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MORE DREAM THAN MEMORY:

The Inextricable Link Between Fiction and Dreaming

A Novella, “Daydreams of Empty Skies,”

Together with a Critical Essay

presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters in Creative Writing

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2019

ABSTRACT

There is a clear and inextricable link between dreaming and fiction. Because of the way REM-sleep dreaming functions, as a hyper-creative state, dreams often serve as the source of inspiration for many authors. Dreaming is also, as one of the most central and yet mysterious aspects of the human experience, commonly used as a plot device or theme in multiple genres of fiction. Furthermore, in terms of how it works in the brain, the experience of reading fiction is remarkably similar to that of a dream.

The critical essay argues the above and investigates the use of dream-related themes and devices in Banana Yoshimoto's *Asleep* (1989) and Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971). The three short stories that comprise *Asleep* each take place in a transitional period in each of the respective protagonists' lives, and the protagonist is required to confront and come to terms with the past in order to escape this dreamlike limbo. *The Lathe of Heaven* protagonist George Orr's ability to change reality via his dreams is reflective of the fluctuating dreaming/creative process itself: it is only once Orr loses this ability that he is able to escape the entangled dreams and realities.

In the novella, *Daydreams of Empty Skies*, the protagonist, Astra, finds that her dreams are direct reproductions of her memories. She is recruited to be part of an experiment by Tenjin, a researcher, in Tokyo, Japan. Throughout the story Astra finds the divisions between dream, memory, and reality becoming increasingly thin, and by the end it is unclear whether or not she has escaped this state of being. The novella, in its form and construction, is much like a lucid dream itself—a point which is enlarged upon in the essay.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Michele Axon, for supporting me in every way; for always nurturing my ambitions; for believing in me, unconditionally and unwaveringly, even when I have struggled to believe in myself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis—most particularly the novella—would not have been possible without the help and support I received from so many. Firstly, I extend endless gratitude to my supervisor, Jack Ross, whose advice and patience at every step has been absolutely invaluable, and helped bring my work to a higher level than I could have otherwise achieved.

I would also like to thank the Creative Writing staff at Massey University, and my Creative Writing peers, for making the contact course back in August such a helpful, wonderful, and humbling experience. Additional thanks to the professors I had as an undergraduate who encouraged me to take on postgraduate study.

I wish also to thank my family, Michele, Peter, Ren, and Ashleigh, as well as all my friends from all four corners. I want to thank all those who, over the past year, have endured my griping and agonising and responded with nothing but kindness and encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank my cats, Tobi and Archie, for keeping me company on all the long days and late nights spent writing, and for being the best, softest, warmest companions I could ever ask for.

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Notes

**More Dream Than Memory:
The Inextricable Link Between Fiction and Dreaming**

When I am awake I like to think of myself as reasonably intelligent. At the very least, I can look at a situation logically and make decisions based on reason and reflection. Admittedly, this often leads to indecision, when each path has its merits and downsides and no amount of critical thinking is equal to the precognition needed to see the precise fallout from each action or inaction. In my dreams, however, I am an idiot. Illogical. Irrational. Impulsive. I say the first thing that comes to mind, I act without considering consequences, I'm easily angered and make no attempt to curb my frustration. It never occurs to me to step back and think. At times, I might be presented with evidence which, to my waking mind, makes it obvious that I am dreaming. Yet I fail to cotton on to this fact, fail to take control of the dreamscape and turn dream to lucid dream. On one occasion, I gained a modicum of awareness, only to forget what I was doing and *dream* that I had woken up, dreaming onwards as if my brief stint of awareness were just a blip in the system.

Not that I can be blamed for my sleepy-time stupidity. After all, when we dream, the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for logic and reasoning and all sensible thought, is fast asleep. Completely inactive. The parts of the brain which *are* active, however, include the hippocampus and the amygdala, critical to memory and emotions, respectively. To put it reductively, when you dream, your emotions are allowed to run wild with the full contents of your memory and all the possibilities of your imagination, with no logic or reasoning of any kind to keep them in check. It should be no wonder if in your dreams, like me, you become a bit of a ditz.

In another way, the dreaming mind is a genius. REM sleep, which houses the most vivid and memorable dreams, is a state of immense creativity. The REM-sleep dreaming brain makes wild associations between facts, images, and fragments of information that restrictive waking logic would never allow. REM sleep is the most valuable tool of creative problem-solving that humans have access to. Take, for example, Dmitri Mendeleev, the Russian chemist who invented the periodic table of elements. After toiling away for many sleepless hours, desperately trying to see the connections between each disparate element, Mendeleev gave himself up to sleep—and in his sleep, he dreamed of “a table where all the elements fell

into place as required” (qtd. in Walker 220). This is perhaps one of the