hall: "Should have known you'd get other people to clean up your messes." Arthur says it lightly, almost affectionately, and Eames doesn't know what to do with that. He's not used to people outside of retirement homes and call centres liking him.

Or maybe, Eames thinks, this is all a terrible idea. Maybe he had some sort of fit after reading Charles' letter in England, and running across the Atlantic is the only way he knows how to deal with personal problems. Maybe he's going to wake up tomorrow, stumble to the mirror, scream in horror, and pack up all his bags and leave without saying goodbye. It's not like he's never done that before.

Or maybe he can be a mature adult for once in his life, and take it a day at a time. So, working with a regular paycheck: weird. So, working with Arthur and Ariadne in an office where they have their own business cards: also weird. But hasn't Eames always bragged about taking on any challenge? (Eames' card says Stuart Eames. It's not his real name, but he's rather fond of it — it was the middle name of his grandfather, whose first name Eames shares, and Eames enjoys playing little tricks like that, leaving a trail for anyone smart enough to investigate further. His card also says 'entertainment facilitator', which means absolutely nothing, as he tells Arthur. Strippers are entertainment facilitators too).

Eames has this habit. In every hotel room he stays in, he has to make sure it's set up the same. The bed always has to be in the centre of the room. The TV has to be across from the bed. The promotional brochures and tourist crap have to be in the drawers. His towels can't hang over the sink counter. The chairs have to be near the northeast corner. It doesn't need to be 100% precise, but as long as he can capture the general placement of things, he's happy.

If it means he has to rearrange furniture, he'll do it. It drives the hotel managers to their therapists, no doubt, but hey, what is Eames paying them for if not to put up with the whims of a deranged Englishman?

"It's because you don't have a home," Ariadne says knowingly when she comes over to drop some files off, and Eames mentions his habit to her. "So you try to make one. You try to make the same space wherever you go."
"Actually, I do have a home," Eames says. "I have a mother, and toe socks, and multivitamins and everything. Who do you think I am, James Bond?"

"No, you're more like Ditto."

"What?"

"I thought we were exchanging pop culture references!" she says. "You know, Ditto? The shapeshifting Pokemon? Found in Route 13 in Pokemon Red/Blue. Um, I guess you're too old for that. Never mind then! You probably think I'm a total geek, but," she furrows her brow, "you probably thought that already." She shoves the file at him. "Here. It's the historical research for the Uzanne job."

Uzanne is their latest client, a dot com millionaire who's way too young, and will try to never let you remember that, so he acts cynical and old, ambling into Somnus and smirking at everything like he's seen it all before, when really, he's probably only ever seen the inside of his own office. You don't get to be a computer tech millionaire at twenty-five by being a happy and well-rounded person.

(Eames' general reaction to marks is a combination of pity, disdain, and occasionally, as with Olsen, pitying and disdainful sympathy. Very probably this means he is Just Not Equipped To Socialize With Other Human Beings. Ariadne seems to actually like their clients, or at least be intensely curious about them. With Arthur, it's harder to tell because there's that professional boss sheen he has to wear like cologne, but Eames usually gets the sense that Arthur is an avid student of human nature. Well, after Mal and Cobb, who wouldn't be).

"Rum runners," Eames says in regard to Uzanne. "I suppose it's slightly more creative than pirates. Or wanting to be a princess. Though I can understand the last one. Hasn't everybody wanted to be a princess at some point in their life?" He bats his eyelashes at Ariadne. "I'm going to make a guess here. You had pink sheets on your bed when you were growing up."

"Wrong. My parents were environmentalists. We slept on leaves," she says. "Leaves of grass."

Eames stares.

"Kidding!" she says. "My parents are English profs."

"That's the most terrible thing I've heard all day," Eames tells her, and she shrugs like don't I know it.

So, rum runners. Uzanne. He leaves the file on the dresser after Ariadne leaves. He goes and takes a shower, soaking up the hot water and shaking out the sweat tangled in his hair from his torrid evening affairs with the Sheraton's treadmills. There are two scars on his chest: one from a bullet in Nagasaki, and another from his father, who'd been ex-special ops and a mechanical genius, the sort that inspires eldest sons to dress flamboyantly and study useless amounts of literature. So there's that old wound, and then there's the rest of it, which he can barely stand to look at some days, the dry, leather burns that pattern down his legs in whorls. He picks at it, because he's half convinced all doctors are liars, and wishes some of the skin would flake off. But it never does. That's why they call it a scar, he thinks sardonically, and then tries to push it out of his mind.

He sings a bit of Queen in the shower, a welcome distraction, shaking his hips like Freddie when he climbs out.

In bed, safe and toasty between the sheets, with a glass of water within reach, he goes over the file Ariadne's brought him. Arthur put it together, he can tell that much right away, because not only does Arthur do the good majority of research for jobs that require accuracy of setting, he has a
system that Eames recognizes. Arthur prefers bullet points, never one to waste words, and he has an obsession with italics. Arthur's writing builds into a rhythm that lulls Eames into sleepiness ("we must be sure to take this into consideration. Uzanne has specifically mentioned a tendency towards motion sickness.")

He dreams about Al Capone, about nights so thick you can taste the air in the back of your throat, about boxes floating on the lake. They look like coffins.

"Olsen's suing us," Ae Sook says after she gets off the phone.

"Fuck," says Arthur.

Eames's hand is halfway towards the cappuccino machine, but he decides that today is a good day for decaf instead.

"Arthur, it's a bit pathetic that you can't run a business for six months without getting sued," Eames says, lounging on the maroon sofa in Arthur's office. It's where clients are meant to sit, but Eames takes pride in his lounging skills. He's mastered the angle where spreading his legs is suggestive without warranting a sexual harassment suit. Arthur's probably good at getting slapped with those too.

"You think this is funny?" Arthur asks.

"Well, yes," Eames says.

"You are a douchebag," Arthur says, floundering around his desk. "Where are my pens? Why don't I have any working pens?"

"It's a little funny," Eames says. "A few years ago, you would have just put a bullet in Olsen's head. Now you have to suit up and make nice with lawyers. It's hilarious."

"I would not have put a bullet through Olsen's head," Arthur says irritably. "For one, he's sixty. I'm not such a miserable person that I go around shooting the elderly for the fun of it. That's really your sort of ha-ha."

"You think I'm depraved," Eames says, delighted.

"I heard about what you did with those triplets on the rooftop of a Bangkok police den," Arthur says. "I think you are horribly depraved, and I also think you should get that depraved ass to a tailor's and buy a nice suit, because you're going to have to go to court with me."

"That could be a problem," Eames says, thinking about his fake passports and forged I.Ds. He buys most of them from a woman in Berlin with technicolour hair, and he trusts her work, but there's always the possibility that even Gertrude's genius might not stand up to legal investigation. The American government's very, very interested in dreamshare right now. He rubs his nose.
"Thinking about leaving, aren't you?" Arthur says, watching him. "They can't subpoena you if they can't find you."

"It's crossing my mind right now, yeah," Eames admits. "But if I stay and testify, there's a certain nobility in it too. One man touting the right of dreamshare professionals to put safety clauses in their very risky work, a white knight standing up to big, bad bullies. I bet you could write a pop song about it, if anyone ever wrote pop songs about legal battles."

"No, they just live it," Arthur says. When he finally finds a pen, he doesn't look happy. "And it's not just that it's about safety. Sure, yeah, that's definitely part of it. Letting clients have sentimental dreams opens up a whole fucking can of worms. But it's also that we're not running a therapist's office. There are people in this town who do that, and kudos to them. I gave Olsen a reference. I was nice to him. It pisses me off that he's acting like this."

"He seemed so nice," Eames says woefully. "He probably had a deer farm and fed the little does from his hand."

"He was nice," Arthur says. "See? This is what I mean. You bring emotion into it, and everything goes off the rails. Even nice guys."

"We're agreed then," Eames replies. "Emotion's such a nasty beast. Everything's better without it. Even sex. Especially sex."

Arthur looks up. If Eames had a romantic soul, he would say that with the half-closed curtains and among the baroque style of the furnishings, Arthur looks gorgeous and stern, like a scripture from John of Patmos promising vengeance to the end of days. Rude as it might be to say, stress looks good on Arthur. It sharpens the youthfulness of his face, and some might say it makes him look like the man he really is, sharpshooter and ex-thief and probably still liable to be arrested in twelve different countries. If Eames had a romantic soul... but he doesn't, and to him Arthur mostly just looks irked, like a bloke at the convenience store who's found out he's been shortchanged for his beer.

Eames has a lot of understanding for the little frustrations that accompany one's existence. You can have someone blow up your flat, you can have your informant betray you to the mafia, and yet it can be a single hangnail that sends you reaching for the Xanax.

"Don't worry about it," Eames says. "This is just a little bump. We'll deal with Olsen, we'll fuck with his lawyers, and then we'll go on and forget about it. Hell, it'll probably bring us more publicity."

"There's always that," Arthur says. "On the other hand, we could always get branded by the media as heartless bastards, and women will make the sign of the cross when we approach their babies."

"We'll get lots of business from the Satanists then. You're such a downer, Jesus Christ. Go do some yoga, practice your downward dog," Eames continues, because Arthur is apparently sort of his friend now, or at least someone he doesn't mind spending time with while his legs are open (and that, to Eames, is the best definition of friend he can think of). Eames is swinging the bat with his eyes closed here. "Think about it this way," he says. "Hell doesn't have the best lawyers. Saito does."

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Eames' knowledge of lawsuits is mostly this: avoid them as much as possible, hold your breath when you pass courthouses, and affect a really posh accent if you're unlucky enough to be pulled in. But
the next few weeks are absolutely hectic at Somnus, with Arthur bringing one of Saito's lawyers in, a woman named Veronica with a lazy eye who is absolutely devastating with her words. Ariadne takes to cowing from Veronica whenever she sees her, and even Arthur seems dazed by her presence. "She's like some sort of dominatrix, but with sensible shoes," he says, leaving a meeting in which Veronica laid out exactly what defenses they're going to use against Olsen's lawyers.

When they're not preparing for court, they're working for Uzanne, who shows up at random hours without calling ahead. And whenever he does, everybody has to stop what they're doing and present him with their work, because Uzanne is rich, and rich bastards pull the strings. It's not actually different from Eames' old jobs, but he takes to hiding from both Uzanne and Veronica after a while, communing with the lovely space that is the storage closet. He has a stool there now, a pile of books, and a bag of dried fruit for when he gets the munchies.

He's on page fifty of Brontë's *Agnes Grey* when Arthur yanks open the closet door and stripes the insides with fluorescent light.

"Apricot?" Eames offers.

"I shouldn't," Arthur says, eyeing the piece of dried apricot with an alarming degree of hunger. Arthur, when he's stressed, subsists on water, butterscotch candies, and yogurt with stale granola that he's probably been carrying in his suitcase for years. "I shouldn't," Arthur repeats, but then they hear Veronica call his name. "But I'm going to."

He slips inside the closet and shuts the door.

"What happened to responsibility?" Eames says. "What happened to owning up to our shareholders?"

"We don't have any shareholders," Arthur replies, "and if I have to hear one more bit of legalese, I'm going to rip my own head off. I was built to handle anything as CEO, but I was not built for this. It's boring."

Eames loves that. When Arthur falters from cool-headed fledgling leader to slightly whiny, Eames gets a thrill that 1) means he needs to develop more hobbies, like, he hears bird-watching is nice this time of the year and 2) makes him want to take Arthur out on a helicopter over the city and give him a bazooka. He's seen Arthur in action before, sees the enjoyment run blood-hot beneath the unruffled exterior, and even when they first met, even before they knew anything about each other beyond a hole in the sidewalk, all Eames knew was that he wanted to see more of it.

Honestly? (For Eames' value of honest). He never expected Arthur to go legitimate. Forget Cobb's absurd bridal metaphors. Arthur's a bit feral. Cobb only thinks otherwise because he knew Arthur back when Arthur was still an eighteen-year-old recruit with a dorky haircut, but Cobb's always been stumped by the essential fact that people aren't tin soldiers, no matter if they can stand like one. People change, and Eames has watched Arthur develop a taste for danger.

"You wouldn't happen to have any wine gum candies on you?" Arthur asks.

"What an oddly specific request," Eames says.

"Odder than that guy who came in yesterday wanting the dream about goats?" Arthur says. Eames snickers. Along with their no sentimentality rule, they also have a no sex dreams rule, because that's a performance Eames really isn't keen to get into with paying strangers.

They stand in companionable silence for a moment; squished together in a closet is hardly the most
notable situation they've ever been in, and Eames isn't ever going to complain about the press of
Arthur's thigh against his, or the clean smell of Arthur's sweat underlying his scent du jour. "Do you
smoke?" Arthur asks suddenly.

"Why, do I smell like it?"

"No," Arthur says. "I was just wondering. I was thinking too, about—"

"This is novel," Eames interrupts.

"Shut up," Arthur says mildly. "I was thinking about what you said the other day. About sex." He
turns his head slightly, and his jaw bumps Eames'. Eames sucks in a breath, sharply, but Arthur goes
on. "I'm thinking we should have sex."

"This is your grand seduction?" Eames asks. There's a buzzing sound that's beginning to fill his ears.
He can't tell if it's the fax machine on Ae Sook's desk, or if it's his own brain going ping ping ping
warning. Arthur isn't looking at him, but his body remains tucked right against Eames', and he can
feel the ghost pressure of Arthur's fingers near his hips — if only Arthur would lean just a little
closer, and it'd be pressure for real. "I must say, there's something a bit lacking about it. The grand
part, I think, as well as the seduction part. You might as well be asking me for my blood type."

"In Japan, asking you your blood type would be terribly romantic," Arthur says. "Besides, I already
know you're O negative. And you're a Libra. And your favourite food is Scotch eggs. I'm creepy like
that."

Eames runs his tongue over his bottom lip. His faculties of imagination are bar none, but even he'd
never imagined it like this. Him and Arthur. If it ever happened, his best guess would be as a result of
too much booze and possibly a case of mistaken identity as well. A rough, no-holds-barred dirty fuck
in a dirty place, though they are essentially in a janitor's closet, so maybe he wasn't too far off the
mark from that.

"Hmm," Eames says. "I was expecting a bit more passion."

Arthur looks at him. "This isn't a Nora Roberts novel."

"No," says Eames, "you're right about that."

"So?" Arthur asks. "Want to have sex with me? Sometime in the near future, when we actually have
time off from work?" Eames listens to the way he shapes his words, measures the cadences of his
breathing. He doesn't want to admit what he's looking for, and in any case, he doesn't find it. Arthur's
self-control is exceptional, and makes virgin duchesses weep in frustration.

of his body, of whom he's with. "Why the hell not?"

With all that self-control, it's no big surprise that Arthur's main talent in dreamshare is maintaining
and stabilizing projections. He's got a whole honeypot of talents if you want to get nit-picky about it,
but there's lots of people with massive amounts of talents. Eames can herd a bunch of dreamshare
operatives together and, after getting them to stop bickering, come up with at least fifty useful skills
between them and a pile of pocket lint. Very few of them, however, can control their own
subconscious to the degree Arthur can, which is why, in a team with Arthur, it's usually Arthur's dream layers that are the most populated.

There's a cool mist rising as their schooner chops through the night water. It tickles the hairs on Eames' arms. They're in Arthur's dream, Arthur's dream as designed for Uzanne, and it's him and Arthur forming the field team. Ariadne's decided to sit this one out — the boat is only so big. They don't want to be bumping elbows with each other, especially not with bullets flying over their head as Arthur's projections, dressed as feds, chase after them in a heavy boat.

Try as they might to catch up, the Billy Ann is faster, even when loaded down with crates of rum from Bimini and the greater Bahamas. Uzanne is at the aft, ducking with a Chicago style Thompson submachine gun cradled in his skinny arms. It's an old-fashioned gun with a heavy trigger pull, and the barrel tends to climb off target during automatic fire, but Uzanne doesn't know that — it's as light as a fantasy when he holds it.

The Port of Miami is in front of them; there's only dark water behind them. They're leaving ripples in their trail as fast as they can. Arthur's captaining the Billy Ann, and they can see lights winking at the port where they're supposed to unload.

They'll get there, but so will the feds. That's the plan — they've gone through it during practice runs so many times. The Billy Ann will dock at port, but they'll be ambushed by more feds, and Uzanne and his rum runner buddies will have to fight their way through.

"Fuck yeah!" Uzanne shouts, firing off a rat-a-tat round. One of the feds on the pursuing boat takes a hit to the chest and goes down in a cry of pain. "Eat lead, motherfuckers!"

Eames stands out of the way, in the shadows where Uzanne won't notice him. Uzanne wants to be the big hero, the rebel of the people. He doesn't want to be reminded that none of this is real, and the big, bad hero's got babysitters. So Eames is content to lurk out of sight, keeping an eye on the action in case anything goes bad. He can see Arthur by the stern. "That's right, I fucked your mom!"

Uzanne shouts, and Arthur exchanges a wry look with Eames.

Arthur's projections are beautifully responsive. Eames won't ever tell Arthur how much he admires it, the way Arthur's projections can shoot at Uzanne with convincing menace but always aim just a little too far to the left. Uzanne moves, and so does their range of inaccuracy. Arthur's up there, pretending to steer the boat, but the Billy Ann doesn't genuinely need him, so he can devote all of his concentration to his puppetmaster duties.

"I've got the real McCoy here!" Uzanne shrieks, so hyperactive that it nearly sounds like he's in pain. Eames' gaze twists to him quickly, checking if he's been hit, but no, Uzanne's still standing there like a goddamn goon, shooting rapid fire metal into the air.

So he's doing all right then, living out his teenage fantasy. Eames lets himself look back up at Arthur and think about sex.

He wonders if Arthur's ever had sex on a boat before.

He wonders when was the last time Arthur had sex, period. Not that Arthur can't get laid any time he wants (with that quirk of a smile and those blackjack-fast fingers, all ready to peel you out of your clothes), but Eames rather suspects that these days, Arthur's schedule isn't allowing for much personal time. Arthur stays so late at the office and arrives so early, that somehow Eames doubts that the circles under his eyes are from wild nights of bed-rocking.

Eames thinks, I bet I could make him scream.
If Arthur's talent is projection management (which makes him sound like an investment banker, but he dresses like one anyway), then Eames' is the ability to think dirty thoughts and still be damn good at whatever he's doing, be it shepherding immature clients, building antique furniture, or Inuit throat-singing. When the Billy Ann hits the docks, he's immediately ushering Uzanne off, and then backpedaling in jerky panic, yelling, "Shit, it's an ambush!"

"Save the rum!" Uzanne says.

"No, no, sir, we've got to run, we've got to run," Eames says urgently, and right now he looks like any 1920s scumbag, suspenders and ragged shirt and dirt underneath his fingernails.

"Men never run," Uzanne informs him, and Eames has to resist the urge to roll his eyes. Instead he pretends to cower in fear as the first bullet flies through the darkness, missing Uzanne's shoulder and smashing into the starboard side of Billy Ann.

"Fuck, it's Frank!" Uzanne says, his eyes gleaming. "Fucking Frank spilled on us! I'm gonna find him and roast his head on a pike!"

Who's Frank? Eames wonders, but Uzanne's got his own story in his head. Uzanne is running forward, pinwheeling his arms, lost in the myth. Eames watches him go, and then discreetly moves behind a bunch of crates and picks his nails.

Arthur meets him there later, showing up with his arms folded loosely. "Uzanne seems happy," he says. "He's picking through the dead guys' pockets."

"Classy."

"Yeah, don't worry, I put a rattlesnake in one of them," Arthur says, just in time for them to hear Uzanne yell cool!, followed by a pumping spray of bullets. Something lives, and then something dies.

"You're so generous," Eames remarks. "I hope when it comes time for the office Secret Santa, you pull my name."

Arthur grins.

"So," he says.

"So," says Eames.

"We should go out for dinner with Ariadne and Ae Sook when we wake up," Arthur says. He sticks his hands in his pockets. It makes him look young, and also sort of lewd, because if Eames isn't mistaken, that's some hip-cocking action going on right there. "And then I think we should find a hotel."

"My hotel? Or a different hotel?" Eames says. "I've got an abundance of them right now. I collect them like lucky pennies."

"We can go wherever you want," Arthur promises him.

"Ah, I do like the sound of that," Eames says.
Eames thinks, all right, casual sex. This, he's good at. Casual sex is like going to a new country and
learning the language, not enough to live by but enough to order food and find your way around.
Arthur's body tells him everything he needs to know when he pulls him inside the Marriott room
they've booked (without any shame, Arthur walking right up to the clerk and sliding over his credit
card — "one bed", he'd said, and glanced over his shoulder at Eames with dark moonless eyes).
Arthur's body melts against Eames' hands when Eames shoves him inside the room and up against
the wall.


Arthur's keyed up, he's two hundred miles per hour. First he'd sent Uzanne home. Then he'd sat
through dinner at Engine Co. No. 28 with Ariadne and Ae Sook, toasting a successful job and telling
amusing anecdotes about rum runners that he dug up during his research ("Did you know—" Arthur
began, and Ariadne said, "No, because only you care about that sort of thing"). He'd taken the seat
beside Eames, and the entire time Eames could feel him thrumming with nascent energy. Arthur
dropped his napkin twice, and when Eames bent down to pick it up for him, Arthur had graced him
with a smile that was half apology, half wolfish impatience. And knowing just what he was impatient
for made Eames go hot all over, like being thrown into the Red Sea.

So now they're finally alone, and Arthur's making dirty noises against Eames' mouth, thrusting his
hips boldly and saying "Eames, Eames, Eames" over and over again.

He wasn't wrong. Arthur is so generous, Eames thinks wonderingly, sliding his lips over Arthur's
smooth jaw. He should have expected this. Arthur's got his control, and his thousand dollar loafers,
but it's a sign Arthur hasn't been fucked up too badly by life and the army, because he still knows
how to let go. He's tight and smooth at work. Here, in this room, he's just desperate for it, unabashed
about his desire, and Eames can't help but wonder if he might not be tight and smooth in other ways.

"You're smiling," Arthur gasps, grabbing Eames' shoulders and hanging on. "Why are you smiling?"

"No reason," Eames says, and kisses him with lots of tongue. "How long has it been for you?"

"Why does it matter?" Arthur asks, kissing him back. When they pull away, Arthur nearly bangs his
head against the wall. He winces.

"Mere curiosity," Eames says.

"It's been — a while, okay. It's been a while," Arthur says, and he starts pushing Eames towards the
bed, unhooking his tie as he strides forward. The back of Eames' knees hit the mattress. He tumbles
over freely, arms spread, and waits as Arthur straddles his hips. "I've heard good things about you,
Mr. Eames," he murmurs as he grinds down. Eames struggles to contain a moan. "Apparently you're
very good at what you do."

"You hired me, didn't you?" Eames says.

"I did," Arthur says, smirking. "Guess now I'm getting around to testing the product." He bends
down, elbows braced around Eames' head, and kisses him again, long and deep.

"This breaches so many workplace conduct codes," Eames breathes.

"Do you care?" Arthur asks, and then he's undoing the buttons on Eames' blazer and slowly working
him out of his clothes. Eames pushes upwards, shoulders and hips both, to help him, and when
Eames' chest is bare, Arthur leans down and licks his left nipple. It makes a part of Eames' brain go a
little mad, a primitive part that thinks Arthur's tongue and Arthur's teeth, and then, as Arthur starts
licking Eames' nipples with rough, strong strokes, just Arthur.

Arthur's good at languages too, and even though this is their first time, he knows exactly how to make Eames feel like an electric wire. He crawls down Eames' body and starts tugging at Eames' jeans. He gets the zipper down, and then his underwear, pushing the whole lot of it down for better access, but Eames stops him before he can wriggle it over Eames' thighs. His hand clamps over Arthur's wrist and he says, "This is enough."

Arthur blinks at him, and he must know (must be able to see the beginning of the scars), but he nods. He doesn't seem to mind as he starts sucking the hollow of his hip. Eames makes appreciative sounds, but he's a greedy bastard, so he starts trying to direct Arthur's mouth elsewhere before long. Elsewhere like his cock. But Arthur gives him a look from beneath his eyelashes (somehow it's not coquettish at all, but powerful, like Arthur's got a hook in Eames' lungs and he's just going to keep pulling), and Eames lets him do whatever the hell he wants. Yeah, that's a good plan. That's a brilliant plan.

Arthur groans. He sounds so happy to be where he is, between Eames' legs, and when he finally moves his clever tongue to Eames' balls, Eames clutches the sheets until the blood drains from his knuckles. "God," Arthur says, and he's licking Eames' balls lovingly, giving them the attention that their clients crave when they're in a meeting with Arthur and Arthur's just so beautiful and brisk and businesslike — that's the kind of attention Arthur gives to people who pay him, but it's nothing like how he's focusing on Eames right now, single-minded, a slut for it.

"Arthur, you're really an absolute cocksucker," Eames says. "So I suggest you—"

"Do you ever stop talking?" Arthur interrupts, and Eames runs a finger over Arthur's cheekbones.

"No," he says sweetly.

Arthur's got a competitive streak with a one-stop express line to his gonads. He swallows Eames' cock without any warning, just a long, slick glide that makes Eames toss his head against the pillows and grunt. Arthur's mouth is all around him, and if he looks down he can see the shadow of Arthur's hair falling over his eyes — and suddenly that seems intolerable, he needs to see Arthur, all of him, so he reaches down and smooths Arthur's hair back. Arthur keeps on sucking, and god, when Eames touches him, he feels like he's running a fever. His eyes are bright and slightly unfocused when he flicks them up, a question, but Eames nudges his cock against Arthur's lower lip, and Arthur closes his eyes and mouths it messily.

When Eames comes, there's a noise between them, low and needy, and he's not sure who it's from.

"Lie on the bed. On your stomach," Eames orders. He doesn't know how he's managing to form complete words — he's still shaking from his orgasm, buzzing high from it—, but Arthur's all too eager to obey, throwing off the remainder of his clothes and then lying down in front of Eames, his arse pale and perfect, made to be bitten. So Eames does just that. Bites it, and when Arthur moans into the pillow, bites it again. He's going to leave marks, he thinks. He's going to leave bruises like this. Good.

When he has Arthur writhing on the sheets, his dogtags sliding around his chest, every last inhibition gone, begging without actually saying the words (not today maybe, but one day, one day Eames is going to make Arthur say them) — when he has that, Eames' tongue slips south. He licks at the pucker between Arthur's cheeks, and Arthur freezes. Eames pauses, waiting it out, and then Arthur gives a full-body shudder. "Eames," he says, voice cracking, and Eames laughs in tender mockery before he starts stroking his tongue against Arthur's hole, wetting it with his saliva.
Soon enough, he has Arthur riding his tongue, pushing against him as Eames thrusts his tongue inside, penetrating Arthur that barest bit, forcing him to spread. Arthur's rolling his hips rhythmically, his mouth making noises all the while Eames eats him out. And then Eames decides that he doesn't want Arthur to move at all, he just wants Arthur to take it. So he grabs Arthur and shoves him down, holding him still with his greater strength. Arthur's breath makes a twisting sound, but he doesn't fight back.

Eames fucks him with his tongue for a very long time, and by the time he lifts Arthur up a little to reach for his cock, that's all Arthur needs to come, violently and with a wail that shakes the room around their ears, jerking and jerking and convulsing so sweetly in Eames' hands.


Eames smiles at him and lets go. Arthur doesn't make any effort to move. He seems perfectly content to lie there, sweaty and sated. He stares at the ceiling fan for a while, catching his breath, and then he hoists himself up to get a good look at Eames. His eyes are darker than ever, and Eames is struck by a sneaking serpentine fear.

"Arthur," he says, "you have to promise me this. Promise you won't ever fall in love with me."

"The hell?" Arthur says, wiping idly at the semen on his thigh. "Uh, I hate to break it to you. You were good, but you weren't that good." He's flushed as he says it though, the colour high on his cheeks, which ruins the effect somewhat.

"I'm being perfectly serious," Eames says, kneeling on the bed. "I'd like to do this again. I'd love to do this again. But I don't do — it's like with Olsen, I don't do sentimental. It's a bad idea. It only ends in tears, and I'm fucking sick of tears." He licks the back of his teeth. "I think we could have a great thing between us — an arrangement. But you've got to understand what I can and can't bring to the table."

"Listen to yourself," Arthur says, snappish. "You really think one fuck and I'm ready to bind myself to you, forever and ever til death do us part? Maybe no-strings-attached fucking is exactly what I want too."

"Is it?" Eames asks.

"Yeah," Arthur says. "I don't have time to do relationships. And if I was, I wouldn't look for one with you. No offense. But I've noticed you're kind of a headcase, and I already spend way too many hours of my life catering to the whims of headcases."

"I'm flattered," Eames says. "Also? Relieved."

"And I'm annoyed," Arthur says. "You've just ruined my afterglow, you asshole."

"Too annoyed to do it all over again?" Eames asks.

"Maybe not that annoyed," Arthur says. "Or maybe you'll have to come over and show me how not annoyed I am." He lets his legs fall open in a clear challenge. Eames is a man of the world. He doesn't waste any more time talking when they could be doing much more lascivious things instead.
One job at a time, Arthur says, and make sure results are superb. This is how they're going to compete with the other dreamshare agencies in town. This is how they're going to establish their reputation, because they're willing to take on the difficult dreams, the ornate.

It's Caroline Lo's sweet sixteen, and what she wants is a slumber party.

At the court of Louis XIV.

"I can't get over it," Eames says. "White boys want to be ninjas, Asian girls want to be French princesses. The human heart — you think we're ever going to understand it one day?"

"Not yours," Arthur shoots back. He's already on his laptop, ordering history books and scheduling tours of museums and sending off emails to professors at UCLA so that he can establish contacts and fact-checkers. Eames gets frustrated by the historical dreams that are becoming so popular in the entertainment business (he rarely had to deal with them before, when historical meant the span of a person's life). But Arthur seems to love them. Arthur takes them as a personal gauntlet thrown down, see if you can do this, boy, and Arthur very much can.

"Oh," Ariadne says when they tell her. "Versailles!"

"I thought you'd like it," Arthur says.

"It's interesting," Ariadne replies. "I'd rather design my own buildings, of course, because that's where I have more fun. But it's kind of nostalgic, working with actual buildings again. Dom never let me."

"He had good reasons," Arthur says, because he can't help but defend Cobb even now.

"I know," Ariadne says simply. "I'm not going to argue with you on that."

"You just never listened."

"I listened to what was important, and then I made up my own mind on the rest," Ariadne says, and there's that streak of arrogance in her which rushes through every now and then, stormy and stubborn and necessary, Eames thinks. People are going to look at Ariadne, see her size and her gender and her youth, and they're going to think she's a pushover. Even Arthur forgets sometimes, and Eames will catch him reminding Ariadne of some basic concept, with Ariadne bristling and hissing, I know, Arthur, I know, now leave me alone.

Arthur's an over-compensating control freak, and Ariadne's an independent-minded prodigy, and Eames is just here to watch the show and refill the popcorn.

Arthur delegates some of the research to Eames, specifically the intel on their client. This is standard procedure at Somnus. Most of their data comes from interviews with said client, but it never hurts to try and verify as many of the facts as possible, to dig deeper and find criminal records or newspaper articles. People will lie about eating the last cookie in the jar; they'll lie about bigger things too. Legally, Eames isn't allowed to search anything that he doesn't have access to, but on the very first day Arthur had said, "I'm not going to ask, and that's the end of it." So Eames searches wherever he wants to, and makes up fake references if he's ever asked to show his work.

Not all the dreamshare agencies do this, but not all of them are actually good at the job — and for sure, not all of them have the kind of experience Arthur, Eames and even Ariadne do, where going in blind means injuries, sickness, or worse. Those yuppy dreamshare companies who learned their trade from twelve-week courses at trendy SoCal colleges — Eames doesn't even bother to remember the names of their competitors, that's how little he thinks of them.
The Lo job is particularly sensitive, because it's not just Caroline who's going to be entering the dream with them. It's Caroline and her five guests, so Eames has to dig up intel on every one of them. They're all Caroline's age, approximately, so there isn't much available. Eames at fifteen had a rap sheet the length of his leg, but Eames was an ambitious child.

This is what he knows about Caroline: that she's the only child of a Hong Kong real estate mogul (they have real estate in Hong Kong? Eames thinks. They have room on the island?). Her mother was her father's former mistress. Never married, but apparently on good terms with each other. Caroline lives with her mother and her uncle in Los Angeles where she attends a private girls' school, and hopes to study biochemistry in college, though secretly she longs to be a model.

She signs all of her emails with xoxo <3, and every time she comes into the office, she's chewing spearmint gum, and her lip gloss smells like tangerine.

"She seems to think I'm her buddy," Ariadne says. "You and Arthur impress her, but she treats me like I'm her high school friend. It's insulting! I have a doctorate."

"Yes, but you also have a pert nose," Eames says.

"I hate every one of you," Ariadne says.

"That's right, show me your passion," Eames snickers.

"One day," she promises, "you're going to be walking into a building and it will fall down on you and crush your head. And you will cry for me to help you, and I will laugh."

"Then it's a good thing your laughter is like the sound of tinkling bells on the wind," Eames says, "filling men's hearts with gladness."

Ariadne makes a horrified face. Then she switches tactics immediately and says, "Are you and Arthur having sex?"

"What?"

"Sorry, are my words too big for you to understand?" she says, because Ariadne is an asshole as well as a genius, and so she fits right in. "Are — you — two — having — sex?"

"What would give you that impression?" Eames asks. "Is this some sordid fantasy of yours that you're projecting on me? Because as much as I'd love to fulfill each and every one of your pleasures, being crushed to death under the work of a furious architect isn't one of my kinks. So sad." He spreads his hands, desolate. "In another life, we could have had beautiful babies together."

"I know you and Arthur left together after the Uzanne job," Ariadne says, ignoring him. "Also that he never got home because I called him during the night. There was a small mistake with one of Uzanne's forms. Anyway, I got his answering machine. And despite what Arthur told me, I don't think he stayed late with you to talk about post-war German cinema."

"Really?" Eames says. "German cinema? That's the best he could come up with?"

"So you are having sex."

Eames sighs. "Is it a problem for you?"

"Not really," Ariadne says. "A bit weird, because now I'm the third wheel working in an office with a couple, but—"
"We're not a couple," Eames interrupts. "We're never going to be a couple. It's never going to compromise the company. I'd stop it if it ever got that far, but it won't. We're all adults here, right?"

She chews her lip thoughtfully. "I hope so."

What he and Arthur do together is very much adult-rated.

It's like — actually Eames doesn't have the words to describe it, which is a shocker because as anyone will tell you, Eames has the right words to describe anything. But it's like — think about a train. Think about that train chugging along at a steady pace, following the tracks like every good train does. And then suddenly, crunch, one of the gears breaks, one of the engines goes down, and everything gets fast and desperate and out of control. Soon enough that peaceful train is veering off the tracks, crashing into the wilderness, no hope of survival.

That's what it's like to have sex with Arthur.

They go into the Marriot, fine, fine, everything's calm. They get a room together. They go into the elevator, and Eames doesn't touch Arthur at all, even though he could, because who the hell is around to see them? The security cameras? It's California; let them look. But he keeps his hands to himself the entire time, and then when they arrive on the tenth floor, he walks in step with Arthur to their room. He handles the key; it slides into the lock smoothly.

They go inside the room, and then it's like madness overtakes them. Arthur's on him, slamming him into the wall, and Eames lets him. Eames welcomes it, kissing Arthur with an animal fury, biting his lips until they turn the colour of pomegranates.

It's a release mechanism, he thinks. They work in a stressful environment, they play roles for their customers, so it's all that pressure building up at the end of the day to catalyze this. This being Arthur on his knees, fumbling with Eames' fly. The bed is about four feet away, but it might as well be on Pluto. Arthur doesn't want to let go, and Eames will knife anybody who makes him.

Arthur slides Eames' trousers down just the barest bit, enough that he can lick at Eames' cock, but not enough that he bares the scars. Arthur's considerate that way. Arthur's more than considerate. Arthur is Eames' favourite person in the entire world when he sucks Eames down, licking licking licking him — Eames wonders where all this hunger came from.

He won't ask, because it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter why Arthur wants to have sex with him out of all the men in the city, and possibly the world (Eames can imagine a few people who might be willing to jump on a plane and fly over for a booty call with Arthur). Eames hasn't gotten to where he is by questioning random windfalls of luck, and so he twists his fingers through Arthur's hair, a bit mean, but Arthur seems to love it. Arthur groans and buries his nose against Eames' pubes, rubbing him until Eames can feel orgasm building behind his balls.

"Stop," Eames says roughly, and Arthur refuses to obey. Arthur keeps on sucking him, so Eames has to put both hands on Arthur's shoulders and shove him backwards. Arthur gives him a disappointed look — see how badly he wants to suck cock —, but Eames says, "I want to fuck you" and Arthur's breath catches like a fishhook.

"Yeah," he says. "Oh god. Yeah." Eames leads him to the bed and strips Arthur out of his clothes. He leans back and reaches for the lube he's brought with him (he knows how to think ahead, that he
does). He slicks himself up, shoving his trousers down just a little more. The scars begin to appear, but Arthur's too far gone to care. Arthur whimpers when Eames slides one thick finger inside him.

"More," he gasps, "more."

"Shhh," Eames says, and kisses Arthur's sweaty forehead. Arthur makes a sound like he's dying of thirst, and Eames works him with that one finger for a while, stretching him leisurely while Arthur writhes. When Eames feels he's ready, he adds a second finger, and Arthur clenches down on him, squeezing. "Oh," Eames says, velvety. "You really want this, don't you? It's all right, it's all right. I'll give it to you."

Three fingers, and then Eames slides on a condom and presses his hips forward, breaching Arthur with one languid thrust that seems to go on forever — he can feel himself sink inside, so hot, and Arthur keens in his throat as he arches up, opening so beautifully.

"Go faster," Arthur demands. "I'm not that patient."

"Ah, but you see, I am," Eames says, and he fucks Arthur slowly, in increments, while Arthur hisses and swears at him. Eames stops his movements entirely to lean down and kiss him, filthy. When he starts moving again, Arthur's quiet, so Eames strokes his cheek and brings him back to noisiness, wringing gasps and moans from him like coins. He keeps it slow for as long as he can, wearing out the edges of his control — but then the train is gone for good, a disaster in the making, and Eames can't hold on. He fucks faster, harder, and he pins Arthur's wrists to the bed as he shoves.

"Ah — ah — fuck!" Arthur says, and he comes, spilling, a shuddering wreck. Eames fucks him through his orgasm, feeling Arthur's body jerk in convulsions, a rhythm that finally tips Eames over, and he's spending so hard, his vision blurs.

The next morning, he's in the office of a court reporter, and he's picking at the threads on his suit, which he bought just last week, examining them instead of the lawyer who's addressing him. "Mr. Eames?" the lawyer asks sharply, and Eames looks up.

"I've already given you my statement," he says. "I can't see what else you want from me."

"We want you to answer a few questions," the lawyer says. His name is Kirschenbaum, Eames recalls. He looks down the table where the rest of Olsen's legal team waits, and sodding hell, Olsen had seemed so unassuming that he'd nearly forgotten how rich he was, to be able to afford Somnus' fees. And to afford a getup like this. "Were you aware of Somnus' policy against personal dreams when you entered its employ?" Kirschenbaum asks.

"Yes," Eames says.

They wait.

"Yes, and?" Kirschenbaum presses.

"I should think that one word is sufficient enough," Veronica says. "Yes. Affirmative. Go on. My client and I can wait while you check your dictionaries. Education is such a problem in this country, isn't it?"
"Mr. Eames, you've been very uncooperative throughout these depositions," Kirschenbaum speaks. "One would think you'd have greater interest in defending your employer."

"The policy exists," Eames says. "It was written into the contract that Olsen signed. It was explained to him. When asked if he had a personal investment in any part of the dream, he said no. Your client is a liar, and this entire lawsuit is a joke."

"Mr. Olsen says that the conditions of the contract were not made clear to him," Kirschenbaum says. "If you read the particular statement, you'll see that the wording is quite vague. What constitutes a personal dream? Technically, the mere desire for a dream makes it personal. So where is the line drawn?"

Veronica begins to reply, but Eames stops her. "I'm going to tell you a story," he says. "There once was a man whose father was dying. This man, he loved his father very much, but he had a father complex, surprise surprise, and this made him weak and vulnerable to anyone who might prey on him. This man dreamt of his father. People were hurt."

"An amusing anecdote," Kirschenbaum replies, "but I don't understand the relevance."

"That's because you don't know anything," Eames says. "You claim to be experts on dreamshare technologies and its legal implications, but there's an entire world and you're still in the kiddie pool along with rest of the population." He makes a gesture with his hands. "I've been in this business even before there was a business. I support Arthur's policies wholeheartedly, and yes, they were made clear in the contract."

Another lawyer speaks. Eames doesn't know her name. "Actually," she says, "you'll find that there's quite a bit of information about dreamshare made available by veterans like you, and it's highly detailed."

"What, like the WikiLeaks?" Eames asks.

"It's just one example," she says. "Quite a few of your colleagues have come forward and shared their knowledge with the rest of the world. I hear the man who leaked those original documents is writing a book—"

"You mean, when he's not in hiding for hacking American military records and being hounded by the people whose livelihoods he betrayed," Eames says flatly. "Do you even know his name?"

"It's not public knowledge yet," she says, "but we have full confidence that—"

"His name," he says, "is Terrence Moran."

"And I think that's enough for today," Veronica interjects smoothly. She faces Kirschenbaum and the other lawyers. "My client has given you his statement. He has answered your questions to the best of his ability. If you want to talk some more, you know where to contact us." She gets up and fetches her briefcase. Eames follows her, all too glad to leave.

There's a noticeable furrow on Arthur's forehead when Eames returns from the depositions. Arthur is lounging casually in the reception area, chatting with Ae Sook — too casually, and Eames just knows that he's been waiting there all along for his return, ready to jump him and ask how it went.
"I have something to show you in my office," Arthur says, and it's not even a good lie, like he isn't bothering to try. Ae Sook snorts, and Eames raises his eyebrows and keeps his peace as he trails Arthur into his office. Arthur closes the door behind him, and then turns around, going, "What did they ask you? What did you say? What did Veronica say? Was Olsen there?"

"Slow down," Eames says.

"Sorry," Arthur says. "I've just, I've been thinking about this all morning, and you can be unpredictable, and I was imagining all these awful scenarios. In one of them, you dropkicked a lawyer. I nearly threw up thinking about it."

"You're really that worried about this, aren't you?"

"Master of the obvious," Arthur retorts. "Yes, I'm worried about this. We're being sued. If Olsen wins this in court, that could mean the end of Somnus. It could wipe us out, our finances and our reputation."

Eames studies him carefully. "But I've never seen you this worried about anything else. And I've seen you in some pretty tense situations. Ones that involve bombs even."

"That's because I could *do* something in those situations," Arthur says, frustration laced in lines of his body, in the brisk movements he makes that look almost like pacing. "Here I'm at the mercy of the law. I'm impotent."

"Well," says Eames.

"Tell me how it went," Arthur says.

So Eames does. He sits on the sofa while Arthur perches on the arm beside him, and Eames gives him a quick rundown of the depositions. "—it wasn't so bad," he finishes. "Olsen wasn't there, his lawyers were idiots, and I didn't dropkick anyone because Veronica wouldn't have let me. It went as well as these things can, so stop losing sleep over it." He smiles, a lilt of his mouth. "Lose sleep over me instead."

"I lose a distressing amount of sleep over you," Arthur complains, but Eames just makes a cheerful sound and snakes his hand into Arthur's trousers. Arthur tries to bat him away, but he's not too worked up about it.

"Do you now," Eames says, and leans up to kiss Arthur's jaw.

"We really shouldn't," says Arthur.

"Mmm," says Eames, and nips him so hard there's sure to be a mark later. Arthur moans helplessly and kisses him for real, wet and sloppy, and soon enough they're making out on the sofa, Eames pressing Arthur deeper into the cushions while they can hear the sound of Ariadne passing by the door, and Ae Sook answering the phone — but none of that matters, and Eames works the tension out of Arthur slowly.

"Eames," Arthur says, licking at his throat. Eames murmurs appreciatively. "I'm going to ask you a serious question, and you're going to give me a serious answer."

"No, I'm not ten inches," Eames says, "but it's close enough."

"Not that," Arthur says.
"I can't see what else could be so important at this juncture."

Arthur stops kissing him, a travesty. He's got them flipped over now so that Arthur is straddling his hips, and Arthur looks intent, though about what, Eames doesn't know. "Do you think I'm a good leader?" Arthur asks.

"Isn't this an awkward position for you to put me in?" Eames asks. "What'll happen if I say no?"

"Nothing," Arthur says. "But I want to know — I can't think of anybody else to ask. I have to be strong, one hundred percent, in front of Ariadne and Ae Soo. But you've already seen me in bad situations before. I've got nothing to lose with you."

Eames thinks about many things in that breath of a moment. He thinks about trust, about vulnerability, about just why Arthur is willing to do this. It's easy enough to offer your body, not so much to offer your personal fears. And he can tell that it's very much Arthur's fear, though Arthur's expression isn't any different. Eames knows Arthur's body well by now, and he can read the stiff line of his shoulders, like an iron pole jabbed between, holding Arthur together in one piece.

"You've got weaknesses," Eames says, because that's what Arthur wants, honesty, and Eames likes him enough to give it to him. "I never used to think of you as a leader when you were always following Cobb around, and to be frank, I still think that's where you're best. You're fantastic at taking point. You're the arm we'd all give up our other arm for. But you work better when you've got someone else looking at the big picture, so you can focus on the little logistical details. Cobb imagined the board; you implemented it. That's how I've always seen it."

"That's what I thought," Arthur says ruefully. "I guess that's why we're in this mess, huh? No Cobb to pull my head out of the ground."

"Bullshit," Eames says, clenching his hands around Arthur's hips. "So you're not a natural born leader? Who the fuck cares. You learn. I'm not a great leader either, but that doesn't mean I can't step up if I need to."

"I wanted," says Arthur, "to do something different. After Fischer, and after Cobb retired, I thought, 'what can I do to get out of his shadow?'"

"You live in the sunlight," Eames realizes.

"Exactly." Arthur smiles crookedly, lost in his own thoughts. Eames runs his hands up and down Arthur's thighs until finally Arthur shivers involuntarily, shaking himself back to reality again. "Thanks," he says. He wriggles his hips against Eames' erection and laughs, some of the tension evaporating from his shoulders; not all of it, but some. "Now what were you saying about almost ten inches?"

The hall's in the Hall of Mirrors — Caroline Lo is sixteen today, of course they're in the Hall of Mirrors. It's an obvious choice, uninspired, but rife with romantic fantasy, sunlight and glass in the midst of Louis XIV's third architectural campaign. The seventeen windows open to the gardens, glistening with mirrored surfaces; the pilasters have writ on them all the glorious symbols of eighteenth century France. Eames can see gilded fleur-de-lys and cockerels everywhere he looks, and when he glances up at the ceiling, he can see Charles Le Brun's modello decorating the central panel, cherubs and Grecian beauties gracing the French king. Le roi gouverne par lui-même, he
thinks, and then faces the party, where Caroline Lo and her five female friends are wearing elaborate gowns with ivory silk bodices and trains that glide effortlessly behind them.

They keep on bumping into each other, these girls — their panniers are wide, and they're not used to it. But they're happy, and they're laughing, and servants are flitting about silently, pouring them virgin cocktails and offering dainty pastries. There's an orchestra playing in the gardens, and Caroline Lo carries a little lapdog with her as she goes, a dream-version of her beloved Mimi whose creation had been one of Eames' additional duties in preparing for this dream.

("Maybe we can bring the real Mimi in," Ariadne had said.

"Are you kidding me?" Arthur had replied. "We don't know nearly enough about animal psychology and sleep patterns. It'd be a disaster."

"One day then," she'd said, sounding like she was already adding it to her to-do list).

It's a party, and they have games planned for these girls. Arthur, dressed as a gentleman of the court, his wig sleek and streamlined, kept together by velvety black ribbons, soon announces them. There will be cards, he says, and garden games, and dancing — dancing with handsome young men, he adds, and already the projections of said handsome young men are appearing at both ends of the hall, approaching with smiles and conversation. These are Arthur's creations; they're in Arthur's dream, and Arthur has a fine eye for beauty. Each gentleman is better-looking than the last, and yet to Eames they lack a fundamental quality of humanity in their absence of scars, or flaws, or even just really bad hair.

Arthur leads the girls through the activities, while Eames trails behind them like a spectre, making sure everything is running smoothly. It makes him feel like an office manager, or David Bowie's office manager at the very least, what with the shiny, embroidered tights and the diamonds in his buttonholes. Arthur even insisted he wear a patch on his face — Arthur likes fucking with him almost as much as he likes fucking him.
This is a sad truth: other people's dreams are rather boring.

Even the ones that seem like they should be salacious. Even the smutty dreams. People's fantasies are always so much more interesting when they're alluded to; when you're actually in the dream, watching their every move, they suddenly take on the quality of the really chatty fellow on the lorry who wants to tell you everything that he did that morning. It's too much detail, too many mundane segues between the exciting bits, especially for constructed dreams like these.

Real dreams are fragmented. They're bloody strange. They jerk from one scene to another without any internal logic. People shift — your mother in one scene becomes your geometry teacher in the next. You forget the first part by the time you reach the third part.

You can't replicate that in an artificial dream. It's too subjective.

Eames stifles a yawn into his arm, and then looks up in time to watch one of the party guests, a short girl named Jean who he notices wobbles even more precariously than her friends on her heels. Jean is falling behind the rest of the group as they head towards the gardens. Eames starts towards her, to offer her some help (or even to reduce the height of her shoes), but then Jean gasps. There's a man who's appeared out of nowhere to grab her by the arm and start tugging her away.

Arthur doesn't notice. Arthur's too far ahead with the other girls. But Eames is here, and Eames pulls out his gun and shoots the intruder between the eyes. Jean shrieks — it finally catches her friends'
attention. They stop and turn back, but Eames hides his gun and calls out to them, "Just a spider! Don't worry!"

Arthur catches his eye, but Eames shakes his head. I'll take care of this, he mouths.

"W-what was that?" Jean asks, panicky. "Where did he come from? Is this — is this part of the dream?"

"No," Eames says, moving to her side. She looks pale and shaky; he reaches for a handkerchief and wipes the sweat off her forehead. "That was a rogue projection."

They sit down all their clients and explain the vocabulary beforehand, so there's no confusion. "A projection?" Jean demands. "So that wasn't — it wasn't really my boyfriend?"

"Your boyfriend?" Eames peers into her face. He was at least ten years older than you. There are people like this, he thinks, even among the uninitiated. Peoples whose subconscious lives are just that strong. People who can't let go. Dom Cobb was one of them. Jean appears to be another. These may be the most dangerous people of all. "You're going to have to leave the party," Eames tells her. He gentles his voice, just in case she protests, but Jean doesn't. She grabs the handkerchief from him and dabs at her forehead more vigorously. "You're going to ruin it for the rest of them if you stay. Sorry, but that's just how it goes."

"No, no, I understand," Jean says weakly. "It sucks, but I — I think I want to go home." She looks down at their feet, where the dream-body of her boyfriend is bleeding out against the floor.

Eames takes her arm and leads her towards the grand appartement du roi, away from the crowd.

"Are you going to shoot me awake?" Jean asks, scared.

"There are lots of different ways to do it," Eames tells her, and then, when she finally looks away, distracted by the flutter of a servant passing by, Eames shoots her in the back of her head. It's so quick Jean doesn't even have time to make a sound. Her body slumps to the floor. Eames turns the gun on himself.

He wakes up at the agency, and Jean is gasping on her sofa. "You said you weren't going to shoot me!" she accuses.

"I lied," Eames says succinctly. "Didn't want to cause you any trauma."

"I've got trauma!" Jean says. "I've got loads of trauma! You've scarred me on France for the rest of my life, oh my god. I can never eat another croissant again!" Eames rolls his eyes, wondering if this is going to be another lawsuit, but Ariadne is rushing into the room, alerted by the sound of their voices.

"Oh hey," she says. "You guys are back early. Um. What happened?"

"Jean had a projection incident," Eames says.

"I'll get her some tea," Ariadne promises. She turns to Jean. "Do you want some tea? We've got tons, like, every packet ever made in all of history. Our boss freakishly collects them," she says brightly. She looks at Eames. "Ae Sook and I can handle it from here. Eames, you should get back into the dream. Arthur will need you."

"I'm just so utterly indispensable, aren't I? Or maybe it's the way my muscular thighs look in tights," Eames says. He unhooks himself from the PASIV and goes to the drugs on the counter, quickly
calculating the dosage that he needs for reentry. Ariadne helps Jean to the reception, murmuring comforting words. Eames finishes the drug cocktail and sits back down. He picks up the wires of the PASIV; he injects himself back in.

It's a long night after they finish the Lo job. If they want to celebrate, the impulse is dulled by the hanging spectre of Jean. She's a rich girl with rich parents — that's one of the most lethal combinations Eames can think of. They should just give her a grenade, point her in the direction of Somnus' mission statement, and be done with it.

"We made them sign an airtight waiver form this time," Eames says to Arthur, who is lingering in the office long after everyone is gone, readjusting furniture and reshelving files like if he takes one step out of the office, it won't be there anymore when he returns. "We soothed her. We gave her tea. We were the height of correct behaviour. It's difficult to become more respectable than tea."

"Eames, my old spa used to give me tea," Arthur says. "And they once waxed me so hard, let's just say I could have worn a bikini afterwards, if I wanted to."

"I knew you didn't come by your boyishly hairless chest naturally," Eames says. Ariadne and Ae Sook are long gone, and there are empty glasses of wine on the desk — their meager attempts at celebration, if only to go through the motions. Eames isn't in any hurry to leave, however, and he so enjoys watching Arthur, particularly when Arthur is like this — on edge and real. Like he's not just the person Eames fucks. He's also a person who forgets to take out his rubbish sometimes, or sits on the sofa in old sweatpants eating potato chips, or avoids his mum's phone calls. A person Eames can relate to.

"There's no point in you being here," Arthur says.

"There's no point in you being here, and yet here we are, at an impasse."

Arthur checks his watch. "I've got to be somewhere soon."

"Then go," Eames says, but Arthur doesn't move. He's trying to be expressive with his eyes, but Eames is metaphorically sticking his fingers in his ears.

Arthur sighs. "I already confided my deep-seated insecurities to you, so you might as well know. Since I'm not going to sneak this past you, apparently, when you're in gargoyle mode." He reaches under his desk and removes a PASIV.

"What kind of appointment is this exactly?" Eames asks.

Arthur isn't quite bursting with enthusiasm to explain, but he understands this one fundamental truth: by being such a fantastic fuck, he has essentially earned himself Eames' curiosity, and that means Eames won't let anything go if he can pester out every last drop of detail instead. This is why Eames failed all his youthful, ultimately misguided attempts to have meaningful relationships, and this is why Arthur should learn not to be such a dirty little cocksul.

Abstinence teachers should include it on the curriculum. If you maintain your purity, boys and girls, scruffy forgers will never try to follow you down dark alleys just to see what kind of pizza you order.

Arthur is quiet though. This is no huge surprise — Arthur isn't an overly chatty person if he isn't
required to be. He doesn't make any effort to stop Eames from leaving the office with him either. He mostly just walks with his gaze straight ahead of him, and he says very little in the car. It's not until they're pulling into the shadowed parking lot of Apple Valley Long-Term Health Centre that Eames gets the feeling this may actually be significant. It's not Arthur revealing a secret sexual fetish for horse roleplay — it's Arthur silently breaking into the health centre and sneaking past the night shift nurses.

In Room 4C, there's a man sleeping on a bed surrounded by machines. Eames has been around enough varieties of sleep to know that this man is comatose — those machines are the only things keeping him alive. Arthur shuts the door behind him and pulls the blinds closed. "Make sure no one comes in," he orders, and then he starts unpacking the PASIV and hooking himself and the comatose man to it.

Eames reads the file hanging off the bed. The man is Laurence Ekuweme, born in Nigeria, American citizen since 1988, condition unknown but unresponsive since 2005.

"He's in limbo," Eames says.

"I know," Arthur says grimly. "I helped put him there."

"2005 — that was years ago."

"He was a former government official in Nigeria. High-ranking. Cobb and I were pulling a job on him to find out if he knew any state secrets that could help the American government." Arthur spools out the PASIV wires. "His subconscious was militarized. We knew that going in, so we used deep sedation. Too deep, as it turned out."

"You were the one who killed him in the dream," Eames says, putting the pieces together. "You feel responsible for sending him to limbo."

"I should have been more careful."

"You're usually careful. You must have had your reasons."

"Maybe I did." Arthur looks up at him. "Maybe I was sick that day, maybe I was going through a nasty breakup, maybe I just got distracted. It doesn't matter. Since I started working dreamshare, I've put two people in limbo who I couldn't get back out. I can't — I have to be better than that."

There's a streak of stubbornness in Arthur that's like a wall. No one can ever break it down. Eames has never seen it more clearly than now. "You've had plenty of time to try and get Ekuweme out. Years," Eames points out. "Why tonight, why after Lo?"

"You don't get it," Arthur says. "I do this every year on this day. Remember to watch the door," he adds, and then he pushes down on the syringe.

Three hours later, Arthur wakes up alone.

Eames offers to drive them back, and Arthur doesn't even put up a token complaint about Eames handling his car. He's got bruises under his eyes, and he falls asleep when they hit the highway — sleep compounding on sleep.

"Next year," he says groggily, when they're back at Somnus and Eames is shaking his shoulder. "I'll put together a better action plan. I'll wake him up next year."
Good news. Jean doesn't sue.

"See, I told you she seemed reasonable," Ariadne says. "And like I told her, you can have a fully enriched and meaningful life without ever eating croissants. Or watching bicycle racing."

"She had no grounds," Eames says. "She brought her own projections in. We had nothing to do with it."

"Tell that to Olsen," she says, and Eames flicks his thumb and index finger at her. **Point.**

"So," Ariadne says, leaning against his desk. She crosses her arms. "You've done three jobs with us. Does this mean you're going to stay?"

"It means I have yet to run screaming from the quality of the coffee and your grouchy face in the morning," Eames says. "As for the rest — it's in the hands of God."

"You're an atheist."

"My mind is as open as my donation jar," Eames says.

"Whatever you say," Ariadne replies. "I think you're just scared of commitment, but what do I know? I only spend eight hours every day with you. Sometimes even on weekends." She makes a face. "Did you see the man who was in consultation with Arthur yesterday? I think he wants **clowns.** I don't want to judge—"

"Darling, judging is your favourite hobby," Eames says. "You probably raise roses in your garden just so you can judge them afterwards."

"I do not," Ariadne protests. "I'm just saying, if you were to pay thousands of dollars for a custom made dream, what would you want?"

"Are you asking me personally?" Eames says.

"Yeah."

"Nubile contortionists," Eames says immediately. "Twins in leather."

"Ew." Ariadne scrunches up her nose.

"What would you dream about then?" Eames asks, laughing. "Organic produce? Artisan cheese? Eco-friendly stockings to go with your ethical stock portfolios?"

"Eames, you suck," she says, "and I don't know. I don't know what I'd want to dream about. It's weird, isn't it? I've never thought about it."

**Liar,** Eames doesn't say. **Everybody's thought about it.**

A noise cuts through his thoughts. Ariadne startles — the pen she's twirling between her fingers drops to the carpet. "What is that?" she asks, listening to the electronic wail pouring over the intercom. They're still new to the Meridia Complex; they haven't heard it before. "I think that's the fire alarm," she adds with some surprise, and Eames goes so still he can feel every thud of his heartbeat as it careens into his chest.
He hears his voice, even and calm, but it's like he's not controlling it anymore. It's like it's coming from a recording somewhere in his voice box, manual control override, all systems set to automatic. "It's not coming from our suite, is it?" he asks.

Ariadne sniffs the air. She goes to the hallway and sticks her head out. "Hey, Ae Sook! We're not the ones on fire, right?"

"No!" Ae Sook calls back. "But I guess we better evacuate, just in case!"

"Okay!" Ariadne shouts agreeably. She looks over her shoulder at Eames. "Are you coming? You probably should. We don't want to get Somnus in trouble for breaking fire code regulations or whatever. Arthur would hit the roof."

"Certainly," Eames says. "Just give me a moment." Ariadne does, and when he's alone again, it takes him three tries to stand up properly — his legs feel like the nerves have gone numb. It's stupid, he thinks. It's so fucking stupid. It's just the fire alarm. Somebody's probably burned their lunch in their microwave on the fourteenth floor. It doesn't pose any harm to him.

But Eames' body is a traitorous mechanism. His legs feel rubbery while a ball forms at the base of his throat, like a tumour.

Shit, he thinks. His head hurts. His teeth hurt.

"Eames!" he hears somebody say. "Are you still in there?"

"Just give me a goddamn moment, will you!" Eames says, and Christ, that was not what he meant to do, draw even more attention to himself. Arthur comes into his office and Eames makes himself stand up properly, but what a fucking joke he is, because once his voice goes tight, that's it, it's game over. The performance is done, the curtain's broke off the rails and tumbled. He knows he's pale and sweating now, just like Jean, and Arthur? He notices details just as much as Eames does, which might explain why they didn't get along so much when they first met, because Eames has a healthy distrust of people who observe his weaknesses.

It's only comeuppance. He saw Arthur with Ekuweme, with his hopeless cause. Arthur should be allowed to see him like this in return, but like immunity and finding true love, justice is something Eames only believes on reality television. Eames hates Arthur for his careful expression, a study in applied nonchalance.

Arthur doesn't speak. He just turns around and leaves again, merciful and compassionate, and Eames wants to rip the paper off the wall and grind it to pieces.

By the time he makes his way out of the building, the fire trucks are already there.

"They're saying it's an electrical malfunction from the food kiosk," Arthur says, finding him in the crowd. He brushes his hand over Eames' shoulder, feather-light, almost too quick for anyone to notice, but the touch roars through Eames's skin. He flinches, and Arthur's eyes go empty.

"I'm going on lunch break," Eames says sharply.

Some people don't like the clean, antiseptic, impersonal brusqueness of hotel rooms. Eames loves it.
Eames also loves, in no particular order: scotch, a cigarette, and his telly turned loudly to an inane game show channel so that he doesn't have to hear himself think. Or to look at the envelope on his dresser, spilling forth with glossy photos of Terrence Moran that a paid informant took the last time Terrence surfaced, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In the photos Terrence is accompanied by a young girl, and the photographer has scrawled on the back: his daughter? But Terrence doesn't have a daughter, Eames thinks, and certainly not a daughter of that age, because that would have meant she was born when Terrence and Eames were still a team, and Terrence would have told Eames. They were still friends then.

There are too many photos, too many mysteries. Eames would rather have peace instead.

Unfortunately, this doesn't last for long.

"Is there something I can do for you, Arthur?" he asks without any inflection, and Arthur doesn't even have the good grace to look sheepish.

"You looked like you were in a bad place today," Arthur says, pushing inside. Eames could, technically, shove him back out (if put to the test, he suspects he's stronger than Arthur is, at least when it comes to upper body strength), but he has obnoxious neighbours and he doesn't want to draw the attention of hotel management. Such is civilized life. "I don't know if I'm supposed to mention, or if I'm supposed to do the polite thing and keep my mouth shut but — you looked bad. And you watched my back with Ekuweme. So I came to check in on you."

"How charitable of you," Eames says, closing the door. "Did you bring me a casserole too, to comfort me in my grief?"

Arthur laughs abruptly. "You think I can bake? You think I have any skills that don't involve swindling people and shooting things? You and me, we're freaks."

"You called me a headcase, if I remember correctly."

"I'm a headcase too," says Arthur. "For real. I'm terrified of closets with nothing inside them. They make my skin crawl."

Eames is suddenly very tired. "I don't want to do this," he says. "It's — it's sweet of you to come over. I didn't think you were capable of sweet, but I was wrong. Thanks. The cockles of my heart are warmed, or they would be if I had cockles. Or a heart. But I just want to wash up for the night and go to sleep, all right?"

"Okay," says Arthur. He clears his throat, and that's strange too, because Eames isn't sure he's ever seen Arthur do anything like that before. Arthur isn't one for nervous tics. On a good day, he's an even better actor than Eames, but today hasn't been a good day, at all. "I'll go," Arthur continues. "But, I guess you should know — it's not a secret, what happened with your team in Oslo. With Terrence Moran. Cobb told me about it."

Once, when Eames was young, he threw a ball into a window. He didn't mean to, or rather, he fully did. Except at the last moment he decided he wasn't that mad at his mum, so he threw the ball to the side of the window instead. But his aim was off, and the window broke anyway.

That's how he feels right now, off-kilter, aiming at random, hitting things that come from the deepest, most vicious parts of him. "And what," he says, in a low, syrupy voice that stretches his syllables, every last terrible sound, "would you know about what happened in Oslo? Your tongue was so far up Cobb's arse at the time, I don't think you even knew what was going on around you."
Arthur flushes.

"Ah," says Eames.

"You're wrong," says Arthur.

"Am I now?"

"You're as wrong as fuck," says Arthur. "Me and Dom weren't like that, and I'm sick to death of people thinking that we were. Just drop it already. You're ruining one of the few good things I've ever had."

"You're awfully defensive if it didn't happen," Eames drawls. "And having Cobb — was it really that good?"

Arthur turns a deeper red. "I said, drop it."

"That's not particularly fair, is it?" Eames says. "You come in here, expecting me to open up to you, and you won't even give me a piece of juicy gossip? Where's your sense of manners, sweetheart?"

"You saw me with Ekuweme! You saw one of my biggest mistakes. I kind of think we're past the part where we care about manners. What, it's all right for you to pry into my history, but I'm never supposed to mention anything about yours? I do know what happened in Oslo," Arthur adds with a fury and a bite, and oh, Arthur plays mean too, Arthur knows how to smash windows. "You were leading a team with Terrence Moran playing point. You were all under, but he shot himself out of the dream prematurely, and then, when the rest of you were still sedated, he set the house on fire. He killed everyone, except you. You survived. Is that about right?"

Eames' stomach turns. The way Arthur says it, strips the details of the worst night of his life like that — it's unacceptable.

"This is why you hate fire," Arthur says. "This is why your dream layer with Fischer, it was a huge lot of fucking snow. You really won the award for subtlety with that one." His voice rises. He shouldn't be this angry, not when Eames has provoked him worse over the years, but Arthur's a bundle of stress, pushed to the wire fence and back. "You think you're some kind of man of mystery, but honestly? Everybody can read you."

"You know nothing about me," Eames hisses, and Arthur stalks towards him, gets up right in his space. He pins Eames against the wall, his elbow to the side of Eames' head. "Yeah?" he says, his breath low and hot, and Eames can feel himself get hard. "You think you know everything about me, do you? All going on about me and Dom, me and Saito, whoever. You think just because I've sucked your cock a couple of times, you can get into my head?"

"You yourself reminded me: I saw your mistakes. If I got into your head, it's because you opened the door and let me in."

Arthur responds by reaching down and grasping Eames by the trousers. Eames bucks against him, ruthless, but Arthur shoves back. "Christ," says Arthur. "I try to do this one nice thing for you, see if you want a friend to talk to, but you ruin it. You fucking ruin everything."

"You're not here because you're nice," Eames says venomously. "You're here because it twists you up, to think there's something about me you can't control, like you do at work."

"I can control this," Arthur says, and he kisses Eames, the kind of kiss you give someone to brand
"I want to fuck you," Eames growls into Arthur's ear. "I can't stand you sometimes, but right now, I want to fuck you."

"Then fuck me," Arthur says. He grabs Eames by the tie and yanks, pulling him onto the bed — and it's Eames' bed, or at least Eames' hotel bed, which is still more intimate than the room in the Marriott they've been using for their fuck sessions. The realization burns cold in Eames' belly. He's not sure if he likes it, but then he sees Arthur's skin against the sheets he jerked off into last night, and he starts losing the ability to think rationally at all. Arthur is fierce and determined, pushing Eames onto the mattress and ripping him out of his shirt. No more finesse, and they've been rough, but never this rough. Arthur opens his shirt with two sharp tugs, breaking seams and sending buttons scattering onto the floor.

"Fucking watch it," Eames says, just to see Arthur falter, but Arthur bites his collarbone and sticks his hands down Eames' trousers. Eames groans, and then he bites back, chasing Arthur's fingers into his mouth and sucking on them.

There's a shadow in Arthur's eyes; he looks like a stranger. Then he leans down and licks Eames' nipples, his eyes darting up through his spiky lashes, and he looks like Arthur again, Arthur pissed off and annoyed because something's not going how he wants it to. Arthur is incredibly spoiled, Eames thinks — why did he never see that before? Arthur is a spoiled brat.

Eames grabs a handful of his hair, and Arthur hisses, but doesn't stop licking.

"You're not my boyfriend," Eames says. "Get that straight."

"Good," Arthur says, lifting his head. "I don't want to be your boyfriend, because then I might have to be careful about your delicate feelings. And I wouldn't be able to do this." He grabs Eames and flips them over, and shoves Eames' head down. "Suck me," Arthur orders.

Eames runs his tongue over his teeth, anticipatory. "What are you going to give me in return?" he asks.

"If you're good about it," Arthur says, "I'll give you the fuck of your life." It's the same voice he uses on their clients to charm them over into trusting him, except amped up by a hundred, made husky and arrogant. What happened to the naive, mild-mannered soldier Eames used to know? Somewhere along the way, he turned into this gorgeous, infuriating man, and Eames can't even remember when it happened.

This is how they begin the night, and this is how they end it: with Eames on his bed, his trousers pulled down over the top portion of his thighs, and Arthur riding his cock, bouncing up and down, groaning loud enough that they can probably hear it down the street. Arthur's back is a tight harp arch, and his thighs slap Eames' every time he grinds back down, searching, searching for that right spot — and he hasn't even bothered to take off his socks, and that drives Eames wild, makes him sweat for it. And then Arthur's shouting, coming all over his stomach, hitting the goddamn bedframe with it.

Afterwards, Eames lies on the bed and fumbles for a smoke, while Arthur gets dressed silently, patting his hair and his clothes into shape. He's walking stiffly, and there's bruises all over his neck.

"Don't get into my business anymore," Eames tells him. "Good intentions or bad intentions — just don't."
"You've made that abundantly clear," Arthur says, and leaves.

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This was where life as Eames knew it fell off its axis: they were in Oslo in midwinter, and Cheung Su was reloading his gun when Rica paused with her hand curled around a grenade, and said, "Do you smell something burning in the air?" They'd all sniffed then, and agreed that yeah, there was definitely the smell of smoke — but nothing in the dream was burning, not unless you counted the ambitions of their hapless mark. The smoke was coming from the surface.

"No problem, Terrence already woke up," Eames had said, reaching for another cartridge of ammo. "He'll take care of it, whatever it is."

This is what he remembers about Cheung Su: that he could hit a penny on a wall with his eyes closed. The best marksman Eames had ever met. A quiet man, but loyal. Eames ran across him in Chengdu, playing cards in a room full of triad, guns holstered, and Cheung Su had been like the unflappable centre. Everyone was scared shitless of him until they saw him with his wife and their daughter, and saw what he looked like with powder formula smeared over his left cheek.

This is what he remembers about Rica: that she was bold, that she was crass, that she was always up for a game, and that was how she saw their work. She used to make bets with Eames, sometimes tasteless, but they'd keep track of their scores together. How many people they killed, how many people they fucked. Rica knew how to drink like a rock star and give gifts like a queen. Her totem was a tattoo on her ankle, which she never showed anybody — she would fuck with her socks on.

This is what he remembers about their mark: that his name had been Carl Mikkelsen, and he stole funds from his employees, and he cheated on his wife, and he was rude to his secretary, and still Eames didn't think he deserved to die like that, burning as the rafters of the house fell down on him. The house had been at the edge of the city, all the doors and the windows boarded up when they woke, and the emergency crew had taken so long to come — he wonders if Terrence had something to do with that too.

(This is what he remembers about Terrence: his laughter, his teenage prickliness, his ease with forgery, the way he used to punch Eames' shoulders when he wanted to show affection, all the afternoons they used to spend together in London, talking about books and dreams and Eames cooking while Terrence played R. Kelly over the stereo).

I'm going to kill him, Eames thinks with a clear-eyed accuracy. One day I will find him, and I'll make him pay.

In the meantime, he's kept busy by two events: the Olsen trial, and a businessman from Cincinnati who wants to dream about going to the moon.

"What do you mean, you want me to design for the moon?" He can hear Ariadne from across the hall. "There's no architecture on the moon. It's the moon!"

Arthur's reply is lower, a murmur.

"There's no gravity!" Ariadne says.

"I have complete faith in you," Arthur says more loudly.
"It's just a big hunk of rock!" Ariadne argues. "This is either the stupidest assignment we've ever taken on, or the hardest. I can't decide which one."

"I'm sorry," Arthur says. "I'd love to discuss it more with you, but I'm late for uh, a dentist appointment." In his wisdom, he scurries away. Eames can see the blur that passes his open door.

"You have problems, Arthur!" Ariadne yells after him. "Notwithstanding your teeth!"

It's not that they're ignoring each other. They work on shared projects all day — there's got to be some communication going on. Arthur says lots of words to Eames. Just, most of them have to do with planning and construction and the relative orbit of the moon around the earth. Which are fine and noble topics, each and every one of them, but Eames find himself snappy before long, a restless itch settling into him that only seems to spread every time he inadvertently catches Arthur's eye over the blueprints.

"Say something, Eames thinks at him. Come on, say it.

Eames knows he's a hypocrite and a bastard, because it's not like he's raring to apologize. But he doesn't want — he doesn't want this either, the polite silence, the neutral glances. He wants to shove Arthur against the mock-up table and bend him over, screw whoever might walk into the room, screw professionalism.

That word, to Eames, means stealing the right things in the right way, and never getting caught. That's what professionals in his line of work do. It's got nothing to do with Arthur standing there in a three piece suit, or Eames keeping his hands to his sides, aware of them so intensely that they become fists.

"Good news," Arthur says on a Friday after the fact. "We've being interviewed by Rolling Stone. One of their reporters is coming over next week with a photo crew."

"What?" Ariadne says. "You could have told us about this earlier. When next week?"

"Wednesday morning," Arthur says, cradling his coffee. He looks bleary and half-awake; there's a sugar stain from a donut on his cheek. "They just confirmed it last night. Apparently there's so many new dreamshare agencies in this part of the country, they had trouble narrowing down the list of who they wanted to talk to for their feature piece. But we're one of them, so suit up, ladies and gents. Be on your best behaviour."

"I can't help but notice you look at me when you say that," Eames muses.

"I can't help but notice your complete lack of surprise," Arthur replies. "Don't shoot your mouth off, Eames. Don't mess it up. Please."

"Why would I ruin my source of free conference lunches?" Eames says.

"I don't know why you do half the things you do," Arthur says. "Sometimes I suspect bad parenting. Other times I suspect drugs. My latest theory is neurotoxins affecting brain activity. Let me know if I'm getting warmer."

"Speaking of stunted development," says Eames, stepping forward. "You have sugar on your face
— I'll just —" He takes a tissue from his pocket and wipes Arthur's cheek. Arthur's eyes widen, and then they go dark and longing. Eames can hear the stutter of Arthur's breath, can feel the heat of his body. So they've still got this, he thinks, and relief rushes through him like a monsoon.

"Guys," Ariadne complains, "you can feel each other up in private."

Arthur steps back quickly. Then he narrows his eyes at the tissue. "Where did that come from? What else did you use it for?"

Eames makes a show of examining the offending tissue and smiling widely.


On Tuesday they clean the conference room, and move the mock-ups and diagrams and all of the notes that Bailey from Cincinnati ("Moon Man," Ariadne says, "except I keep on forgetting not to call him that to his face") has left them. Bailey's one of those clients that doesn't mind seeing the real face of the business, the real face being empty coffee cups and day-old newspapers and spilled fish food. The Rolling Stone reporter, however, is an unknown variable, and so they clean, and then they come in on Wednesday, washed and dressed nicely, and Eames even shaves — that's how cooperative he's being about this.

"Hi," says the reporter, "I'm Maram Saab, and oh my god, are those shortbread cookies?"

Eames knows how to win people over to his side.

"Oh yeah," says Maram, "and this is Tom. He's going to shoot some photos. Hopefully not of us eating cookies, though you never know. Just act natural."

Which is the cue for Ariadne freezing up, because Ariadne isn't so good with being in the spotlight. She fidgets, and then takes her seat silently, while Arthur pours Maram and Tom some coffee to go with their cookies, and he starts chatting idly, asking them about their commute, about where they're from — what a con man, he seems so goddamn earnest, Eames thinks, and he can tell Maram and Tom are charmed.

"So how do you feel about the exposure of dreamshare to the general public?" Maram asks, making notes with a hot pink pen. "I know that not everybody was happy about it, but I understand you were working in the field long before the WikiLeaks?"

"That's right," Arthur says. "All three of us were. Eames here probably has the most experience out of all of us. And — well, my feelings on the public exposure are complicated. It came as a shock, and not a very good one at first, because there was a lot of fear surrounding those leaks. Fear that we'd be persecuted — more than we already were. Fear that our lives and our jobs were going to change. In that sense, we were probably no different than anybody else who works in an industry undergoing a massive transformation."

"And how do you feel about it now?" Maram says.

"Honestly?"

"This is journalism," she says with a quirk of a smile, "so no, probably not. But humour me."

"I could take it either which way," Arthur says. "I was comfortable working in old-school dreamshare. There were freedoms we had that we can't have anymore. Governments and courts weren't watching us so closely — it was a thrilling time, what can I say." He smooths his cuffs. "But there are benefits to legitimization as well. Stability. Representation. Access."
"And are those important concepts to you?"

"I think they're important concepts for everyone," Arthur says noncommittally.

Maram turns to Eames. "And what about you?" she asks. "You haven't said much throughout all of this."

"That's because I'm being a gentleman," Eames says. "I'm sparing you from the terribleness that is my personality. But since you ask what I think about the exposure? I don't think about it."

"You don't?"

"It happened," Eames says. "For better or for worse, it happened. Now we've just got to roll with the punches. Don't get mad, get even. And by even," he adds, "I mean making as much money as possible and laughing my way to the bank. They thought legitimization would ruin me? They're bloody wrong."

He can hear the click of Tom's camera to his left. He doesn't look at Arthur — he doesn't want to know what Arthur is thinking. He keeps his focus on Maram, who writes some more in her notebook and then smiles again, easygoing. "I'm definitely going to quote that," she says. "Thank you." She looks at Ariadne. "What about you?"

"I'm pretty new to all of this still," Ariadne says. Eames hides a snort, because when has that ever stopped Ariadne from expressing an opinion.

"I think you've been in the business long enough to have your opinion count," Arthur says mildly.

"Then... I'm glad this is the way things turned out," she says. "It means I don't have to lie to my parents when they ask me what I do. Maybe I'm too much of a white picket fence person, but that's important to me. I don't want to lie."

"Right," says Maram, flipping a page. "I've got a few more questions for you guys, but some of them are really boring, so maybe I'll just skip to a good one. We can return to the boring ones later." She beams. "If you had to design a dream for yourself, what would it be? What do the dream-givers dream about?"

Ariadne laughs.

"Pardon?" Maram asks.

"No, it's just, we've talked about this," Ariadne says. "It's like our water cooler question, kind of like chefs asking each other what their death row meal would be. I would apparently dream about being a hippie and Eames would dream about sex, and Arthur would — actually, I have no idea. What would Arthur dream about?"

"You've never asked," Arthur says.

"I'm pretty sure we have—"

"No, never," Arthur says. "I would dream about the sea. Warm and sunny, and me on a sailboat. No one else around. Just the waves."


"After working with you two? Who wouldn't?" Arthur says. To Maram he says, "My parents were
sailing nuts. I grew up on a boat. Every year they'd yank me out of school for a few months, and we'd make the trip from Rhode Island to Bermuda, and then across the South Pacific to Australia, just the three of us. Well, the three of us and my pet guinea pig. I learned to tie boating knots before I learned to spell my own name."

"Sounds like an experience," she says.

"It was better than that," Arthur says. "It was a life."

They win the case against Olsen. Judge Albern rules in their favour, and when Arthur comes back from the courthouse with the news, he grabs a handful of paper clips from Ae Sook's desk and tosses them in the air like confetti. "What are you doing? Someone's got to clean those up again!" Ae Sook grousches, but Arthur grabs her by the wrist and twirls her around. Eames and Ariadne come out, and Arthur declares that they're taking the rest of the day off. Go home, go take a nap, get the hell out of the office, losers.

It's on the tip of Eames' tongue to ask if Arthur wants to get the hell out together. Arthur's standing beside him, warm and flushed and happy for the first time in weeks. It would be so easy to reach out, pretend to stretch, and brush Arthur's cheek with his knuckles. Subtle, no, but easy. Eames considers it, wants it, but then Arthur moves to the other side of the reception and starts picking up the paper clips.

Eames leaves alone.

He makes a detour on the second floor to pick up an egg salad sandwich for lunch, extra pickles, and a root beer to go with it. On his way to the parking lot, to his rented Ford Fusion, he spies Ariadne crouched by her own vehicle, taking a call on her mobile. When she sees Eames, she says something quickly and hangs up.

"Don't let me stop you," Eames said. "Was that a boyfriend then?"

"No," she says.

"Girlfriend?"

"Keep your fantasies to yourself," Ariadne says, and then seems to realize how sharp she sounds. She smiles. "So hey, we won! I can't get over that. I didn't have much of a doubt, but still, it's nice to have it in writing. You don't want to mess with us because we will slap you down."

"Let me handle the slapping. I'm not sure you could reach."

"I'm feeling generous today, so I will ignore that," Ariadne says.

"Tell me who that was on the phone," Eames coaxes.

"Have you no shame?"

"None whatsoever," Eames says. "I'll swap you a sandwich and a drink if you tell me who that was on the phone."

Ariadne hesitates. She must be really hungry. "You can't tell Arthur."
"What Arthur doesn't know will hurt him terribly, because it'll drive him crazy trying to figure out what it is," Eames says, "but that's nothing for us to worry about." He hands over his lunch. Ariadne takes it and starts unwrapping the sandwich right there in front of him. He tries to remember seeing her eat that day, and then realizes that he can't. Ariadne never eats when she's nervous, and he could hear her all morning, pacing in her office, waiting for the judge's decision. Why she didn't just go with Arthur to the courthouse is beyond him, but Ariadne has these self-imposed rules. Things she will do. Things she won't do. They're never going to make a hedonist out of her.

"It was Professor Miles," Ariadne says. When she sees Eames' blank expression, she says, "Cobb's father-in-law? Architecture professor? One of my old teachers?"

"Oh, I see," says Eames. "Mal's father."

"Yeah." She has the sandwich open but she picks at the wrappings instead of diving right in. "You remember that I have a PhD?"

"It had completely slipped my mind, seeing as how you only mention it ten times per day," Eames says. "Eleven times, I'm sure, will be the charm."

"He has a friend at the University of Arizona," Ariadne says. "Part of the architecture department there. He was telling this friend about me, and so it turns out his friend was pretty taken in by my, ah, description. He asked me to send in my CV, and I thought, why not, I'm curious to see if I'm any good. He called me yesterday." She pokes her fingers through the wrapper, tearing it. "He offered me a postdoc fellowship."

"That's impressive," Eames says. "Not that I'm surprised."

"Doesn't mean I'm going to take it! I've got a job here at Somnus. I told Arthur I'd work with him. I can't leave. I don't want to."

Eames looks at her, steady. Ariadne squirms under the weight of his gaze. "I hate this," she complains. "Just tell me what you think."

"I think it's a great opportunity," Eames says. "If you want it, you should take it."

"But I just said I don't want to," Ariadne replies. "I'm happy here."

"Then you're happy here," Eames says, shrugging. He doesn't doubt Ariadne's sincerity. It's probably true — he doesn't know her well enough to know what happiness for Ariadne even means, other than the basic necessities that might make anybody happy. But, he thinks, isn't that simple either. It's not Maslow's hierarchy. Happiness is a dial turned up to degrees. You can be happy at mid-dial, but there's always that extra bit more you yearn for until you're too old and cynical to admit it.

"Don't tell Arthur," Ariadne finally says. "He'll just worry, and there's nothing for him to worry about. Not today of all days."

"I won't tell," Eames promises, and Ariadne is smart enough not to trust him, but he means it this time and for the same reasons.

He's halfway to his hotel when he realizes, shit, I've forgotten my mobile. Eames doesn't have a lot of people who ring him (he doesn't want a lot of people to ring him, and who's the antisocial one now), but he's been tracking Terrence long enough that even missing a tip-off by a day could mean the end of the trail. So he doubles back and returns to Somnus to find the doors locked and everyone out. Thankfully, Eames has a key, and he lets himself in, slipping through the empty mid-afternoon
offices until he fetches his mobile from on top of his desk.

Arthur's office door is slightly ajar, which isn't unusual because Arthur has developed rather lax habits in civilian life — it's like he no longer expects ambushes and pissed off ex-clients who try to shoot his kneecaps off. Eames might have to retrain him with stealth attacks, for his own good, of course. Eames goes to shut the door and to make sure the windows are closed properly too, but then he stops, because Arthur's still inside his office, lying on his sofa asleep.

God, he looks like he needs it. His hair is dishevelled and he's got his suit jacket tossed over the back of the sofa. His white shirt is rolled up to his elbows, but he hasn't bothered to take off his shoes. They hang over the arm — Arthur's too tall. It's a two-seater. Ariadne's probably too tall. Arthur twitches, and nearly falls off the sofa, but he unconsciously catches himself just in time and buries his face deeper into the cushions.

Eames looks around the office. He finds a blanket in the cabinet, two pillows, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and three spare changes of clothing. Arthur's been spending nights here, Eames thinks, and the anger that overtakes him is fresh and clean. What the fuck is wrong with Arthur? This, designing stupid dreams for stupid, spoiled clients, isn't worth that level of sacrifice.

Arthur sighs in his sleep. Eames covers him with the blanket, tucking the edges into the corners. He touches his fingers to Arthur's hair, stiff with gel, and then he shakes his head. "You're a piece of work," he says before he lets himself out of the office, closing the door quietly behind him.

Two knocks and Eames wakes up. Three knocks and he's reaching for the lamp. Four knocks and he's swinging his legs over his bed, bleary-eyed, reaching for his gun. Five knocks and he opens the door to find Arthur with his fist half-raised. "Hi," says Arthur, and Eames tucks the gun into the waistline of his pyjama pants.

"It's three in the bloody morning," Eames grunts.

Arthur pushes past him into the room. Eames gets one whiff of him and says, "Someone's been drinking."

"Someone's been drinking?" Arthur says. "What an observation! That someone out there, at this very minute, might be having a drink — who would have ever thought! Congratulations on your complete lack of specificity. You're right. Someone's been drinking. I've been drinking."

"And clearly not the better for it," Eames says. "I was under the impression this was meant to be your grand celebration. You've bested Olsen, hurrah hurrah. So what are you doing here, abandoning your parade and crawling to me?"

"That's what you think of it as, crawling?" Arthur bites back. The colour is high in his cheeks, and Eames should have remembered: Arthur is a touchy drunk. "You were the one who came back to the office just to watch me sleep."

Eames blinks. He folds his arms over his naked chest, and then he unfolds them. There's a tickle of a scar that shows up faintly on his belly — it starts from his kneecap and travels upwards, but it's barely there in the shadowy pre-dawn hours, with only the moonlight as accompaniment. "I was there to pick up something I forgot," he says evenly. "I just happened to come across you passed out."
Arthur is embarrassed, he can tell that much. Arthur may be more of a sensitive new age bloke than Eames (basically everyone is more of a sensitive new age bloke than Eames), but he's also someone Eames has seen put fifteen bullets into a dead man, and keep on shooting. "I thought we weren't personal," Arthur says coolly.

Eames wants to laugh, but the sound won't work properly from his throat. "It was a blanket, not an offer to add you onto my tax return."

"I dreamed——" Arthur catches his words and slips them back into his mouth. "Never mind. I'm drunk. I'm tired. I —" he lifts his jaw "—I really want to suck your cock."

"Drunk overworked men sucking my cock," Eames says. "How did you know? These are some of my favourite things." He reaches for Arthur, and Arthur lets him. Eames tugs him not to the bed but to the armchair beside it, where Eames tugs his pyjama pants down around his groin and tosses his gun aside. He sinks down onto the chair. Arthur's breath goes funny at the sight of Eames' cock as it hardens, and Eames grins, because yeah, yeah, Arthur wants it bad.

Arthur falls to his knees and nuzzles his cheek against Eames' thighs.

"You need this?" Eames murmurs.

Arthur spreads Eames' legs wider and places his tongue at the base of Eames' cock. Eames leans his head back and groans. Arthur groans at the same time, the vibrations making Eames shiver as he winds his fingers through Arthur's beautiful hair. First tugging at him gently, and then not so gently at all when Arthur takes him fully into his mouth. "Tell me," Eames gasps, riding out the throbs of pleasure. "Tell me what you dreamt about."

Victory, he thinks, and it's Arthur's voice in his head, the way he imagines it would be. Coffee. A warm bed. The shooting range. Perfectly pressed shirts. Sunlight on my skin. The sea. You.

But Arthur doesn't say, and Eames comes with a force that makes him lose his voice entirely, shuddering and shuddering in Arthur's graceful hands.

He's smeared all over Arthur's mouth when Arthur pulls away, and the sight of it makes Eames groan all over again. He pulls Arthur onto his lap and kisses him greedily, until both their mouths are messy and wet, and Arthur's grinding against him, shameless. Eames puts one hand on Arthur's hip to anchor him, and the other he snakes into Arthur's trousers, undoing the zipper deftly and then taking Arthur between his fingers, his thumb right over Arthur's slit. Arthur's pearling, and he's panting like he's just chased some scumbag five miles on foot, and Eames smiles against Arthur's mouth as he jacks him off leisurely.

"Go faster," Arthur says, eyelashes trembling. "Eames, fuck, don't tease me."

But this is what Eames thinks: that Arthur needs somebody to tease him. Arthur needs someone to yank at the threads on his jacket, to switch out his sugar for salt, to keep him moving because otherwise he'll atrophy here — he'll atrophy in this city of angels, smiling all the time at poor sods who want a dream and who know that Arthur will give it to them, and who won't ever think to look at Arthur and ask what do you dream about? because it's too invasive. And one day, he thinks, everything will be too invasive — there won't be anything left.

Arthur shoves at his shoulder, insistent, but if Arthur really wanted to have sex that he could control, he wouldn't have come to Eames. So Eames strokes him slowly, meaningfully, listening to every hitch of Arthur's breath until finally Arthur is sinking into it, eyes closed, kissing Eames in between helpless moans. He's hot and slick in Eames' grasp, and Eames kisses the pulse behind his ear, just
once, and Arthur comes in his arms.

They make their way to the bed, eventually, and when Eames has Arthur's legs slung over his shoulder and is fucking him like an animal, Arthur says, "I'm really sick of this ceiling. There's a stain there, can't you see it?"

He doesn't sound drunk anymore, but Arthur shouldn't be able to form full sentences anyway, so Eames just fucks him harder. Arthur arches his back in response, a smooth ocean line, but he keeps on talking. "I mean it," he pants. "This is a fucking ugly ceiling."

"Who cares about the ceiling?" Eames growls, biting his ear.

"Where did this stain come from anyway?" Arthur continues on, and it's a damn good thing he's so hot like this because Arthur also has the ability to drive Eames up the wall and through the other side. He's so bizarrely fixated — even with Cobb, he used to focus on the most absurd details, like where should this birdhouse go in relation to the yard? or based on her credit card history, I get the sense that she's a bottle blonde. Eames shoves his hips against Arthur, driving in deep, and Arthur says, "You need to move out. You — ahhhhh! — need to get an apartment."

"Because of the stain?" Eames asks.

"Are you stupid? The stain is a fucking metaphor!" Arthur says, fingers clawing at the sheets. Eames thrusts in, and Arthur melts against him. "I thought you were supposed to be some sort of literary genius."

An apartment, Eames thinks. A flat in the city. Jesus Christ, how much would it cost, and how much of a hassle would it be, and let's not even mention commuting because he hates L.A traffic with the vehemence he normally reserves for nuclear apocalypse. Living here, staying here, having to worry about things like mold spores and mildew and pest control when he could just get up and check out.

He slows down. Arthur's watching him now, braced against the headboard, his body language deceptively casual.

"It's not like you have anywhere else to go," he says.

"I have—" Eames begins, and then stops. He hates that Arthur's right.

Janice Walczak comes into the office, and she's grey-haired with a ruffled blouse and pearls that look like they were mail-ordered out of a National Geographic ad. Her steps are tiny and unsure, and when Eames first sees her, he wonders if she's merely lost her way and is dropping in to ask where the washroom is.

No such luck. Walczak talks to Ae Sook, and then ten minutes later they're sitting in the conference room with her.

"I didn't think it would be this fast," she says in her high, wavering voice. "I thought I would have to make an appointment and come back next week."

Eames wonders about this too. Somnus isn't the biggest game in town, but they've got enough potential clients that he's never seen Arthur push one forward like this — never seen Ae Sook
mention just her name and Arthur says an immediate yes. Arthur probably knows her, that's why, but when Eames watches the two of them together, Walczak doesn't seem to recognize Arthur at all.

Walczak fingers her pearls. It takes her a few tries to get the words out. "I have nightmares all the time," she says. "I've been sick for most of my life. I was... I was in a coma, actually," she says in a hush, and Eames' stomach feels like he's swallowed a bucketful of ice. He looks at Arthur, but Arthur isn't looking back. Arthur is staring straight at Walczak.

"I dream about it all the time," Walczak says. "Lying there like a piece of butchered meat. I'd like it if I could dream about something nice for once. Makes me less afraid to go to sleep."

"What would be a nice dream for you?" Arthur asks.

"Oh, well, maybe it will sound quite boring to you," Walczak says nervously. "But, ah, when I was a girl, I grew up on a farm. I think that would be nice? But of course, I'm happy to listen to anything you might offer too. Maybe you don't do farms?"

"We don't do sentimental dreams," Ariadne tries to say tactfully.

"Places are fine," Arthur says. "It only applies to people."

"Are you sure? Because I think you said—"

"I'm sure," Arthur says.

Walczak's eyes droop to the table. There's so little strength in her, Eames half expects her entire body to follow suit. "I came by because I was curious," she says. "But this room is so nice. It probably costs so much. I don't have a lot of money."

"We have lines of credit," Ariadne says, "and in your case, it sounds like dream therapy, like a medical concern as well as an entertainment one. We could probably give you a discount. Can't we, Arthur?"

But Eames can see the steeliness developing in Arthur's spine. Oh yes, he thinks, Arthur knows this woman, and Eames is willing to place bets on exactly how and where he knows her from.

"We'll do it for free," Arthur says.

"What?" Ariadne says.

"You will?" Walczak echoes.

"Or rather, I'll do it for free," Arthur says. "I can take this on as my own personal project. If it's just a farm, it won't be too complicated. I want to brush up on my architecture skills — so really, you'll be helping me out, Ms. Walczak."

"So you don't want me or Eames on this job?" Ariadne asks, confused. "Your architecture isn't that bad. Actually, it's fine. I don't think you need all that much practice, not when you've got me around to handle most of it."

"But you might not always be around," Arthur says. Ariadne pales, and looks quickly to Eames, who shakes his head. I didn't tell him.

"You and Eames continue the moon dream for Bailey," Arthur says. "I'll take this on myself."

"If that's what you want..." Ariadne says, still sounding doubtful.
"It's exactly what I want," says Arthur, but he doesn't meet her eyes, or Walzcak's.

When Ariadne and Eames finish the Bailey moon dream, they and Arthur accept a commission for Hannah Rosenthal. Hannah Rosenthal is the Chief of Surgery at the Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, roughly the same age as Walczak, and who, in her own immortal words as she sits before them with her sleeves rolled up and a pale mark around her fourth finger where the rest of her tan should be, says, "I want to be the most badass zombie hunter in history. I want to kick some ass."

The Rosenthal job is technically complex because Rosenthal wants hand-to-hand combat. "Zombies aren't so good with the precision aiming and thinking, you know?" Rosenthal says, and Arthur and Eames and Ariadne all agree quite pleasantly. It doesn't make sense to have undead sharpshooters when they could be rambling brainless pieces of muscle instead.

The problem with hand-to-hand combat, however, is that it's bloody difficult to coordinate without hurting the client, to say nothing of the stress on Arthur to control his projections in such a fine-tuned manner.

Stress, ah, yes. Arthur yo-yos back to stress like it's an itch. Between Rosenthal and Walczak, the space between Arthur's eyes slowly disappears in a constant furrow. Eames sees him in his office, working so intently that he doesn't even hear his own phone. He's looking at photos of the Walczak farm, or he's playing Resident Evil games to understand zombie motion mechanics — but it's all work to him, deadlines he needs to meet, promises he needs to keep. Arthur tries to meditate, to increase his powers of concentration for projection manipulation, but Eames can't see how he has any success when his head is full of so much sound.

"Hit me," Arthur says once, jittery with predatory energy. Eames blinks at him for a while before saying "okay" and swinging a punch that clips Arthur's jaw.

Arthur doesn't make any effort to dodge. He just says "hmm, okay" and rubs his jaw before wandering away, presumably to make notes on natural pain receptors or something fully beyond Eames' understanding.

(Not the pain. Pain Eames understands. It's the rest of it, the scientific breakdown of the frontiers of human experience, or maybe it's just Arthur's brain that's such an enigma).

"Team meeting," Arthur says the next day, tapping his pen against Ae Sook's desk where he's waiting to ambush each one of them as they walk into Somnus. "So this is the problem: I can't control the projections in hand-to-hand combat to the same degree I can control projections with guns. There's going to be at least one projection who lands a blow on Rosenthal in the dream, possibly a blow that'll kill her. How do we prevent her dying during the fight and waking up prematurely?"

"One word," says Eames. "Yusuf."

"Drugs are not the answer to everything," Ariadne says.

"If you say that, you just haven't had the good ones," Eames replies, and goes to ring him up. "Wake up, wake up," he says, singsong into the phone. "Honeymoon's over!"
Yusuf hangs up on him, but then rings back fifteen minutes later.

"This is what you want," he says. "You want to trick the dream-body into taking damage but not feel it. The pain is what wakes you up — trust me on this. If we were in a dream together and you were, I don't know, a patient about to be euthanized? Most people, your dream death wouldn't wake you up. That's an urban legend. Most people's brains can't process metaphorical events into physical stimulus very well. They need actual physical stimulus. Pain. Or orgasm," he adds thoughtfully. "That's why when you come in a dream, you tend to wake up right after. Your body's flooding with all these endorphins, it breaks the stability of the dream experience."

"I haven't even told you what I want," Eames says.

"Ariadne called me. Yesterday," Yusuf says, and Eames discovers a new-found respect for Ariadne's fiendish cleverness and her double-faced moralizing. Well played, well played.

"So what then do you propose? Arthur can't guarantee that he won't smack Rosenthal in the face with a machete. He can't promise no pain in such close quarters."

"I have an experimental drug I might be willing to try out, for the right price," Yusuf says. "And of course the right donation of lab equipment and volunteer support."

"How experimental?"

"Well, it's unlikely anyone will die from it," Yusuf says judiciously.

"That's horrifying," Eames says, drawing out the syllables. "I know for a fact that you haven't any consent forms in that dream den hallucinatory fantasia of yours."

"You hang with me, you've already signed your consent," Yusuf replies, and then he goes on to talk about his drug, currently nicknamed N27, which fools the brain into numbing dream sensations so that the dreamer feels no pain at all. "They also don't feel pleasure," he says, "and that's something you are going to have to consider. Rosenthal too. Lucky for you, I've managed to get N27 to stop inhibiting epinephrine/adrenaline receptors, or at least most of it — it's never going to be as good as if you go without. But that's my offer. Pass it on to Arthur."

"So" Arthur says. "Our decision: we either switch the zombie fighting to ranged combat, or we can provide close quarters combat but with reduced sensory experience and the risk of using an experimental drug. We'll have to ask Rosenthal what she wants. Just in case, I'm going to prepare some alternative scenarios for her." He flips open his notebook, so packed with his minuscule handwriting that the lines look filled with squiggling ants. He looks down at his notes, makes a face, and then goes searching for the right page. It takes him at least a minute because there are so many considerations. Rosenthal is a woman at the top of her game. She has her tastes.

My god, Eames thinks, respectability is hard.

The Walczak job goes more slowly. Arthur shows the diagrams of Walczak's farm to Ariadne, and then he shows them to Eames.

"It's fairly simple," he says before Eames even asks, and there's a defensiveness to him, like he's challenging them to ask why this job, why this woman, she can't even bring in the big bucks like
Eames examines the diagrams. It's a farm, which is to say, it's an area that he knows absolutely nothing about, except that it would probably include a house, some animals, and fields of crops. What sort of crops grow in Maryland, where Walczak is from? He bets Arthur knows. Judging from Arthur's mysterious disappearance one day, Arthur's flown out to actually look at the farm. It won't be the same. Time will have changed it. But Arthur's focused and determined, and those are worrisome, occasionally delightful, qualities in any case, at any time.

"It'll be a basic dream," he goes on to say. "It's different from Rosenthal's. Rosenthal wants a plot. She wants a story. Walczak just wants a playground. I'm going to drop her into the farm, and she can do whatever she likes. She can plant crops, or bake, or collect eggs from the chickens, pretend it's Farmville — whatever she used to do as a girl."

"It's an atmospheric dream," Eames says.

"Precisely," says Arthur.

"It'll remind her of life before she met her husband and moved to the big city," Eames prompts. "Happy times."

As bait goes, it's not his best. Arthur catches on right away. "I wouldn't know," he says. "I haven't done too much research into her personal life yet."

"Oh, so you want us to pretend like you don't already know her? Because that much was obvious from the very beginning. Sorry to burst your delusional bubble."

"Where would I know her from?" Arthur asks. "We don't exactly move in the same knitting circles."

"You insult my intelligence," Eames says. "She said she had been in a coma for years. Who else have we seen recently that's in a coma, hmm? She's a dreamshare victim." He lowers his voice, not that he needs to because they're alone in Eames' office together, but better not to take that risk. "It could be that you just have a soft spot for dreamshare victims who end up in limbo, because of what happened to Ekuweme. I could see that. But the way you act around her, the way you don't meet her eyes — you know this lady personally. She's your victim."

"You've put all this together, just like that?" Arthur asks. "Because I didn't make eye contact?"

"Arthur, I don't know if you've noticed this, but you make aggressive eye contact. You are a slut and a flirt with your eyes. I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad — I just don't see the point of pretending that Walczak is a stranger to you." Eames leans forward. "It makes you more suspicious, not less."

Arthur looks him in the eye, contrary to the very end. "Fine," he says. "I know her. She was one of my first jobs, before I met Cobb and learned how to do things properly. I put her in limbo and she stayed there for fifteen years, until I managed to get her out. Is show-and-tell over now?"

"She doesn't seem to remember you."

"It was a dream to her. You always remember your dreams?"

"Yes," says Eames. "The bad ones, yes."

"Then I'm lucky she's not like you." Arthur's mouth tilts up, self-deprecating. "I'm lucky she didn't put a bullet in my head when she first saw me."
"You sound like you think you deserve it," Eames says with some surprise. "Limbo is a terrible place to end up, I'm not denying as much, and few people deserve to be in comas for, Christ, fifteen years. But you must have been very young then, and badly trained. I've known people with more age and experience to have made those same mistakes."

"You like to think the best of me, don't you?"

"I do like to look at your arse, absolutely," Eames says, but the expression on Arthur's face makes him drop the flippancy. "What?" he says. "Are you going to tell me now that it wasn't a mistake?"

"It wasn't," says Arthur.

"So you put Janice Walczak in limbo on purpose?" The disbelief is rich in Eames' voice. There are whole countries of it.

"Ekuweme was a mistake," Arthur says quietly. "But Walczak wasn't. Her ex-husband hired us. He told me to put her under. Make her sleep, he said, but don't kill her. He thought it was a mercy. I was nineteen."

"And you did it."

Sometimes it's possible to keep a secret in yourself for so long that you reach a physical limit, a point where there's just no more room left in your muscles to hold it. Eames can see that in Arthur now, the fatigue of everyday life breaking down the barriers one by one. Arthur's thinking she doesn't remember and he doesn't care, so what is there for me to lose? It makes it easy. He jerks from side to side like a clockwork toy with a broken spring. "Her ex-husband, Lindall — he was going to kill my parents if I didn't." His eyes are dark, fierce. "As it turns out, we do terrible things for people we love."

The Rosenthal job ends up being mostly Arthur and Ariadne's domain, as it doesn't require forgery. Unless, as Arthur suggested, he'd like to forge a brains-obsessed zombie to make up for those he didn't have — Arthur was in a particularly overworked mood that day. So Eames' much-envied loitering leads to Arthur showing up with a manila envelope that he slaps down on Eames' desk.

"Do you have time?" he asks.

"No, but I do have, let's see, two quarters and three nickels in change," Eames says. He opens the manila folder and starts reading.

"We're starting to get clients who are shopping around at the different agencies," Arthur explains. "I've gotten a lot of requests lately for demo dreams. You think you can design some?"

"Why not? One Playboy mansion dream coming right up."

"Do whatever you want," Arthur says.

Eames lets his mouth fall open in exaggerated surprise. "Golly, do you mean it?"

"I can always nix it if I don't like it, and send you crawling back to your desk in tears," Arthur says simply. He leans over and with one nimble finger, shuts Eames' mouth. Eames grins at that. He snaps
his fingers, already thinking about a portfolio of demo dreams to throw together. They have to be simple, if he's god and master and architect in one. He doesn't have quite Ariadne's chops. A desert dream, he thinks, wide open and empty, but beautiful, with flowers blooming where you least expect it. A cocktail party dream, maybe, banal but well-executed, for those clients who want to see Somnus' skill with projections. London, he thinks. He can always design London too.

He used to forge books; creating dreams is much the same thing. It's about set and type and quality and performance. It's about accuracy, perhaps not of content and edition, but accuracy of vision, all the napkins in the right place, all the laws of gravity properly fixed. It's detail work, and Eames, like Arthur, has always specialized in detail work. That's what makes them so good at what they do, when men like Nash have tumbled and fallen before them.

Arthur asks him for his progress on a Thursday afternoon, and Eames says, "Come on, let me show you."

"You're that far already?" Arthur asks.

"What can I say? I make it look effortless." Eames leads Arthur to the dreaming rooms where he hooks Arthur up to the PASIV, a magnanimous gesture that Arthur allows with good humour.

Today's been a slow day, and they're waiting on a call from Rosenthal — otherwise he'd be rushing Eames along. He looks up at Eames, asking what's this about? with the inquisitive tilt of his body, but Eames shushes him. You'll see.

The sea is the bluest they've ever seen, a sharp colour that pierces the eyes until they adjust, and Arthur can see the endless shape of it underneath the sun. The sea is warm like blood (or like tea, Eames prefers to think — all good similes deserve to be about tea), and it laps slowly around them, keeping time to the rhythm of their heartbeat. There's nothing else around them. There's no land, just water and air and the sudden press of their bodies, intimately together as they stand on the sailboat, a 31'C E Ryder 31' Southern Cross with the high mast moving with the wind above their heads.

"I don't know what kind of boat you and your parents had," Eames says, and he can see the grains of Arthur's skin underneath the sunlight. "So I just made it up."
Arthur doesn't say anything for a long time. He walks around, from the cockpit to the stern, and he
breathes in the crisp air, watches a few birds cross the sky and then disappear into the horizon, a
single flat line in the distance that he could almost touch, if he reached out his hand and traced the air.
"It's nothing like our boat," he says when he returns to Eames, and then it's Eames' turn to say
nothing until Arthur grabs his head and pulls him down for a long kiss.

He wraps his arms around the back of Eames' neck, kissing him like this is the only language he
knows, the tongues of salt and the tongues of sea. Eames kisses him back whole-heartedly, and they
stand there together, two small specks and this boat which surrounds them. Their own private place.

"You said floating alone in the sea," Eames says. "You've got all these tense muscles in your neck.
I'm terrible at massages, really, my hands are like ice, I'm told. So this is going to have to do."

"What are you—"

Eames laughs as he strips off his shirt, tossing it at Arthur, who catches it in surprised reflex. Then
Eames is kicking off his shoes and diving over the side of the boat into the water. He goes down; and
then he bobs back up, treading. "There's drinks in the cooler, plus fishing gear! Want more, you're
going to have to dream it up yourself! See you in a few!" he calls, admiring Arthur's bemused
expression. He laughs once more, the pressure of it almost a pain in the water, and starts doing the
breaststroke towards the shore. He can't see it, but this is his dream — he knows it's there, and that he
can reach it.

It's a mindless pleasure, pushing through the water. The breaststroke is slow. It needs leg power,
endurance. Eames loves it for that, and he swims and swims in the warm surface water of the Pacific.
He stops and turns at one point, paddling as he stares at the boat. He can see Arthur on it, a blurry speck, before he turns back for the shore.

On the dry beach, he shakes himself out. He changes from his sopping wet trousers to a clean pair, and then spreads himself on a towel in the sand. He has a copy of Tristram Shandy, old and yellowed at the edges with that particular musty smell of a book that's been around water for too long. It's in terrible condition, but it's perfect for the dream. Eames reads and eats strawberries and waits for Arthur.

He doesn't know how much time passes. Less than four hours, because four hours is the limitation of the sedation. Otherwise, he has no idea, and he doesn't care to. He gets through a fair portion of Tristram Shandy and moves onto a bowl of cashews when he spies a swimming figure heading towards the beach. He watches the progression of Arthur's smooth strokes. He times it. Arthur makes it look even more effortless than Eames does.

Arthur rises out of the water like Eames' own personal fantasy, a slick, beautiful vision who flops down on the towel beside Eames and smiles at him. "Hey," he says.

Eames sticks his finger in his book, and then figures who cares. He removes his finger and tosses the book aside. "Feel better?" he asks, but he's a greedy bastard who doesn't even wait for Arthur's answer before pulling Arthur on top of him and kissing him until they're both dizzy.

They make out like that, on an island at the edges of the world, rolling around on the towel and then off the towel into the sand. The sand gets into Eames' trousers, but it's a dream and he's got everything he wants underneath his fingertips, gasping in pleasure as Eames sucks at the sensitive spot on his neck.

"You're so fucking hot," Arthur says, pushing Eames back down and licking the salt off his lips. "Can I — let me fuck you."

"Yes," says Eames, "yes."

He almost forgets then, that there are burn scars all over his legs, that Arthur's never seen him naked from the waist down, at least no more than his groin and his cock. He freezes when he remembers, and considers forging them away. But's like Arthur's expecting it because he strokes fingertips over Eames' ribs and says, "It's okay, I don't mind, you're gorgeous, please."

Eames loves it when Arthur begs him. And they're in a dream — there's a softness to the ends of his nerves that make him feel like it's not quite real, that nothing that happens here will apply once they've waken up. Which is stupid, because Eames should know better, but one's own subconscious is a difficult beast to tame. All he knows is that he feels safe here, in the sand with Arthur's body pressing him down, and so he opens his eyes and pushes down his trousers, arching his hips for reach. Arthur watches him, dark-eyed, and Eames can't breathe — he can't breathe when he pushes the trousers over his old third degree burns (Terrence's burns). The scars are stiff and brown, leathery to the touch, and Eames can't feel anything when he touches them — it's like a part of him is dead.

"You crawled," Arthur says quietly.

"I shuffled on my knees," Eames corrects, because if he crawled his hands would be burned too, and they're not, thank god. He still doesn't want to talk about it though, and for once, Arthur doesn't press.

Arthur says, "Lindall said he was going to kill my mother first, and then my father. He was going to burn through their eyes with hot irons, and make me watch."
"You saved them," Eames says. He knows an offering when he sees one, an equalizer. Eames gives up a secret; so does Arthur.

"I want to fuck you," Arthur says again, and it's like coming out after surgery. Eames learns how to breathe again.

He lets Arthur have him there, with the towel bunching under his knees. He lets Arthur have him, braced against the ground, the sand shifting with every thrust. He lets Arthur have him, a hot thick pleasure sliding into him, making him hang his head down and gasp. He can hear the waves, he can hear the birds, he can smell the tang of his own sweat. There, in that place that doesn't exist, he lets Arthur have everything.

"What I really want," Yusuf says, "are French fries. Do you know how hard it is to get good French fries in Kenya?"

"French fries, marshmallows, pumpkin pie... what do you not want?" Eames grumbles as he drives Yusuf from LAX to Somnus.

Yusuf thinks about it. "An absence of French fries would make me very sad."

"Well, we can't have that," Eames says, and pulls into a drive-through. It's always a good idea to feed your resident chemist, if only because Yusuf is very talented at making his displeasure known. And you don't want him to make his displeasure known when he's sliding needles into your veins, that goes without saying. Eames once dared to criticize the inferiority of American football over real football when Yusuf was about to help him slip into a dream for Cheung Su, and afterwards he had felt bruised and hung over for days. Yusuf is mercurial and vengeful in his moods. It's why he and Eames get on so well.

Yusuf is licking sticky marshmallow residue from his fingers when he trails Eames into the 22nd floor Somnus office. Arthur has his door open, but he's in the middle of a phone call. Eames can see Arthur catch their arrival, but he lifts a finger. I'll be with you guys in a second. Ariadne and Ae Sook are ready, though, and Ariadne just beams when she sees Yusuf, like he's her stray cat suddenly found.

"Hello," Yusuf says solemnly.

"These are going to be good times," Ariadne promises. She drags Yusuf over to introduce him to Ae Sook.

Arthur finishes his call and joins them. "Yusuf, glad you're with us. The flight was okay? Didn't get seated next to any crying babies?"

"Nope," Yusuf says, looking up from where he's admiring Ae Sook's nails, "but I did get picked up by Eames right after, so I suppose I got what I deserved."

Arthur's smile is a streak of lightning across the sky. Eames looks, and is distracted. "That sounds about right," Arthur says. He knocks his shoulder against Eames' companionably, like that'll hurt Eames' feelings when Arthur has said a lot worse and meant it. "So that was Rosenthal on the phone. She's thought about it, and she's okayed the N27."
"Wait," Yusuf says slowly, "you mean she didn't okay it before I got here? You flew me to L.A before you even knew I was needed?"

Even though Arthur's pulled back to stand a respectable distance away, Eames can still feel the weight of his shoulder, the citrus smell of his shampoo. "You're always needed," he says to Yusuf, just to clear his head. "Sometimes even for your skills. But don't worry your fragile little ego about it. Even if we weren't going to use the N27, there are other projects we want to talk to you about."

"We've got a few commissions for you," Arthur adds.

"All of them are legal, sorry," Ariadne says. "We know how much that distresses you."

Yusuf throws up his hands. "We, we, we, we! Listen to you! It's like talking to Cerberus. Three heads all the same."

"The world shifts," Eames replies, "and we shift with it." For the first time, he realizes that he even believes it. This is his life now, designing dreams and suntanning on beaches and looking for a new flat — and he's all right with it. It's more than he's had in years. It's even better than all right when Arthur chuckles and then straightens, going into business mode. The sound makes Eames think of sex, but to be fair, Arthur could be cleaning out his earwax and Eames would still think about sex.

"This is the setup for Rosenthal," Arthur says after he's rolled out the whiteboard. "The dream starts in an abandoned hospital in post-apocalyptic Chicago. The hospital was Eames' idea."

"— of course," Yusuf interrupts, "because whenever Eames thinks where do I want to shoot lots of people, hospitals are always his first choice."

"No, actually, it's because Rosenthal works at one, so hospitals are home ground for her," Arthur says. "The dream starts in what used to be the Northwestern Memorial Hospital, where Rosenthal will be holding fort against the zombies. We're considering getting Eames to forge one of her colleagues to make it even more authentic, but that might take too much time — she seems excited about that idea though. So anyway, the beginning of the dream, the hospital slash last Chicago holdout is suddenly under attack. Begin the first wave of zombies." Arthur taps the end of a marker to the whiteboard.

"The zombies will start pushing Rosenthal out of the hospital and onto West Huron Street," Arthur continues. "At this point most of the projections will be dead, and it'll just be Rosenthal and a few survivors still fighting."

"This is a really morbid dream," Yusuf says. "I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to pay for a dream where my friends and coworkers all die."

"We're not going to bring in anyone close to her," Eames says. "Even if we do forge one of her colleagues, we'll make sure it's not someone she knows very well, and that they don't die in the dream. We're not trying to scar the woman."

"And the deaths are very g-rated. Mostly she'll just see the bodies drop," Ariadne adds.

"Okay, okay, I'm convinced." Yusuf flaps his hands downwards. "Do go on."

"From West Huron Street, we'll go onto North Rust Street," Arthur says. "And that's when the flamethrowers come in."

"That's my favourite part," says Eames.
"I thought your favourite part was the lovable dog who follows her throughout the entire dream," Ariadne says.

"Lovable dog versus gigantic deadly flamethrower. It is a rather difficult decision. I'll get back to you on that."

"—and then we're on the ruins of West Ontario Street," Arthur says, talking over them. "One of her allies will bring in a decrepit helicopter, an old military UH-72 Lakota. It'll land, Rosenthal will get on, and it'll take off. Rosenthal will have a machine gun by then, and we'll switch from close combat to picking off the zombies in the air." He circles a diagram on the whiteboard, but not the part where Eames drew a stick figure with a knife stuck in its head. "The chopper will malfunction in the third act, and Rosenthal will have to brace for a crash landing on West Grand Avenue, where the fourth act begins, which is a continuation of ground combat, with Rosenthal — and potentially her colleague — as the last ones standing."

"Sounds bloody and horrible," Yusuf says. "But, you know, good job with the planning and all that."

"Think of it like Shakespeare," Eames suggests, "but with more undead and less homoerotic subtext."

They walk Yusuf through the technical details, and by the time Yusuf starts looking antsy, having already been cooped up on a plane for so long, they set him free. Eames eats lunch in his office, staying in to put the finishing touches on a blueprint for another demo dream, while Arthur attends a meeting with a potential investor. Ae Sook is empress of the phone lines as per usual, and the sound of her voice is a soothing counterpoint to the busy scratch of Eames’ pen. Around 12:30, Eames decides that what he wants more than anything else is an orange mango banana smoothie, so he stretches his legs and goes to the Starbucks next door.

He’s leaning against the counter, waiting as the barista blends his order, when he sees Ariadne and Yusuf at one of the back tables. They don’t seem to have noticed him. Their heads are bowed low together, and Ariadne is making emphatic gestures with her hands.

This better not be an affair, Eames thinks. I don’t relish having to explain to Priyanka why I let her husband wander into a den of temptresses.

The barista hands him his smoothie. He takes it, jabs a straw through the clear plastic lid, and casually wanders closer to the table where Ariadne and Yusuf are sitting. Arthur would have noticed Eames approaching, but neither Ariadne nor Yusuf are ex-military. They don’t have those self-preservation instincts, and in Yusuf’s case, probably never will. He catches the tail end of Ariadne’s words.

"—so I don’t know, he says the fellowship is still open if I want it, but he can only hold it for so long —"

Ah, Eames thinks, therein lies the rub.
Eames could see, after a while, when Cheung Su and Rica tried for the back door. Mikkelsen punching the boarded window, as if that would help. Mikkelsen grabbing Eames' gun, struggling with it, and shooting through the boards as if that would help either.

Fire, and snow — snow falling from the sky, wetting his smoky face when he finally broke through the front door and collapsed in the bushes. Snow fragmented into tiny patterns by the moon, and pain everywhere in Eames' legs, pain the last monster in the labyrinth yet to be faced. (Some say the last monster is death, but Eames disagrees. Death is the maiden with the spool of string who comes and guides you out, and sleep her lesser cousin).

He wakes up from his dream, sweating hard enough to stain the sheets. He looks over at his alarm clock. Two a.m. Still time, he thinks, and so he fumbles for his mobile.

It's not until Arthur answers that Eames realizes he doesn't know what he wants. He dialed the number without even thinking — instinct overriding logic. So he says the only thing he knows how to say, which is, "Feel up for a shag?" He hates himself a bit for it.

"I'm at home," Arthur says. Eames can hear him move around. There's a shaking noise like the sound of cereal pouring into a bowl.

"Never mind then," Eames says. "If you're already settled in, forget it."

"Come over," Arthur says too casually.

"What?"

"You want me to say it again?"

Yes, Eames thinks. "Give me your address," is what he says, because he's sucked Arthur's cock until Arthur's voice went hoarse from moaning, but he has no idea where Arthur lives.

Arthur lives within wailing distance of Skid Row in a flat overlooking a 7-Eleven. It's a lot less upscale than Eames had expected, and Eames wasn't even expecting upscale — he knows Arthur well enough by now to know that the sophistication is a cultivated image, and he's seen Arthur eat tuna straight from the tin. He knocks on Arthur's door, and Arthur comes to answer it in slippers and boxers, still holding his bowl of Lucky Charms. "Good, I was beginning to think you got lost," he says, as if that could be the only reason why Eames took so long. Like it never occurred to him to think Eames wasn't coming at all.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Arthur asks, inviting Eames inside. It's clean and neat, and that makes Eames feel a lot better, like something is right with the world after all, 2 + 2 still equals 4, and Arthur can never resist organizing his CDs by alphabetical name of artist when he can cross-reference them by date and genre and colour theme instead. It's a homey flat, though somewhat sparse, with the telltale signs of an owner who doesn't actually spend much time here. Junk mail and flyers are gathering neatly on the kitchen partition, but there's nothing on the coffee table except for a coffee table book on modernist Caribbean photography, Eames sees upon closer inspection.

"I don't actually have a lot of groceries," Arthur says apologetically. "But I've got cereal, and I can make some seafood pasta if you'd like. I've got fresh shrimp."

Eames would rather kiss Arthur, so he does. He snakes an arm around Arthur's waist and pushes him towards the wall. He pries the cereal bowl gently from Arthur's fingers and sets it down on the counter. Then he kisses Arthur full on the mouth, and he can taste milk and sugar and Arthur's satisfied sigh.
"Eames," he says, the most perfect syllable in Eames' entire excuse of an existence. He takes Eames’ hand and leads him to bed.

They fuck slowly, leisurely. Tomorrow's the weekend, and while Arthur could always sneak back to Somnus on a Saturday like Eames suspects he does, Eames won't let him. They have time to fuck all night, and so Eames pulls Arthur onto his lap and kisses him until their mouths are sore with it. He doesn't even care. Arthur buries his fingers in Eames' hair and makes these noises, like this is all he wants, like he was just sitting around, hoping Eames would ring him. Want a shag? Yes, Arthur does — Arthur wants Eames above him and around him and in him. Arthur wants Eames to make him come as many times as possible, to destroy his composure until he's a shuddering mess beneath Eames' callouses, eyes bright and mouth as red as strawberries. Arthur wants to suck Eames, to fuck him, to make the headboard bang against the wall, and then to grin and do it again. He wants Eames to make him forget about the Walczak job, rapidly approaching D-Day. This isn't a dream, Eames thinks as he listens to Arthur shake. He burns, and it doesn't hurt.

Later, in the twilight hours while Arthur is lying sleepily in Eames' arms, Eames looks around Arthur's bedroom, memorizing every piece. He might never be here again. "What are you doing?"
Arthur murmurs, poking Eames' leg with his toes.

"Thinking," Eames says.

"You have enough energy left to think?" Arthur yawns. "I was hoping I'd fucked it all out of you."

"I was thinking of Cobb—"

"You had sex with me while thinking of Cobb?" Arthur looks up at him. "That's not cool, Eames. That's not cool at all."

"Well, Cobb is a very alluring man," Eames says reasonably.

"No."

"You don't think so?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," Arthur says. "This conversation is all sorts of wrong."

Eames smiles and traces a scar on Arthur's forearm. He remembers this scar — they were in San Antonio, and a car came veering from out of nowhere. "I was thinking," Eames says, "that if I died, I hope I could come back and haunt you as a projection. I'd cause you all sorts of mayhem. You'd never get rid of me."

"That's the creepiest thing anyone's ever said to me," Arthur replies.

Ask me to leave, Eames thinks. Tell me to go. They've never spent the night together before, but Arthur doesn't ask and he doesn't tell. He kisses Eames' shoulder once, and then goes to sleep.

Arthur slips back into his withdrawn silence the day of the Walczak job. It's his job alone. He's the only one who's going under, but everybody in the office knows when it happens, because they can feel Arthur's stillness that he wields like a knife. He lapses back into military efficiency, every move precise and calculated, but it's not confidence that fuels it, it's fear.
He still can't look Walczak in the eye, and it unnerves her right back. She thinks Arthur doesn't like her, but Eames can't explain it in a way that won't leave everybody hating him. She's a nice, high-strung person who should be put at ease, but Arthur's not equipped for that in this particular situation, and Eames doesn't know how to say, *You're in good hands, the best hands. He will kill himself trying to make this up to you.*

He wonders what Walczak and Arthur were like, all those years ago when they first met. Somewhere in Walczak's unconscious is a memory of Arthur, nineteen years old and gorgeously brilliant — it's a memory that Eames would pay money to see.

Gorgeously brilliant, and a traitor — though maybe that's not the right word, because he never owed Walczak anything. It was her ex-husband who hired Arthur. It was her ex-husband who Arthur answered to, and answered to reluctantly.

But even Eames, in his worst moments, never sent anyone to limbo deliberately. He's stolen and lied and placed foreign thoughts in Robert Fischer's head, but he's never made anyone sleep for fifteen years. He's selfishly glad he's never been put in that situation.

Walczak lies awkwardly on the sofa, her hands folded over her stomach. "Will it hurt?" she asks, but Eames, watching over them, shakes his head.

"It's like sinking into a bath," he promises.

The moment before they fall asleep, that's when Arthur looks at Walczak for the first time. Walczak as she closes her eyes and lets her muscles go loose, pearl necklace slip-sliding around her papery neck. Arthur looks at her, and it's so obvious what he's trying to say. *I'm sorry, I stole your life from you, this will be a good dream.* But Walczak doesn't see. Will never see.

This is true: Arthur's sent two people to permanent limbo. Walczak because he was forced to, Ekuweme because he did it wrong. But this is also true about Arthur: he doesn't have ego. He will acknowledge his mistakes, and he will fix them. Even if he has to return year after year, time after time.

It's Arthur who got Walczak out of limbo, after all. Fifteen years, and he was her Hades, but he was her Orpheus too. She doesn't remember anything about it, but it happened anyway: the boy who left her there, the man who returned, the grip on her wrist, yanking her out into sunshine.

In a dream, there's only one way to go: and that's up and out. They'll all find their way there in the end, somehow.

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Eames learned passion with a knife and a badly scraped knee. He'd been fourteen then, as tough as any spring bud that has yet to unfurl, and he'd been kicking around at the dingy garage by the railroad tracks. Billy Hartinger, son of Mrs. Hartinger the piano teacher and the bloke who beat her, had been there too. Smoking with his shoulders pulled up over his ears. When he'd seen Eames swagger in, he'd flicked his fag at him. "What the fuck did you do that for?" Eames had snarled, and Billy had snarled back, and Eames took nothing those days, was as eager to fight for it as he was to steal for it — and he and Billy had been trading punches before long. Until Eames reached into his jacket and flicked open his switchblade, a long hiss that seemed to last forever — and he'd held it against Billy's throat, where Billy swallowed hard. And then Eames had kissed him, sloppy mouth,
acrid with blood.

The first time he ever wanted anyone that badly.

Eames isn't a masochist but he's harsh — and he's harsher to himself than anybody. The Monday after the Walczak job, he shows up to work and finds Arthur chatting with one of their prospective clients, a gorgeous young woman with an hourglass figure and a low-cut dress. Arthur looks more at peace than Eames has ever seen him. He's laughing, actually throwing his head back and laughing. She's touching him gently on the wrist, over familiar, but what matters is that Arthur lets her. His body language is writing odes to flirtation, and Eames feels a jar of stones empty into his stomach.

He's made a mistake here, a fatal error in calculation. He said from the very beginning, promise you won't fall in love with me, and like a hypocrite he went and backspaced his own rules.

Eames feels completely changed, burned down to the filter. He'll keep this to himself because he doesn't see what other option there is. He's Arthur's quirky fuck buddy, his entertaining and insufferable employee, his occasional friend. That Eames is carrying an inconvenient passion for him isn't going to make a difference. There isn't a tale in the world that goes and then he turned around and saw him as if for the first time, and they lived happily ever after. Eames tells stories for a living. He should know.

He has a lighter in his office. He doesn't smoke much anymore because every time he does, he's stepping inside the ring for a championship match between old habit and old memories. It's the way the smoke will stay trapped in a locked room, the way the flame vanishes in and out of sight. But when he's working on wrapping up the last of the demo dreams, he finds his lighter in his hand, and because he doesn't know better (won't let himself know better), he flicks it on. Fire, pure and holy, and Eames sucks in his breath through his front teeth. His grip on the lighter trembles.

So he does it again, and again, until his palm is covered in sweat.

"Huh."

He looks up quickly. It's Yusuf.

"What are you doing?" Yusuf asks, coming in. He closes the door behind him. "Trying to give yourself a panic attack?"

Sometimes, Eames thinks uncharitably, Yusuf has read too many pop psychology books. "Trying not to become a useless, complacent shit," he says, smoothing his voice out.

"It's funny," Yusuf says. The expression on his face is exquisitely empty, like Pandora's box after the last of it is gone, even the hope.

"What?" Eames asks.

"That I catch you doing this when I come to tell you about..." Yusuf stops to sit down. He picks up one of Eames' river stone paperweights and studies it. Yusuf always does this. He can't stop himself from touching and fiddling with every interesting artifact he can get away with. "I was talking to one of my old associates, Hernandez. You know Hernandez? A whiz with the new-school amphetamines? No, you probably don't. He goes into the field even less than I do. But I was talking to Hernandez, and he told me that he was in Manchester last week, and he saw quote-unquote 'that fucking rat Moran' on Roman Road."

Blood rushes through Eames' eardrums. "That's what he said?"

"Do you trust Hernandez?"

"There's no reason not to," Yusuf says. "He said he followed Moran, but Moran spooked and lost him. Hernandez isn't very good at that sort of thing, no surprise there. But I don't think he's a liar either. He hates that dreamshare has gone public, and he hates Moran more than anything."

"Seems to be a vice we all share," Eames says, and his voice sounds too quiet to him, too level, but underneath it, he can feel the tarantella quickening of his heart. He looks at the lighter, at its dull chrome mouth, and then at Yusuf again. Yusuf stares back steadily. "Do you know who lives on Roman Road in Manchester?" Eames asks.

"No idea."

"Charles Lyle does," says Eames, and laughs.

Terrence, Charles, revenge, passion, bad life choices — it's all out of his hands when Arthur has an allergic reaction to one of the compounds in the N27.

It's their first time using it, him and Yusuf and Ariadne and Arthur in one of the dreaming rooms, joking around as Yusuf injects 5 mL of the N27 into the PASIV's holding tank. "Sweet dreams," he says as they lie back and close their eyes. When Eames opens his eyes again, he's inside of Rosenthal's dream as dreamt by Arthur — he's in a hospital corridor, trashed and empty, with graffiti smeared across the walls and dried syringes lying crushed underneath his feet. It's the end of the world, and he feels Arthur right behind him, breathing it all in.

"Zombies," Arthur says with a slight smile.

"Zombies," Eames agrees, and they go through a test run, feeling the smoothness of N27 in their bodies. Arthur has a sword and Eames has a machete. Ariadne follows them with a morningstar that she swings with clumsy effort, but it seems to make her happy. When the cry goes up that the zombies have infiltrated the hospital, the action starts. Eames sees the first revenant to his left. He swings, slashing the zombie across its necro throat. It makes a gurgling sound, and pus rather than blood wells out like a swarm of bees.

Eames slows down, lets the zombie strike back. The knife sinks jagged into Eames' shoulder, and Eames braces himself for it, waiting for (pain, he's always waiting for pain). He feels nothing, just a rough pressure that's almost unpleasant, a falling backwards off a roller coaster at the peak of the ride pressure, but it doesn't wake him up.

Gold star for Yusuf.

Arthur, though, isn't doing well. Eames notices this when he swings back to Arthur's side, machete in hand. Arthur's going through the motions with the sword, hacking and cutting like he was born to it, but he looks flushed and sweaty, and his breath is too loud.

"You all right?" Eames asks.

"I'm fine," Arthur gasps, and he whips around to put his sword through a zombie's eye. He yanks it
"Got it!" she shouts back, and she's too far down the hall to see Arthur bend over and start wheezing. He can't get enough air. His face is turning redder by the second, and Eames makes the immediate decision to end the dream right fucking now. Only, Yusuf on the surface beats him to it, yanking all the PASIV lines out of their arms and slapping them. The pain rocks Eames up nastily.

"Arthur's having an allergic reaction," Yusuf says.

There are hives all over Arthur's bare arms, huge swelling hills on his skin. Arthur's shaking, his lips are swollen, and he's squeezing air out of his lungs so painfully that the sound of it fills the room.

"Anaphylactic shock," Ariadne says, scared. "I've seen it before. My cousin once, at her birthday party—"

"I've called 911," Yusuf says, and Eames wish he could say something, offer some brilliant medical advice, but he's struck dumb and useless. All he can do is watch Yusuf go over to Arthur and lie him flat, head on the same plane as the rest of his body, except for his feet, which Yusuf raises several inches with a pillow. He finds a blanket and covers Arthur with it. Then he goes into his bag and pulls out a dose of epinephrine and a dose of antihistamines.

Arthur moans.

Eames moves to his side swiftly. He doesn't care anymore what it looks like. He kneels down by Arthur's sofa and he takes Arthur's hand.

"We each took a medical history!" Ariadne is saying. She turns to Yusuf. "We each dosed ourselves with samples of N27 beforehand! You cleared us as safe!"

But no, Eames thinks, that's not true. Arthur wasn't there the day he and Ariadne prepared themselves for this new compound. Arthur was in a dreamshare conference in the Midwest. He said he'd do it when he came back, but Eames never actually saw him run the tests.

"He didn't want to hold the rest of you up," Yusuf replies tightly. "I told him he should go through the full range of medical tests, but he said — I told him the active ingredient and he said he'd never had a reaction to it before. What was I supposed to do but take his word for it? He's the boss."

"You're the chemist," Eames says.

"I can't make people's decisions for them!" Yusuf snaps. "I'm not God."

Arthur's hand is slippery. Eames squeezes it all the more. Arthur isn't looking at him. Arthur's looking up at the ceiling, eyes wide and glassy — and then Arthur tilts his head and he is looking at Eames. He's breathing Eames' name through his bruised lips, trying to speak it with his thickened tongue. "Shut up," Eames demands. "If you know what's good for you, you'll shut up right now, do you hear me?"

The emergency crew arrives. He can hear them even before they come in, the wail of the ambulance sirens, the leitmotif of every bad memory in Eames' life.

"I've already delivered epinephrine and antihistamines," Yusuf informs them, and then tells them the exact amount.

"Is he on any additional medication?" the EMT asks. "Can you find them? Bring them with him to the hospital."
"I — we have no idea," Eames says.

"I've got it written down," Yusuf interrupts. He runs to Ariadne's office, where he's keeping his books, and he comes out with the medical histories that he took from them. His hands are trembling as he goes through the papers, but he pulls out Arthur's in time for the emergency crew to heft Arthur onto the stretcher.

There's only room for one person in the ambulance. Ariadne looks at Eames and says, "Go."

Eames goes.

Arthur's breathing is a pitiful thing, a desperate struggle that makes Eames feel dizzy as he watches. He's seen worse than this. He's seen men bleeding out on the sidewalk; he's seen a house charred to its bones, but it's not a matter of degree. He holds onto Arthur's hand until there are bruises, and at the hospital the first thing they do is open up his airways via endotracheal intubation, sliding the rubber tube into Arthur's trachea via his mouth. They deliver more epinephrine, and steroids as adjunct.

"That should do it," says the doctor, and Eames goes with Arthur to the hospital room where he's supposed to stay for observation. They hook him onto the breathing machine for supplementary oxygen, and they attach him to the intravenous fluids.

They wait. For an hour, two hours.

"I feel like shit," is the first thing Arthur says when they take out the tube. His throat relaxes and he finds his voice again, scratchy and worn. "Did I pass out? I think I passed out."

"For a bit," Eames says roughly.

"Jesus," Arthur croaks. "What a mess. We're going to have to think of a new plan for Rosenthal."

Eames is still holding Arthur's hand. He lets go reluctantly, histrionics and heaving bosoms no longer appropriate now that the danger has passed. "Fuck Rosenthal," he says. "If that's the first thing you think of, you've got your priorities twisted up."

"It's true," Arthur says, rubbing his throat gingerly. "I'm not good at priorities. Hey, is there any water? I'm so thirsty."

Eames finds a plastic cup. He fills it with tap water from the bathroom and gives it to Arthur. He waits for a complaint about bathroom water versus the beauty of mineral water harvested from Switzerland, no doubt strained between the thighs of nuns, but he doesn't get one. Arthur knocks back the water clumsily. "Go get me some more," he says.

God, Arthur is infuriating. When Eames returns, he finds Arthur checking his messages on his mobile. Infuriating isn't even the right word.

"Is that really necessary?" he asks.

"Just telling Ari and Yusuf that I'm still alive," Arthur rasps back.

"I already did that when you were doing the whole breathing-through-tubes bit, thanks," Eames snaps.

"Why are you annoyed at me?" Arthur wonders. "I thought I was the one who just went through a traumatic experience."
"I'm annoyed because you skipped the preliminary drug tests," Eames says. "You were the one who insisted on them for the very reason that we could have a reaction to the N27, but you can't eat your own advice? You had to deceive Yusuf into letting it go?"

"I didn't think I would have a reaction," Arthur says. "I've never reacted to alphadreximol before, and there was the schedule to keep—"

"The schedule," Eames says blankly. "I'm sure the schedule is what will be on your mind when you drop dead at age forty because of reckless stupidity."

"You don't get it," Arthur argues. "You weren't there from the start — I can't let Somnus fail."

"If this is about your investments—"

"It's not about money," Arthur says. He would probably sound more impressive if his voice was stronger, but as it is, the hoarseness of it sends shivers down Eames' back. "You think any of us lack for money? Even Ari could probably sit on her hands for the next five years and be fine. It's just — I can't fail, all right? I need to do this right."

This is Arthur's history, Eames thinks, scratched out for everyone to see. This is what Lindall made of him. The sort of history where there are choices that aren't choices at all, where we do terrible things for people we love, but no one at that age should have ever come to face the truth of it, least of all Arthur. This is Arthur down to the cellular level. He can't forgive himself — Eames can't forgive himself. There's an echo between them, traveling through all the rooms of Eames' heart. Maybe this is why Eames knows with a sudden, fierce certainty that one day Arthur is going to be the end of him. Terrence was the beginning, the first time he let himself care about another human being who wasn't related to him, to sit with them in waiting rooms and pay their bills and help with their laundry and watch their back during gunfights. Terrence was the first, his best friend. Arthur is neither, but Arthur will be the song that finishes the act.

"More water?" he asks out loud.

"Sure," Arthur says, sounding steadier than he is.

Everyone's more subdued the next day, except for Arthur, who blazes through the office like a lighthouse signal, getting down to business quickly and efficiently. At one point Ariadne dares to ask if he shouldn't take a day off, but Arthur stares at her until she huffs a sigh and turns away.

"So we have to think about what we're going to do now," he says, calling them all into a meeting. "If I can't go into the dream, then either someone else has to control the projections, we're going to have to switch to ranged combat, or we're going to have to cancel. And let me just say — if we cancel? I will lose my shit."

"Arthur, you're deranged and mentally unstable," Yusuf says. "Most of the time it's a good thing, or at the very least wildly entertaining. But we're not risking you for Rosenthal."

"Who would make our coffee then?" Eames says.

"I don't make the coffee. Ae Sook does."
"Who would swoop around breathing down our necks then?" Eames corrects. "I long for the touch of your tender breath. It has moisturizing qualities, you know."

"I'm sure that's not the only thing you long for," Ariadne mutters. Eames looks sharply at her, but she waves her hands in apology. "Ignore me. I'm just thinking about what to do."

"Rosenthal seems reasonable, from that one chat I had with her over the phone," Yusuf offers. "I think she could be convinced to switch to ranged combat."

Arthur rubs at his nose bridge. "I really hate to do this. After the fiasco that was Olsen, I don't want us to get a reputation as an agency that can't satisfy its customers — and stop that smirking, Eames, I know what you're thinking and I'm not talking about brothels."

"I'm not smirking," says Eames, and for once he isn't. "There's another option we haven't considered. I don't think it's the greatest option, but you might be willing to go for it, Arthur. Clearly you can't go into Rosenthal's dream using the N27, and no one else at Somnus has the skill with projections that you do. But we can bring someone from the outside in. I'm thinking Cobb as a possibility."

"Cobb's retired," Ariadne says immediately.

"And that means he never misses it? He never thinks about having one last taste of dreaming?" Eames says. "Because I'll bet you anything he does, and we have the best tool in the box to convince him. We've got Arthur."

Arthur looks like his first instinct is to argue, though whether about Cobb doing one last job or Cobb being swayed by him, they'll never know. He taps his fingers against his throat, right over the skin that peeks from his parted collar, and then he seems to remember the three pairs of scrutinizing eyes that have been on him all day. He drops his hands. "It's still a bit sore," he says by way of explanation. "From the intubation. Not that it's anything for you to worry about. Let's think about Cobb first."

Eames would rather not think about Dom Cobb, not when his thoughts could be given to much more pleasant subjects instead, like lottery tickets and fast cars and Arthur on his knees, but there's work and then there's play — not that Arthur understands the difference.

"Either way," Ariadne says, "we're going to have to put the Rosenthal job on hold. Until we train someone else, until we figure out our new plans."

Arthur nods, unhappy, but as they get ready to leave, he deliberately catches Eames' eye. He jerks his chin towards the table, twice, and Eames knows this is his signal to stay. So Eames lingers casually, purposefully, and it's hardly as if Ariadne and Yusuf can't tell. But they're good enough not to say anything, leaving Arthur and Eames alone when they're gone. Arthur goes and closes the door of the conference room.

"Your nails are in bad shape," Eames notices.

"As if it matters," Arthur says.

"Well, I'm quite fond of the way you clutch me when I'm fucking you — I wouldn't want it to hurt though," Eames says. A slow smile creeps across his mouth. "Or maybe I do. Maybe I'd like your nails to leave marks all over me."

Arthur barely flushes, but barely is more than none. "If you think I've cornered you here to have sweaty office sex—"
"I hadn't, but now that you mention it—"

"—you're going to have to take a rain check," Arthur finishes. "Not that the prospect isn't, ah, extremely tempting." He sneaks a grin there, quickfire, mesmerizing. Then he sobers. "Yusuf told me."

Eames plays obtuse. "About the temptations of office sex?"

"About Moran and Charles Lyle."

Eames says nothing.

"You're going to make me work for this, huh?" Arthur says. He takes a step forward until he's closer in Eames' space, not close enough to touch but enough that Eames can feel the warmth of him. Arthur's so alive, he reflects, and not in the way that most people mean it, where living means talking and thinking and occasionally laughing, which even monkeys are capable of. But alive in the sense that he can't ever imagine Arthur dead. He can't envision a world where Arthur doesn't exist somewhere to push and prod and follow you loyally down every dark path you go.

"Rosenthal's on hold," Arthur says. "I hate it, but that's how it's got to be. It's on hold and we don't need you for the next project, so — so I think you should go after Moran. He won't surface in one place for too long. Don't miss the chance."

"Are you really encouraging cold-blooded revenge?" Eames asks.

"I think you should do what you need to do. If it's revenge, then it's revenge. God knows I haven't always been nice about people screwing me over, and that's even without killing my team and giving me third degree burns. And if it's not revenge... well, that's up to you."

"Yes, thank you for pointing that out," Eames drawls. "As if it weren't exceptionally obvious." It almost hurts to speak, to look into Arthur's face when he's being compassionate like this.

Arthur looks frustrated. "Look, I can't make you happy. I can't wave my dick around and cure everything. There isn't anybody in the world who can do that. But this I can do."

"I should find Terrence Moran," Eames echoes. He turns the words over in his mouth, measuring the weight of each of them. It's exactly what he's wanted for all these years; why is he hesitating now? "He fucked me over, he murdered our friends. I need to take care of him."

"You'll know what to do when you see him," Arthur says, as simple as that.

There's an alleyway in Manchester, trash wind-tossed across the damp concrete. The air has the earthy scent of recent rain. The graffiti is still there as he remembers it, but layered over itself like oils on a painting — scratch one layer off and there will be another underneath it, and another under that, until all memory is lost of the canvas. There's a New Age shop with celestial print curtains, and permanent marker signs made out of construction paper that say '50% off all merchandise, student discounts extra, incense available!!', and a backdoor where Charles Lyle is waiting.

"Have a drink," is the first thing he says, and Eames wonders just what it is about him that makes Charles choose those words. He doesn't look too awful, probably — it's true he just flew in, but he
ducked into a bathroom at the airport and made sure to straighten his sloppy hair and grab some real food. But there it is nonetheless, and he smiles at Charles with a humour and charm he doesn't feel, following him inside the shop.

"So what business do you have in Manchester?" Charles asks, moving around, bringing out a bottle of amontillado sherry and two musty glasses, which he wipes with the corner of his sleeve. "That agency of your friend's not working out?"

"Nah, it's doing fine," Eames says, accepting the proffered drink. He sits down on a rickety chair and watches as Charles shuffles closer to him. There's a stain on Charles' plaid tie that looks like ink from an exploded fountain pen, and a wildness to his hair that looks like uneasy sleep. Or maybe Eames is just projecting. He sips the wine. It's terrible, but Charles has never had great taste to begin with. Should have been a warning sign, that.

"I heard you were embroiled in a lawsuit," Charles says pleasantly. "Nothing you couldn't handle, I hope?"

"You know, lawyers," Eames says flippantly. "What are lawyers compared to being chased around the backstreets of Bangkok by a pack of angry dogs? The lawyers, they charge more, that's all."

"But you charge even more than them for the dreaming."

"It's a luxury good. If everybody could afford the dreams they wanted, there wouldn't be much use for them anymore."

"A communist might disagree," Charles says.

"I'm a thief and a killer and a liar and a failed academic," Eames says. "Alas, I cannot add communist onto my list of distinctions." He sets his drink down on the card table. "You don't look well, Charles."

"Ah, well! It's been a trying few months, I'll admit that much," Charles replies. "Financial woes, mostly, but also the saddening burden of watching the young talent, except they don't actually have much talent. One of my newer friends tried to break into the British Library to steal the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf manuscript. Can you believe it! I hope he was drunk when he thought of it. A foolhardy risk, and not one that worked very well, I'm afraid."

"Where's he now?" Eames asks.

"Awaiting trial," Charles sighs. "I worry he'll mention my name. I didn't put him up to it, you know. Quite the contrary. I told him if he insisted on stealing from the BL, steal something less noticeable for starters. But his ambition was untempered by common sense." Charles smiles nostalgically. "I keep thinking of you and Terrence before — before this whole sordid mess. The way you waltzed through the libraries and museums of the world, and left with their goods in your pockets. That time you cased the Vatican!" His voice softens into a breathless hush. "You were fearless, the both of you."

"The Vatican libraries had shit security until a few years ago," Eames reflects. "Of course, we had to masquerade as scholars with references, and we had to check our coats and our bags at the door, but references are easy to fake and ugly jumpers with large, convenient sags are easy to wear."

"It wouldn't be so easy these days," Charles agrees.

"They catch onto our tricks," Eames replies. There's a cut on the back of his hand — he swung his razor in the wrong direction yesterday morning. "That's why we can only do them so often. Save
"You sound like you have something in mind." Charles sparks up with interest. "Are you thinking about switching over to the shady side of things again? Not that I don't support your friend Arthur's business, but, well, things have been rather boring lately. I could use a story of a good old-fashioned heist."

"Boring? Not for you, I don't think." Eames meets his friend's gaze straight on. He had thought this might be difficult, but instead all he feels is a muffled calm, like someone's reached into his body and pulled out the spaces where fear and betrayal might be. He's lived through this once; it was an inoculation. "Tell me where he is," he says.

Charles flatters Eames by not playing dumb. He looks away. "Oh Eames. Oh, I was hoping you wouldn't find out."

"Are you his ally?" Eames asks. "Did you help him in Oslo?"

Charles looks horrified. "No! No — no, how could you think that of me? I could never do such a thing—"

"Here's an interesting tidbit for you," Eames says. "Humans are the only animals self-aware enough to state their limits, and they're the only animals where they'd be wrong."

"I had nothing to do with Terrence's... with what he did," Charles says. He's pale now, and Eames can see the blue veins engorged in his paper thin throat. "Believe me or don't believe me, I know I can't prove it. But I'm an old man, never married, and you and Terrence and the others — you're the closest things I have to grandchildren. I'd never turn one of you against another." The veins in his throat deepen. "Terrence went wrong. I tried to guide him back."

"Did you know beforehand, what he was going to do?"

"No!"

"Do you know why he did it?"

"No!"

*I don't know why either*, Eames thinks, and it dries him out, hollows him. He reaches for the terrible wine, and he drinks it. Charles keeps on looking at him anxiously, guilt and shame written all over his face, and then looking away — the bells from the frontside shop tinkle and a customer comes in, but they ignore her. "I think it was money," Charles says at last. "I think he was in a lot of gambling debt."

*He could have come to me for help. We were like family back then,* Eames thinks, but none of this is going to change anything, so he says, "Then why was he here to visit you?"

"He needed money," Charles says. "After the WikiLeaks, he was — well, you know how unpopular he was. He couldn't get work anymore. He had to keep moving. He lacked money, so he came to me and asked if I could help him. I took pity on him! He looked a wreck, Eames, you don't understand. A part of me wanted to ring the police right then and there, but another part of me remembered how he was when I first met him. He was so young then! You remember."

"I'm tired of remembering," Eames says. "It's all I ever do."

"I gave him money. Then I told him to leave."
"Where is he now?" Eames asks.

"He didn't say," Charles says wearily. "But he mentioned a potential job. He didn't like it, but he couldn't be choosy about it. He wouldn't tell me any more, but I saw — I saw his notes when I let him borrow my shower. I saw a name. Bradley."

"Bradley," Eames repeats. He's gotten what he's come for. He stands up, and Charles flinches. When Eames walks by him, there's a trembling heaviness to the old man's shoulders, and Eames knows that he's waiting for a blow (*I'm a thief and a killer and a liar*). Eames could do it. Charles' neck is so weak, Eames could break it with a twist of his hands. The first time Eames met Dr. Charles Lyle, he'd been the chief librarian at the Bodleian, and Eames was twenty and the youngest doctoral student in the medieval history program, scraping a miserable existence off his scholarship and his dissertation on scroll versus codex tradition in English Catholicism. Charles had been brilliant and Eames had been hungry, all the way until the day Charles sought him out and said, *Mr. Eames, I'd like you to procure something for me, but you must be discreet.* That was Genesis, or the gospels; that was Eames' annunciation. But this — this is Exodus.

Eames isn't interested anymore in where he began. *I must be growing wiser, or lazier,* he thinks.

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He stops in Oslo and looks for Mikkelsen's house, but it's not there anymore, not even the ruins. On the outskirts of the city, where the roads bleed into the countryside and the spruce trees speckle the rough skyline, he finds a house that he neither recognizes nor knows. It sits fenced in on the land, and Eames vaults the low yellow fence to walk the yard, gazing up at the new house — it must have been rebuilt, he thinks. After all, it's been years. The structure is completely different, and the colour's all wrong, and shrubbery is fixed up, and the air smells like bread baking for dinner. He can see the family inside through the bay windows.

He doesn't make any attempt to hide. They see him back, and the father excuses himself from the kitchen to come outside.

"Hello, can I help you?" he asks in Norwegian. Eames knows enough of the language to know that, but he's not so skilled in speaking it himself.

He replies in English. "I was in the neighbourhood and I got lost."

The man struggles to parse the English, and his own reply is awkward and faltering. "Where... you... go?" he asks.

"I don't know," Eames says. "I'm sorry to bother you. You have a lovely house."

The man nods, and Eames hoists his bag over his shoulder and walks back towards the gate. The man watches him all the while, suspicious, so Eames figures he has nothing to lose. If they ring the police on him, he'll be long gone anyway by the time they arrive — lessons learned and paid for. Eames stops on the other side of the gate, the rusty metal cool under his fingers. This, they might not have replaced, he thinks, and he almost checks for blood, even though he knows he won't find any.

"Did you know three people died on this land, six years ago?" he asks.

The man doesn't know.
"Out of curiosity, do you believe in ghosts?" Eames says.

"Please," says the man. "Please... leave."

Eames does not believe in ghosts. He did, when he was a child, and he used to sit up all night on Halloween with a mirror and a glass of water, waiting. Once, he felt his skin prickle and heard someone's voice through the walls, but it was the wind and the radio playing tricks on him. He'd like to believe in ghosts though. He'd like to believe that even though Cheung Su and Rica are dead and cremated, there are pieces of them left like particles in the air, and that Eames can hear them when he's asleep, but he can hear them when he's awake too.

The man is growing twitchy. He's reaching for his mobile. Eames smiles to himself. He doesn't believe in ghosts, but he doesn't believe in overstaying his welcome either.

"Poof, I'm gone," he says.

Bradley Culhane is a difficult man to find in his own right, so in the meantime, while he calls in a few favours and waits for his contacts to hit gold, Eames returns to California. The day he comes back is the day he runs into Dom Cobb in the elevator.

Eames is standing there, watching the doors slide shut, when a hand snakes in between and pushes the doors back open. Cobb steps inside, and then looks surprised. He's carrying a coffee. "Arthur told us you'd be back today," he says.

Eames waits until the doors close before responding. "Arthur knows my habits, this is true," he says agreeably.

Cobb sips his coffee and makes a noncommittal sound.

"How are the kids?" Eames asks.

"I'd rather not discuss my children at work," Cobb replies.

"Really? But they're the most interesting thing about you," Eames says, and smirks when Cobb levels him that intense stare of his. He's always had trouble reading Cobb. He shouldn't, really. Dead wife, abandoned children? It's practically textbook. But Cobb has multiplex layers of repression with broken escalators between every floor, and there's only one proper course of action with people like that: mock them mercilessly and steal their lunch money.

Ariadne's in the reception area when they walk in together, bent over the fax machine. She raises her eyebrows at the sight. "What are you two, best friends now? You travel in pairs?"

"Like rabid hound dogs," Eames says. "Like cancer-ridden testicles."

"Forget I asked," she says.

"I'm the balls, he's the cancer," Cobb says.

"No, really, forget I asked," Ariadne protests. "Didn't we used to have, like, intellectual conversations once upon a time?"
"I honestly can't remember," says Eames. "Speaking of intellectual, how's it going with the..." He looks around and then lowers his voice. "The University of Arizona? You make any decision about that fellowship yet?"

"I think you should take it," Cobb says. "Professor Greer is the best in the field. If I had the opportunity at your age, I wouldn't even think twice about it."

"Here's a thinking point for you," Eames says. "How about you try to keep your voice down? Arthur doesn't —"

"Arthur knows," says Arthur, appearing out of his office. When Ariadne sees him, she looks disgruntled and miserable, but she lifts her chin defiantly. "Ari told me while you were gone," he says to Eames, almost conversationally. "These are the files I said I was aggregating for you," he says to Cobb, and Cobb shifts his lunch to the crook of his elbow as he takes the folder from Arthur.

"Great," he says. "I'm still not convinced West Grand Avenue is the best route to take for Rosenthal, considering the angles of triangulation it would require to pull off the most efficient explosion. But I can run the numbers now, so we'll see."

This is what it's like working with Dom Cobb as the lead in the field: familiar, yet aggravating. Like anybody who's accumulated years of experience leading a team, Cobb has set ideas and rules about how to run a dream, and if they clash with anybody else's ideas, he's not going to say sorry. Eames is the exception to the pattern — he used to lead Terrence, Cheung Su, and Rica in a team, but he was never the kind of leader that Cobb was, maybe because Terrence was a shit and Rica was a douchebag and Cheung Su could kill you with his eyes closed. He never led them so much as try to round them up in a place where they could do the least amount of damage.

Cobb's used to dealing with Arthur and Nash, and neither of them can be described as the confrontational type. Arthur's more likely to try and argue rationally, maybe behind closed doors. He'll save his words, and sometimes they'll lose their effect as a result. Nash, as far as Eames knows, is more likely to take your words and snort them up his nose — Nash just didn't care.

Arthur's gotten better at not letting Cobb control everything. He has to. Arthur's name is on the top of the Somnus masthead, so it's in his best interest to reel Cobb in when he has to. He's doing a passable job of it so far, Eames thinks as he watches them over the rest of the day.

In between the navigation of egos, Eames can see the old partnership between Arthur and Cobb at work. The way Cobb will relax around Arthur, even smile for him. The way Arthur seems to relax right back, walking in tandem with Cobb like they're two puppets in the same Punch and Judy show. They've got their own language between them, their own code of sideways looks and minute frowns. It's driving Ariadne crazy, trying to pick up the pieces of what they're thinking.

It should drive Eames crazy too. It doesn't. Eames should feel jealous. But he doesn't. He knows what it's like to have to carry all that history on your shoulders — you'll carry it for the rest of your life.

Cobb comes to visit Eames in his office at the end of the day, first to go over projection design and then to shuffle around Eames' office for a bit, reading the spines of his books in a way that's vaguely reminiscent of Yusuf's restless habits. Yusuf's gone back to Mombasa, gone back to his wife — good for him, Eames thinks. Cobb picks up the latest Helen Oyeyemi and then puts it back down. "I'll have to borrow that sometime," he says absently.

"Go ahead," Eames shrugs. "Makes no difference to me."
"You know, I was surprised when Arthur told me he was trying to recruit you for Somnus," Cobb says. "Then I thought about it, and I wasn't surprised at all."

"Did you try to argue him out of it?"

"No, why would I?" Cobb says. "You're probably the best forger I've ever met, and you weren't attached to any other project. I wanted you for inception — why was I going to tell Arthur that he shouldn't use you, when all this time I've been trying to train Arthur to be like me?"

"That never goes well," Eames says, thinking of Terrence.

"Sadly, despite my best efforts and the sessions with the hypnotist, Arthur has a brain of his own," Cobb says. He makes an uncomfortable expression, and Eames realizes what Cobb is trying to work himself up to say — Are you fucking him? Is there something going on between you and him? Do you love him? Eames wonders what it means that everybody who knows them seems to notice. But Cobb, thankfully, is a poor poet and an even worse conversationalist. Eames hears from guys like Vaughan that Mal used to be sparkling enough for the both of them, but Arthur's told him (when they were lying tangled in the sheets together, and Eames had Arthur's teeth marks on his collarbone) that Mal was even quieter and more self-contained than Cobb was. They were reflections of each other.

Eames asks him, straight out, "Do you know Bradley Culhane? Do you know where he is?"

"Culhane, huh," Cobb replies. "I worked with him once. He struck me as unstable, but to be fair, a lot of you people strike me as unstable."

"You people?" Eames asked, amused.

"Forgers," Cobb says wearily. "I don't know where Culhane is, but I can ask around."

"Then I owe you one," Eames says. It makes him feel strange, the idea of owing Cobb anything, but he feels like if he does this, he has to do it right.

Cobb hesitates.

"Problem?" Eames asks.

"I think I know why you're going after Culhane," Cobb says. "I feel like I should tell you. He has a daughter."

"Culhane does?"

"No, Moran."

"Moran doesn't have a daughter," Eames says. He thinks of the girl in the photos. There are a thousand explanations for that. Cobb opens his mouth to speak again, but Eames ends the conversation there by digging out one of the demo dreams to show him.

Arthur tells Cobb about Walczak. Eames knows this because he can hear their voices through the closed door of Arthur's office, and those are not tones of voice one uses to talk shop, or to comment on cute photos of your children's birthday party. That's a tone of voice you use when you face
confession.

"So what did the great hero say?" Eames asks later, when he and Arthur go out for lunch together. Arthur picks a seafood place that he loves, and eats his tilapia with pine nuts like he's never heard of table manners. Having emotions is a hungry business.

"Is there nothing private I can keep from you?" Arthur asks, wiping a stray bit of garnish from his chin.

"I hope there are some things you're keeping from me. Otherwise how will we keep our sex life exciting and fresh?" Eames deadpans. "I truly hope one day you will tell me about your student-teacher roleplay fantasy, or your orgasmic connection to licking Hollandaise sauce."

"That's disgusting," Arthur says.

"You've never had a sexy teacher who you just wanted to have spank you?"

"Ms. Leung, eleventh grade English," Arthur says immediately. "But I was referring to the Hollandaise sauce."

"And I was referring, at one point, to you and Cobb having your no doubt manly American heart-to-heart."

Arthur grimaces. "I told him about Walczak. He knew before — about what I did to her. He got me drunk once when I was twenty, and I blabbed all about it. But I told him about meeting her again recently, and making that dream for her."

"I hope he approved," Eames says.

"He said —" Arthur looks down at his lunch, at his fingernails. "He said I shouldn't be so hard on myself for it. He asked if I would have been able to live with myself if I'd made the other choice — if I'd let Walczak wake up and my parents die. Obviously, the answer to that is no."

He looks up again, clear-sighted, no longer afraid. "He says I need to learn how to forgive, like he forgave himself for Mal, eventually. Because the only other option ends in me self-destructing, and that's giving Lindall the satisfaction." He smiles slightly. "Cobb's pretty good at rhapsodizing when he wants to."

"I suppose he has a point underneath all that excessive sentimentality. But it's easy to say, hard to do," Eames says.

"I want to do it though," Arthur says. "I think I could try."

In Venezuela, Eames finally tracks down Bradley Culhane. Culhane's holed up in a colonial-style flat in El Hatillo in Caracas, and he's rolling weed when Eames breaks his way indoors, pinning Culhane to his sofa by the throat.

"You fucker!" Culhane spits, but Eames only tightens his grip.

"Hello, Brad," he says pleasantly, because there are more than a few people he's pissed off over the years, and this happens to be one of them. The incident involved a disgruntled mark, a wayward
shipment of explosives, and Culhane hightailing it out of there, leaving Eames and Cheung Su to deal with the mess. He's not going to take any chances. If he remembers Culhane properly, there'll be a shotgun somewhere within reach, and enough artillery in the flat to blow up Bolívar Square.

Culhane tries to push him off, but Eames has the greater bulk. He straddles Culhane, pushing him deeper into the sofa, knocking the weed from his hand — it flakes everywhere, dry tufts of it. "Terrence Moran came to you for a job," Eames says softly, speaking directly into Culhane's ear, practically purring it. "Where is he?"

"I'm gonna fucking kill you!" Culhane shouts when Eames lifts his hand from his throat, to let him speak. "I'm gonna fucking string your balls through your teeth!"

"What would the neighbours think?" Eames asks.

"You come here like some—"

"I'm perfectly happy to leave you alone," Eames says, stopping Culhane from squirming. "Just give me the information I want. Moran. His whereabouts. What job he did for you."

"You think I'm going to give you anything?" Culhane spits. "You think after everything, I'd do a single fucking thing to help you?"

"I don't really see what choice you have in the matter," Eames says. "If you don't tell me, I'll put a bullet through your head. I've heard it's not so pleasant."

Culhane roars. And then, fast as a striking bird, he smashes Eames' head with his own. It catches Eames off guard — last time he saw Culhane, he remembered him being slow, too weighed down by the drugs to have any real wit or ingenuity. But Culhane must have learned a few tricks since, because Eames rears back reflexively, head exploding, and Culhane throws him off.

So Culhane's fast now. Who would have thought? Eames has to be faster, if he wants to stop Culhane from reaching the shotgun that his hands are already flying for, the shotgun lying under the sofa. Eames pulls out his pistol and shoots just to the left of Culhane's stretching fingers.

Culhane yanks his hand back.

"We could do this all day," Eames says. "Or you could just tell me. Why the secrecy? You and Terrence aren't friends."

"It's the principle of it," Culhane says, red-faced, gritting his teeth. "I'd help anybody if it'd fuck you over, you pompous asshole."

"Have you ever considered discussing your apparent animosity towards me?" Eames says. "We could be mature, self-actualized beings about it. You could even use I-statements. For example, 'Eames, I feel hurt when you insult my honour by implying I'm a cowardly, useless piece of shit.'"

Culhane lunges for the shotgun, but Eames squeezes the trigger. The bullet goes through Culhane's shoulder cleanly, and Culhane roars.

"Or we could settle it the schoolyard bully way," Eames says. "Not my preference, but I'm a gentleman. I'll let you choose." He walks over to Culhane and kneels by him on the floor. "Shush, you really are going to make the neighbours suspicious, and that's not something either of us wants. Tell me where Moran is, and I'll drive you to the hospital."

Culhane punches him, and then shouts at the pain. Eames grabs him by the face and slams him into
the carpet. "Tell me where he is," he demands. Culhane shakes his head, so Eames slams him again. There's blood and there's spit and Eames feels an icy fury grip him by the stomach. "Tell me where he is, or I'll do this all fucking day."

As it turns out, he doesn't need to. Culhane gasps it out viciously by the seventh slam, because Culhane was never good at taking pain. Eames would have lasted until at least the twentieth, not that he cares to put it to the test.

"Okay," Eames says, finding a tissue and wiping his hands on it. "Hospital time. Come on. You look pathetic."

Later, as he leaves the emergency room sign in the rear view mirror of his car, he rings Arthur up. "I'm in Caracas," he says when Arthur answers. "Beautiful city. Lots of sun. First time here. I'll have to mark it as a vacation spot in the future."

"Vacation's starting to look like a fairy tale dream," Arthur says.

"That busy, hmm?"

"Cobb's found the secret stash of chocolate bars," Arthur says. "And the secret stash of weed."

"We have a secret stash of weed? It's not just Culhane?" Eames replies. "Why was I never informed?"

"It's Ariadne's. She says it's medicinal. She's a doctor, remember."

"A doctor of philosophy."

"All the more reason then," Arthur replies lightly. "There's a pause, and then Arthur says, "How's the hunt for Moran going?"

"Culhane says that he hired Terrence for a job where he needed a skilled forger for cheap. Low-level extraction, local drug deal politics. It's not the sort of job Terrence would have ever considered back in the day, but seeing as how everybody's blacklisted him, he doesn't have much of a choice if he wants to eat."

"Why do you think he did it?" Arthur asks.

"Take the job? I just told you."

"No, why did he leak the information to the public?" Arthur asks. "I've wondered about it so many times. He had to know he would be making people in the field extremely angry. What did he have to gain from it?"

"I used to think I understood everything about him," Eames replies. "But I used to be quite arrogant."

"Used to be?" Arthur mocks.

"Is this some sort of judgement on my character, sweetheart?" Eames says. "Don't you know? I'm the reformed villain of this piece. I'm the bad man with the tragic past and the heart of gold."

"You were never the villain," Arthur says.

"I wasn't the hero, that's for certain."

"None of us are heroes," Arthur says. "We're just the bit players trying to make a living. I'll have my
happy ending when I've got my retirement fund in the bank."

"God, Arthur, retirement funds already? Your practicality depresses me," Eames says. At a red light, he waits near a roadside cachapa stand and his mouth waters. He can smell the fresh ground corn on budare-cooked batter, but then the light changes and he's forced to drive on.

"It's my dirty little secret," says Arthur. "Everybody thinks I'm a romantic, but when I'm looking at a sunset, really I'm thinking about scalping tickets for it." Eames can hear his smile.

"I thought I was your dirty little secret. Is this going to be a competition now?"

"I can take you on in any competition you want to name," Arthur says. "I can take you on in hopscotch."

Eames smiles to himself. There's a minute or so of companionable silence, during which he can hear Arthur typing on his keyboard. Then Eames says, almost like a confession, "I keep thinking of what you said. About forgiveness."

"I don't even know what I was trying to say," Arthur says.

"Nonetheless, you sounded very wise."

"Fuck wisdom. It's just — I mean it, I don't know what I'm saying. But it's — kindness you do for others. Forgiveness you do for yourself. Kind of like masturbation."

"That's how you choose to summarize my tragic misery?" Eames says. "With a comparison to masturbation?"

"Eames."

"Yeah?"


Riomaggiore. Italy.

This is where it ends, Eames thinks. This is where I say goodbye.

If he were to count the pennies in his jar, he would give them these names: anger, frustration, regret, sorrow. And now finally, freedom. He and Terrence are going to be in a room together for the first time in six years, and only one of them is going to leave it. Eames fully plans on it being him.

Eames walks along the wharf of the village, along the Gulf of Genoa. When he looks up, he can see the tower houses stacked like candy boxes, pastel-coloured and crowded, and also entirely charming. It's a quiet village in the Riviera di Levante, as Eames walks along the shoreline with his gun concealed in his coat, he sees the people that are up at this early dawn hour — bakers and shop owners and vineyard workers. It's a life that Eames has never had, working by his hands and by the clock, but it's a life he's beginning to appreciate. He finds the tower house which was Culhane's last known address for Terrence, and he sits in a bar across the street, ordering a cappuccino e brioche, and a cornetto, which he eats wrapped up in the napkin it comes in.
He watches Terrence's place, and around ten o'clock he sees Terrence emerge.

Eames stops. Terrence isn't alone. There's a child with him, a brown-haired girl wearing a plastic pink backpack. It's the same girl Eames saw in the photographs. She looks around eight, maybe nine years old. Terrence holds her hand as he leads her down the street and out of Eames' sight.

At 10:30, after Eames has finished his breakfast and is pretending to read the Corriere della Sera, he sees Terrence return alone. Eames looks at him closely then, inasmuch as he can from this distance. Terrence looks older, but that's to be expected. His youthful lankiness has become an adult ranginess, but his hair, black and lank against his forehead, is the same as Eames remembers — he used to tease Terrence about his hair, and ply him with products. He moves with a taut energy, and as he reenters his tower house, there's a moment when he stops and looks around. He nearly sees Eames, but Eames ducks behind his newspaper and waits the moment out.

Fifteen minutes later, he stands up and pays his bill. Then he crosses the street and enters Terrence's building.

He keeps his mind blank as he climbs the stairs up to the fifth floor. There's no elevator in a tower house as old as this one, and his steps make echoing sounds on the metal. It's better that way. He listens to the rhythm of his ascent, and enters a familiar state of calm when he finally reaches Terrence's door (#4, his notes say) and pulls out his lock picks.

These old Italian flats, they're so easy to break into. Terrence's door is a bit harder than expected, probably because Terrence in his wisdom has reinforced it, but Eames works quietly and deftly, and feels the lock give way underneath his pick in about ten minutes. He listens for sounds on the other side, for any indication that Terrence is alert and waiting for his intruder. There's nothing, but that means very little because Eames taught Terrence, and Eames knows the beauty of a proper ambush. He unholsters his gun and pushes the door open.

The telly is on. It's a pitch too loud for a man with so many enemies, but Terrence was always careless — Eames never managed to train him out of that. He finds Terrence in his bedroom, watching the telly on his dresser. When he sees Eames at the door, he pales so quickly, it's like seeing water wash away sand.

"Shit," he says, and he's going for his gun.

Eames doesn't let him. He starts running, and before Terrence can reach his firearm, Eames tackles him to the ground. They land in a rough heap, sideways skewed, and Eames pins Terrence down under him. Terrence stares up at him, wide-eyed. There are all these lines on his face, around his eyes and his mouth. There never used to be so many before. Terrence is still, by all accounts, a young man.

Eames waits for the cockiness, for the rude courage that was always Terrence's bluff. He remembers one time when the two of them were captured in a warehouse and hung out to dry, and still Terrence wouldn't stop running his mouth. He never cared about the consequences — consequences were for people with one foot in the grave.

But this Terrence, older and beaten down, looks scared. "You going to kill me?" he asks, his voice a rough gnarled rasp.

"I'm thinking about it," Eames says honestly, and that seems to make Terrence light up with nerves, because he starts struggling then, bucking and thrashing and doing his best to get Eames off him. He succeeds after a while, kneeling Eames in the groin. He scrambles to his feet, but Eames gets to the gun before him, scooping it up with his free hand.
Eames hurts everywhere, a violent throb of pain. But now he has two guns, and he trains both of them on Terrence, tracking him in the narrow, caged space of his bedroom. The telly drones on, but it's as if it doesn't exist; Eames only registers it in the very back of his mind, ambient nose, like the sound of the dripping tap or the upstairs neighbour walking around on the floorboards.

Terrence is breathing heavily. He knows how to fight but he's out of shape, and he doesn't think like Culhane does. He doesn't keep himself armed to the teeth. That used to be Eames' function in their partnership. Terrence was the genius, the wunderkind. He could forge the most exquisite creations, could imitate anybody after seeing them only once. Eames used to be annoyed at him for it, and then he settled for admiring it. He used to look at Terrence working a con beside him and think, *I wish I could have had one tenth your talent, at your age.*

Terrence used to make Eames feel like an overgrown thug by comparison, but right now, overgrown thug is having its advantages.

"You're not going to kill me," Terrence says. "See, I know you. If you wanted to kill me, you would have done it without all this hassle. You don't like drawing out the ugliness. It makes you feel like a sociopath."

"You say that with such confidence," Eames says coolly. "But I suppose you would know all about sociopaths."

"You don't understand," Terrence says.

"I don't understand?" Eames says. "Let me tell you a story, Moran. Once upon a time there was a man who had a partner, and he trusted that partner with his life. Which turned out to be a colossal mistake because trusting that partner with his life led him to crawling out of a burning house, choking with smoke, limbs on fire."

Terrence shows his teeth.

"At least you're not denying it."

"I'm not denying it," Terrence snaps. "It happened, all right? It bloody happened. I sold you out. I locked down that house and poured the gasoline and threw in the match. I did all of it. What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry?"

"I want to know what you got out of it," Eames says. The feel of the triggers is smooth and comforting. "Some sick joy? Revenge? Was it because I laughed at you? Was it because Rica turned you down?"

"I have a daughter, Eames," Terrence says. His mouth is moving strangely, stiff and inhuman, like it was sewn on wrong.

"No you don't," Eames says. "That girl is far too old. Did you kidnap her? Is that how low you've sunk?"

"I just never told you, that's all," Terrence says with that same ghastly mouth. "It was with Georgie, that girl I was seeing? You probably don't remember. But Georgie got pregnant. I — wanted to tell you, but Georgie made me promise not to. She had an older sister who already had kids. They pretended that the baby was the sister's. No one was supposed to know."

"How positively soap opera," Eames says. "Little Terrence Moran, raised by nuns, reproducing and spreading his genetic material. Should I offer my congratulations?"
"No," Terrence rasps, "I'm telling you because if you kill me, you're going to have to explain to my
daughter why you shot her daddy. I'd like to see that, I think. I'd like to see you charm your way out
of that one. Georgie and her sister are dead. Car accident. I'm the only family she's got left, so yeah.
Turn on that charm of yours. Work your magic."

"You killed Cheung Su and Rica," Eames says, watching Terrence flinch. "You tried to kill me too.
You were unlucky, that's all — I managed to get out of the house."

"I'm glad you got out."

"I'm supposed to take your word for that? You were sloppy, not glad."

"I was glad," Terrence insists. "I didn't want anyone to die, least of all you. Jesus fucking Christ, you
were my best friend. You were like my big brother."

"So why did you do it?" Eames asks.

"Because I had to!"

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I had to!" Terrence shouts. "He was holding my daughter hostage! He said if I didn't lock
the doors and burn the house, he'd kill her, and kill Georgie, and kill me too. What the fuck was I
supposed to do?"

"You could have gone to me," Eames says, and the calm he feels is gone in an instant, replaced by a
rage that makes him feel like he could tear the walls with his bare hands, with a scrape of his voice.
"You could have come to me, and I would have helped you, and we could have come up with a
solution together. You didn't need to butcher anyone."

"Fuck," Terrence says, and it's almost poetic how Eames used to prod and prod him for a reaction, to
make him lose his adolescent bravado — and he's only getting his wish now, down the barrel of a
gun. Terrence is gasping for air, and it makes him think of Arthur in that hospital, throat closing,
body in shock. "Fuck, maybe you're right," Terrence wheezes. "Maybe we could have figured it out
together. But I was a stupid kid, and I was scared shit out of my mind, and they had Sandra, don't
you get it. You don't have children, you wouldn't understand — he was going to break her fingers
one by one."

"Did you know," Eames says, "that burning to death is one of the slowest, most painful ways to
die?"

"I think about it every day," Terrence says. "Eames. If you ever felt any affection for me. Please. Let
me live with it. I'm miserable. I'm depressed. I have nightmares. Everybody hates me. Let me live
with it. Let me keep Sandra. Let me go on being a pathetic loser. Give me — give me this."

"Your asking for it makes me less inclined to do it," Eames says coldly. Terrence makes an ugly
sobbing sound in his throat, and god, he really is pathetic — Eames used to think Terrence was the
best thing he ever made, and his skills were the one brilliant project Eames could take credit for. This
is wrong, he thinks, his head hurting. Somewhere down the line, this all went so very wrong.

"If I could, I would kill myself," Terrence says. "I would have done it ages ago. I went to visit Rica's
g rave and I — I would have — but I can't," he says desperately. "I have someone who needs me."

"There's always foster care," Eames says.
"You wouldn't—"

"Haven't you heard?" Eames says sardonically. "The world's a different place, no thanks to you. You know bollocks about what I would or wouldn't do."

"Eames, I was in love with you."

"Now that's just playing dirty," Eames says, but it's like a needle in his tonsils, the sharp clarity of it. It's the first and only love confession of his life. Drunken words, lying words, words said in the spur of the moment — Eames has heard all those before, and they don't count. But this, with Terrence backed up against the wall watching him wild-eyed, this counts, and fuck, it hurts. It hurts like a wound reopening, like all the lives Eames might have ever wanted to live rushing into him at the same time.

"Who told you to start the fire?" is what he chooses to say.

Terrence's eyes grow shuttered. "Eric Castor," he replies. "But his real name was Patrick Lindall. One of Mikkelsen's business partners. He wanted control of the company. He thought, if he made it look like an in-fight between the dreamshare team, no one would suspect him."

"Where is he now?" Eames asks.

Terrence smiles for the first time, bitter. "He's dead. Killed three years ago when he tried to pull the same shit on another team. Never got far enough though. Arthur Berlinsky shot him in the head." He stares. "Why — why are you laughing?"

"I'm laughing because it's funny," Eames says. "I'm laughing because this is all bollocks, and it's hilarious as all fuck." He holsters one gun but lifts the other, and Terrence goes pale again.

"You're going to kill me," he says.

Eames thinks, now, of this: of Arthur lying spread open on the bed, Arthur staring up at him with half a smile and half a promise, Arthur walking into that room with Ekuweme like he was being pulled by strings, Arthur and the way he looked at Walczak that moment before they went under, Arthur at nineteen and desperate, Arthur as he is now, Arthur saying *we do terrible things for the people we love*. Arthur saying *forgiveness*.

Eames is never going to forgive Terrence. It's just not possible. But this is what he can do, as he thinks of Walczak and how she could have put a bullet through Arthur if she had remembered. But Eames is so very grateful that she didn't:

"I'm going to kill every last part of you that can still be happy," Eames says. "I'm going to make sure that you live the rest of your short life not just in misery, but in fear. Every time you open a window, every time you cross the street, you're going to wonder, *Is Eames going to choose this moment?* Because I'll kill you one day, Terrence. I might wait for your daughter to be old enough when I do it. I might not. It's up to my whimsy and I," he says with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes, "am a very whimsical person, you might remember."

"I'm sorry," Terrence says haltingly.

"I don't care," Eames says, and he walks out of Terrence's home, out of Terrence's life. His hands start shaking when he reaches the stairwell, his legs are numb, and he feels like he's sleepwalking the entire way down. Yet here's another first: when he hits bottom, it feels good, it feels powerful — he feels brutally, breathtakingly *human*. 
Arthur kisses him at the airport. When no one's looking, he grabs Eames by his collar and kisses him with some force.

"Did it go well?" Arthur asks. "You didn't say on the phone."

"I'll tell you later," Eames promises. He feels the Californian sun warm on his face as he angles up to look at the sky. Arthur's got one of those open-roof convertibles, rustic red and as big as anything, which might have prompted Eames into teasing him about overcompensation if he didn't know otherwise. The sky is painfully blue today, but it's the kind of pain that follows in the smoky trail of pleasure. And it's the kind of sky that created souls like Arthur, sailing from one island to the next, never settling down except at the end of the journey, where you could dock your boat and rest your feet on solid ground.

"I was wondering."

"Mmm?"

"You never told me you killed Lindall."

"You never asked," Arthur says. His voice doesn't change, but he twists from the driver's seat to look at Eames directly, just a flick of a glance before he has to turn back to the road — but it's enough. "I tracked him down a couple of years ago."

"You did the right thing," Eames says.

"Well, now that I can be morally certain about it—"

"I'm glad," Eames interrupts, more forcefully. "I'm glad one of us killed Lindall."

Arthur bites down on his lip. "This is going to be part of the 'I'll tell you later', isn't it?"

"Yes," Eames says. He leans back even further, pressing his head into the leather seats. He's sleepy all of a sudden. Maybe it's the sunshine, maybe it's the air, maybe he'll never know why. But all he wants to do is sleep, and so the rest of the drive from LAX passes by in a blurry daze, and when Eames is next aware, Arthur's tugging at his sleeve and telling him they've arrived at Eames' hotel and does he need any help with the bags.

"I'll manage," Eames says sluggishly, blinking away his dreams. Do you want to come in? is the next question he means to ask, but he knows it's probably useless. It's a Wednesday afternoon. Arthur needs to get back to Somnus. Eames should too, but Arthur's given Eames the day off. He won't hear otherwise, and Eames isn't such a model employee that he's going to argue it. So he licks his lips and tries not to let his eyes remain too long on Arthur as Arthur heads back to the car.

"You really need to get on with apartment-hunting!" Arthur calls after he's climbed back into his seat. "I'm starting to feel like you're my high-class escort, baby."

"But you're the one who looks better in a thong!" Eames replies.

There's a well-dressed couple and a bellhop standing by the revolving doors. They turn and stare. Eames lifts two fingers in farewell as Arthur drives off.
He sleeps through most of Wednesday, and a part of Thursday as well. It's sleep like he's never known it before, sleep like an illness, but when he wakes up he orders room service and eats bacon and eggs until he's full. Then he showers, gets dressed, and goes to Arthur's.

"I want to tie you up," is the first thing he says when they're on the bed, and Arthur looks at him for a moment that feels like a thousand years.

"All right," he says. Eames crawls over Arthur's bed to his bags, and he takes out two lengths of black silk, which swim over his hands.

"You came prepared, Boy Scout?" Arthur asks, a smile in his voice. Eames shows him his teeth before he crawls back between Arthur's outspread thighs, and nudges him up. Arthur puts his hands above his head willingly, and Eames kisses him — a long, deep kiss that ends with Eames trailing Arthur's jaw — before he lashes Arthur's wrists to the bedposts. The black silk is shimmery dark against Arthur's pale skin, and Eames is hypnotized by the contrast of it until he hears Arthur's breath quicken.

Arthur leans up for another kiss, and Eames gives it to him — harder this time, with more push to it. Arthur opens his mouth like a key in a lock, and he arches against Eames, trying to rub every part that he can get.

Eames touches him. He has the opportunity now, as slow and languid as he likes. He works his way down Arthur's body, looking at every part of him, from the muscular line of Arthur's throat to the space between his toes. Arthur isn't perfect but he's better than that; he's gorgeous and unashamed, and Eames presses kisses to his thighs, to his stomach, to his nipples. Arthur groans when Eames start licking his nipples, getting them tight and wet.

He pulls at the knots holding his arms to the bed, but they don't budge.

It occurs to Eames to ask. "Do you — want a safe word?"

"No," says Arthur, and Eames shudders, a bright hot pressure appearing behind his eyelids.

"Arthur, you know how I hate to be a responsible adult, but—"

"What I hate," Arthur says, "is when you aren't fucking me." He hooks one leg around Eames' thigh, urging him back up the bed. Eames complies and buries his face in Arthur's shoulder, biting the skin there. He hears Arthur's laughter in his hair, and then his whisper: "Let's live dangerously."

There are so many ways to interpret that, and when Eames lifts his head to look Arthur in the eye, he sees that Arthur means every one of them.

"Jesus," Eames says.

Arthur's smile borders on the divine — there's that uncivilized quality to it, untouched by anything that might ever bring him down, and that's it, that's the end of Eames' good intentions. That's the end of Eames' rationality. That's the end of safety and distance and let's be fuck buddies and have a good time, because Eames has had plenty of fuck buddies in the past, but he's never wanted them the way he wants Arthur right now — to taste that smile of his, to eat it like a feast. Fuck consequences, fuck tomorrow.
He spreads Arthur's thighs and licks Arthur's cock, long tiger stripes that make Arthur writhe in his hands, panting and breathless. When Eames thinks that Arthur is going to say something — even if what he says is more or please —, Eames shuts him up by taking him fully into his mouth. Arthur slides in, a solid pressure against his tongue, delicious. Eames starts sucking him hungrily, pinning Arthur there with his hips hoisted above the bed.

Arthur starts moaning, filter broken between his brain and his mouth. He throws his head back and makes noises like Eames is breaking him, groaning restlessly as Eames sucks his cock. His hips jerk erratically, and then become one sinuous movement when Eames applies more pressure. Arthur speaks — he tries to speak

— Eames lets him hit the back of his throat, and Arthur's voice breaks on a jagged bottle edge.

He can last longer. He's got the self-control. But with Eames, why would he want to? And so Arthur comes sharply, noisily, his come spurting into Eames' mouth and filling all the deep spaces underneath Eames' tongue. Eames keeps on sucking him until Arthur is soft and over-sensitized, and then he sucks him some more — Arthur is a trembling mess on the sheets, his eyes as black as charcoal.

"How many times do you think I could make you come tonight?" Eames wonders when he finally lets go.

Arthur doesn't reply. Can't reply.

"Let's call it a scientific inquiry," Eames says. He moves back between Arthur's thighs where he lets his come-soaked tongue press against Arthur's hole.

This is how they fuck: like there's nothing else their bodies were born for. Like there's no other world outside of Arthur's bedroom walls, no Walczak or Terrence or Somnus, no clients who want to dream things that should be by all rights impossible — no impossibilities, period, not when Eames has Arthur's legs over his shoulders and Arthur undulating beneath his hands, and when he can push his cock inside Arthur as slowly as he wants to — and he wants to do this so slowly, wants to catalogue every electric jolt of pleasure, every shade of red that Arthur turns as he closes his eyes and lets Eames inside him.

"Look at me," Eames rasps. Arthur opens his eyes and then flutters them shut again when Eames moves in just a little deeper — he's halfway inside now, and Arthur's skin is getting chaffed from where he keeps tugging against the bindings. It's such a beautiful red.

"Look at me," Eames says, and Arthur does — Arthur looks right at him, and Eames raises the both of them up and thrusts completely inside.

Arthur's mouth falls open. He gasps, a brief sound that Eames doesn't let linger for too long because he's grabbing Arthur's hips and fucking him like he means it. No more slow, no more gentle, no more games. Now that he's inside Arthur, he has no control. He shoves his hips in a piston rhythm, and Arthur takes it all in, moaning like a sideshow hooker — god, Eames wants to do this to him always, to keep Arthur's voice forever in that deep, overwhelmed cadence. He doesn't care how many other men Arthur fucks. This is his.

The violence of his thoughts pushes him inside Arthur hard, and Arthur braces his ankles over Eames' shoulders, holding on for the ride.

"Yeah," he breathes, regaining coherency. Eames renews his efforts to fuck that out of him. The next time Arthur tries to speak, Eames screws him without mercy, and Arthur makes a sort of choking
laughing sound — like he knows what Eames is trying to do, and he's amused by it, but he doesn't complain. His skin is hot and flushed where it slaps against Eames' balls, and Eames leans down to kiss him until they're drowning in it. He buries his hands in Arthur's hair and kisses him over and over again as they fuck.

They're animals, this is their glory. Arthur is infinitely compassionate and ultimately unfathomable — Eames wants to get into every part of him.

Arthur comes again, roughly, and Eames thinks, *one more, I'm going to give you one more.*

He'll do this or he'll destroy himself trying. If he's going to throw himself against the rocky shore, dashing himself to pieces, he can think of worse reasons than to make Arthur quake in orgasm.

Hours later, when he unties Arthur, Arthur immediately wraps his arms around him and yanks him in close. He presses his chin to the top of Eames' hair as they lean against the headboard together, sweaty and panting. "Sex with you is always so damn fantastic. Why is that?" Arthur muses. Eames gives him a tired but rakish smile.

"Proper training and girth," he says. "That's all it takes."

"I can support that," Arthur grins. "Never underestimate the value of a decent education." He stretches out his cramped legs, but he still doesn't let Eames go.


"Something you want?" Arthur asks.

"Been thinking. Shocking, yes. I realize it ruins my image as a happy-go-lucky debonair without a care in the world." Arthur snorts in disbelief. Eames bites his ear before continuing, more seriously. "I want to stop being scared," he says. Even admitting it makes something cold settle inside his ribcage. "Every time I hear the fire alarm, every time I flick open a lighter — it's not the way I want to live."

Arthur pauses. "I'm not much of a shrink—"

"With your grades? Hardly. I've hacked into all your school records."

"I have a learning disability, asshole," Arthur whips back. "And I have *your* birth certificate on my hard drive, the one with your real name, so even's even." He goes on. "I'm not a shrink, but I can make you a dream. Wouldn't even charge you the fees. We could — recreate the burning house for you, maybe. I don't know if that'll work, but I think it's worth trying. If you're interested." The look he gives Eames is uncertain, but he doesn't stop looking, and that's what matters.

Eames can feel the bruises underneath his skin from where Arthur's gripped him so ferociously. He can't see them today, but they'll blossom tomorrow, or the day after — they'll rise to the top. "I'm interested," he says. Then he rears up and pins Arthur's wrists back onto the headboard, kissing him open-mouthed. Arthur meets him effortlessly.

This is Somnus, and Somnus can make your dreams come true.
Eames dreams: of char, of heat, of rooms without doors. Arthur is the last thing he sees before he
goes under, and the first he sees when he wakes, fingers digging into the arms of the sofa, tearing
holes into the expensive leather. Eames can taste blood sometimes, from how hard he bites down —
the pain wakes him up, just like Yusuf says, but it's almost better this way because when it actually
happened, there was nothing to wake up to, only hospital beds and ugly scars.

Now he wakes up to Arthur handing him a glass of water, Arthur coming to sit beside him and
making sure he drinks it.

Dreams don't erase memories. They don't wipe out fears. But it's like being on that boat in the middle
of the open sea. You can't make the water go away, so the best you can do is learn to survive on it.
Learn the language, learn your own body's responses, learn to read the map of stars that will one day
bring you home.

Eames burns, and burns, and burns, and the startling thing is that each and every time he breaks out
of that house and sees the sky. This happened, he has to remind himself. It's not just my fantasy. I
made it out in real life too.

This is what Eames knows about survival stories: that they usually get it all wrong. First you survive.
Then you live.

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Cobb pulls off the Rosenthal job like a maestro returning to the scene of his last symphony. Arthur is
waiting for them when they wake up, and he looks pleased when Rosenthal squeezes his forearm
and says, "That was a good dream, worth every penny. Thank you."
Ae Sook helps her through the last of the paperwork, and when Rosenthal leaves, she tips her hat. A
cool lady, Eames thinks, not for the first time. He hopes they get her repeat business — it might even
be likely, if they offer her a valued customer's discount. He mentions the idea to Arthur, who says,
"You mean not take in as much money as we can? Who are you and what have you done with the
Eames that I know?"

"You've even shaved properly today," Ariadne adds suspiciously.

"I've found," Eames says, "that beard burn is like eating durian. It's always better in small doses."

"You're not giving yourself beard burn, are you?" Ariadne says, and then her gaze darts quickly in
Arthur's direction. "Oh, wait. Never mind. Just tell me where to purchase the brain bleach and I'll get
to it."
Brain bleach? What for? You don't think I'm the Adonis of this century? Look at this sculpted jaw —

"Sculpted, yeah," she says. "Out of bullshit."

Cobb starts cleaning the PASIV and packing his bags. His movements are economical. "I should be heading home now," he says apologetically. "I'd love to stay longer, but I don't want to leave James and Phillipa with their grandmother for too long." He looks around at them. "Congratulations, everyone. We did good."

"Are you glad you came back?" Ariadne asks him.

"I think so," Cobb says.

"You think so?" she repeats. "Uh, that's not really overwhelming enthusiasm. I thought you said we did a good job. Everything went right to plan." She sounds slightly hurt. Eames remembers that Cobb was her first teacher.

"Don't press it," Cobb says. "I retired for a reason. Only way to go is forward." But he smiles at Ariadne, a slight smile that nonetheless softens his features. It makes him look suddenly like a much younger man, and Eames has a vision of what that Cobb might have been like — the Cobb that first recruited Arthur, the Cobb that Mal was in love with, the Cobb whose name is still spoken of in the right circles with hushed respect and seething jealousy. He shakes their hands before he goes, and he does that eye contact thing with Arthur, who's the last one before the door.

"I'll see you soon," Arthur says, and that's the end of it, that's the last performance of Dom Cobb that anyone will ever remember. It's not inception, but inception happened in a different world, one they can't ever go back to. Eames isn't sure any of them even want to.

Legal dreamshare is a tricky, frustrating, way too much paper tape sort of business. But Ariadne's a doctor now, and Arthur's becoming a leader, and Eames — Eames is taking control of his own dreams again.

Except I'm not, he thinks, frowning. I'm letting Arthur take control of my dreams.

It bothers him how little this bothers him.

These are safer times; these are dangerous times. Eames is less likely to be arrested by border police now. He doesn't have to disguise the PASIV anymore. He can actually pick up academic journals and society newsletters and read about the latest developments in dreamshare. News travels as fast as allergies, as fast as your modem, and dreamshare education is becoming standardized, which makes it boring, without a doubt, but it also makes the up-and-comers less likely to blow anyone's minds up or send themselves tumbling into limbo.

And yet the danger, Eames thinks — the danger exists where it's always existed. That is, within himself. With the way he's let Arthur through all his doors, wreathed in fire and regret. The way he's handed Arthur the all-express pass. Weave around the bouncer, no need to show I.D. He's not even trying to barricade him anymore, and that's the most dangerous development of them all. Legal dreamshare can protect Eames' mind and his rights, but there's little to protect against all the hollows where Arthur's come in and set up shop.

As far as he knows, all Arthur wants is a good fuck and a decent friend.

It should be enough, Eames thinks. It's what they agreed on. Arthur's a mindblowing fuck and a stellar friend, which are qualities rare enough on their own but almost statistically impossible in
Combination. *Never let emotion ruin it* isn't quite right anymore. Eames has to amend it to *Never let the wrong emotion ruin it*.

But there's one thing the world's never going to take from him, not even with a hundred exposés and dreamshare agencies up and down the coast, all run by lithe men in form-fitting slacks and cocksucker mouths. He's selfish, and he never wants to be hurt.

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We should talk is the message he sends to Arthur, and two hours later Arthur's showing up at Somnus where everybody should have gone home, but where Eames has decided to stay late instead, catching up on all the work he missed while chasing Terrence.

"I would have come sooner," Arthur says, "but I went to your hotel first because I figured I was the only one in this company desperate and boring enough to stay late at work. Then I went to the bar, the closest strip club, and the library, until I thought to look for you here."

"I never go to the library," Eames says. "The librarians are terrified of my voracious personality. They'll stone me."

Arthur waves his phone. "I'll stone you first. Did you just break up with me through a text message?"

"No," Eames says calmly. "Breaking up with you by text message implies we were dating, or some such equivalent, to begin with. And anyway, I said nothing of the sort. All I said is that we should talk."

"I don't know how you guys do it in England," Arthur says, "but that's code for breaking up. You should watch more movies."

"Arthur, I don't know what's gotten into your head. Movies? That doesn't make any sense to me," Eames says. He looks up at Arthur, who's flushed and slightly sweaty. He must have run, and the thought of it makes a muscle in Eames' chest clench. He has to do this, he thinks. Like giving up smoking, but not exactly, because Eames never managed to give up smoking even with the fear of fire — but Arthur's ten times more lethal than that. "But now that you're here," Eames continues, smoothing the sandpaper roughness out of his voice, "we should talk. You're half right. I think we need to stop having sex."

Arthur doesn't look disappointed. Arthur doesn't look heartbroken. Arthur just looks angry. "Why, do I not suck your cock the way you like it?"

"No," Eames says. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" Arthur asks, frustrated. "I thought — I thought we had a good thing between us. You yourself said, at the very beginning—"

"I remember what I said," Eames says flatly.

"Oh good, so you haven't lost your memory," Arthur says. "Even though you've clearly lost your mind."

"Lost my mind? You're jonesing me, right?" Eames' laugh is as dry as empty wells. "This is
probably the smartest, most rational thing I've done all year. Arthur, I like you—"

"I'm so flattered," Arthur says. "I'm fucking overjoyed."

"Will you stop being sarcastic?" Eames snaps.

"You. Want me to stop being sarcastic."

"I want—" No, Eames shouldn't go there. He should back away right now and let that door stay closed. There's a disaster waiting there that even dreamshare can't master. "I want to be the way I used to be," he says, but that's not true. He used to be miserable, he used to be cynical, he used to be alone. "I want — I want to wear my skin like stone. I want nothing and no one to touch me. It's not you, I promise, and fuck, that's cliche too, isn't it? But it's really not you, Arthur. I'm not going to ask for more than you can give."

Arthur looks blank at first, and then realization seems to settle into his eyes. Eames makes himself watch, because if everything is going to end here, at least he wants something to remember.

"Are you saying," Arthur begins, "that you have feelings for me?"

"Put in that incredibly puerile way—"

"Let me remind you that you were the one who made us promise. We practically pinky swore it. Never fall in love with me, you said."

Eames doesn't back down. "Guess what. I lied."

"You're not just a liar," Arthur says. "You're an idiot. For someone who's so good at making other people's dreams come true, you really have no idea —" He stops himself and makes an abortive motion, like he's trying to yank his hair out with his hands. "I don't even know how to deal with you sometimes. You're just so goddamn self-deluded."

"Thank you," Eames says, "for not bothering to spare my tender feelings."

"I don't give a fuck about your tender feelings," Arthur says. He strides forward and leans over Eames' desk, smelling like sweat and oranges and money. "I've tried to be nice about this. I've tried to be caring and supportive and understanding, but screw that. It's clearly not having any effect." He darts forward and grabs Eames by the collars — he's so fast that Eames doesn't even have time to shove him off, though once Arthur's there, pressed close to him, shoving him off seems the furthest thing from Eames' mind.

"Eames, I'm going to tell you a story," Arthur says. "Since you love them so much."

"Now, really, this is uncomfortably infantilizing. As much as I want to say that your kinks are my kinks, hurrah hurrah—"

"Once upon a time," Arthur says, breath hot against Eames' mouth. "There was a man who had been burned, and a man who wanted to make him burn. They moved in the peripheries of each other's lives for years and years, never connecting, even when they did big jobs together, even when the man who wanted to make him burn wanted — well, we could write entire spinoffs about what he wanted. But my point is, certain events occurred in politics and industry, giving them an opportunity for new lives, and the two men were able to lay down their ghosts and come together at last. And this story? Isn't a tragedy."

"No, but it's a rather heavy-handed metaphor," Eames says, even as he feels his heart rate pick up.
"It isn't a tragedy," Arthur insists. He shakes Eames once, like he wants to rattle the stubbornness out of him. Then he pulls him over the desk and kisses him, deep and long, and at first Eames is frozen by it. Until he hears Arthur's groan in his mouth and he comes alive. He kisses Arthur back, frantically, the desk an awkward barrier jutting into their hips — but it doesn't matter. Eames' hands come up and touch Arthur's jaw, holding him in place, marveling at the smoothness of his skin. He kisses Arthur's mouth, his nose, his eyes. He feels laughter bubble inside of him.

"I'm in love with you," Arthur says. "You just never saw."

"I'm looking now," Eames promises, and watches Arthur's smile light up.

"I've thought about it," Ariadne says. "I've thought about it so much that I wanted to stop thinking about it." She lifts her head. "But I'm going to take the fellowship."

"You mean they haven't come to their senses and rescinded it yet?" Eames asks.

"That's what I thought too," Ariadne says, like she can't tell it's a joke. "I mean, I'm so young and I don't have much teaching experience. I've only ever been a T.A. And they want me to — to teach courses on architecture and dreamshare, on imagined space and real space."

Arthur's sitting beside Eames in the conference room where Ariadne's summoned them. He knocks his knee against Eames' and gives him a private smile before turning back to Ariadne. "You sound like you love it," he says.

"I'm wild about it," Ariadne admits. "Sonnus is great, don't get me wrong. But I miss that theoretical part. I miss—"

"You miss writing papers, is that it?" Eames interrupts.

"God no," Ariadne says, horrified. Then she looks yearning again, yearning and embarrassed and yet certain, because her mind's made up. She isn't here to have it changed. "It's just, there are so many new dreamshare agencies popping up, and there are so many great architects attached to each and every one of them. I'm not jealous — or maybe I am," she adds when Arthur slides her a look. "But I want that feeling that Cobb gave me, during the Fischer job. When he introduced me to you guys. I want that feeling of doing something nobody's ever done before."

"In our defense," Arthur points out, "we are doing new things at Sonnus. N27 comes to mind."

"I want more," Ariadne says. "Wait, that came out wrong."

"Nothing to be ashamed of," Eames tells her. "You want more? I can respect that."

"I'm proud of what I've done at Sonnus," she says. "I said before that we do fantastic work, and I believe that. But Sonnus will probably always be here, or some version of it. I can always get work as a dreamshare architect. I'm not always going to be able to get work as a professor." She starts pacing nervously. "Arthur, it was you and me at the start of the company, but now you have Eames. I think it's great, I think it's amazing. That's why I'm going to take the job, because you've got someone to watch your back. It doesn't have to always be me anymore. But I still feel terrible about this. I feel like I'm cutting and running on you, and if you want me to stay, then I will."
Arthur says her name. She stops pacing.

"This is what I want for you," Arthur says. "I want you to go and fail some slacker kids. I want you to go and hold office hours no one shows up to. I want you to publish — and don't perish."

Ariadne stares at him in disbelief, in hope.

"Go get them, Dr. Feniger," he says. "What are you waiting for?"

"Arthur," she says, "Arthur, you're so—"

"Dashing? Intelligent? The best boss ever?"

"—wrong," she finishes. "Everybody will show up to my office hours."

So this is how they say goodbye to Ariadne. They help her pack up her office, and then her flat. They hire moving vans for her. They write her references. They throw a farewell party for her, and everybody drinks too much and speaks too loudly, and they help her home together, holding Ariadne up while she giggles and wobbles on her high heels. Eames drops her off, and as he's helping her out of the car, she decides that now is the perfect moment to practice her high kicks. So she kicks, and catches Eames right in the face with her pointy heel.

"Fuck!" Eames says. He touches his forehead and feels the blood welling out.

"Oh my god!" she cries. "Who did that?"

"You did!"

"No, it couldn't have been me," Ariadne slurs, and then she passes out right there on the sidewalk.

The day after Ariadne leaves, Ae Sook approaches them and says, "This is bad timing, I know, but —"

"You're going too?" Arthur asks.

"My girlfriend and I are having a baby," Ae Sook says. "I'm going to stay at home and be a mom, and you're not going to say anything about it, are you?" She flashes her tongue ring.

They throw her a goodbye party too, but Ae Sook doesn't wobble on her stilettos. She glides gracefully through the bar and at the end of it, kisses both Arthur and Eames on the cheek, smearing lipstick and the faint taste of alcohol, before her very pregnant, water-guzzling girlfriend grabs her arm and guides her home.

"I guess we should start hiring a new architect and a new receptionist," Arthur says the next day, walking around the quiet office. "You think of anyone we can poach? How about that guy you said you work with sometimes — Vaughan?"

"I would rather eat packaged food with the plastic on than hire Vaughan," Eames informs him, stopping Arthur by slinging an arm over his shoulder. They stand together in the reception area, looking at Ae Sook's empty desk.

"I have an idea," Eames announces. "How do you feel about a vacation? I realize that word is anathema to you bloodhound workaholics, but honestly, I think you need one. We both need one."

"What sort of vacation?" Arthur asks.
"This is my proposition," Eames says. "How about we get a boat and we spin a wheel, and wherever the arrow lands, that's the direction we go." He can't see Arthur's expression because Arthur's looking the other way, but he waits. When Arthur turns to look at him, he has an expression like he's slightly amazed, like this isn't something he ever thought Eames would suggest — but Arthur needs to start having higher standards for Eames, because Eames can see the sea-longing in him. He can recall the fierce joy of the sun, the steady rocking of the boat, and the sight of Arthur swimming through the ocean, a mermaid who eventually reached land.

"I'd like that," Arthur says. "It's an awful business decision, but hey, Saito always said I don't have a head for business." He squares his shoulders and grins like a beautiful madman. "Somnus can wait. They can all wait." He walks to the window that separates their suite from the rest of the complex, where they have a sign hanging with their hours listed on it. Arthur means to get rid of the sign and have the hours painted properly onto the glass, but they've been busy. Arthur grabs the sign and flips it from OPEN to CLOSED. Then he walks back and melts against Eames, kissing him with copious amounts of tongue.

"Intrepid world travelers, you and me," Eames says when they break apart. "While we're at it, we can think of ideas for waking Ekuweme. We can crash the house of every ally we've got left, eat their salad, and pick their brains."

Arthur starts touching Eames' face — absent touches, little strokes over his brow, touches that say he doesn't want to let go. "Are you kidding? We'll probably die of dehydration within two weeks," he says. "Or we'll fight and I'll throw you overboard, and then the police will have to arrest me for brutality, but the jury will acquit me because you'll have deserved it."

"But think of all the benefits I'll bring in the meantime. I know how to fish, and I know how to fuck."

"Your dick does bring all the salmon to the yard," Arthur agrees. His thumb stops moving over Eames' forehead. "You have this... this cut here," he says. "I keep meaning to mention it. Where's it from? It looks nasty."

Eames tightens his arm around him. "It's a funny story," he says.

The art bluelittlepig has done for this fic is stunning, dazzling – I could heap accolades on it all day and never run out. Thank you, bb, thank you so much. I'm so glad I had you as my partner in this big bang.

This fic was betaed by the dream team of bauble, laria_gwyn, and chibi_lurrel. They took their pens, struck parts out, made me rewrite, and this fic would be nothing, absolutely nothing, without their keen eyes and expert advice. Ladies, every day you teach me how to try and be better.
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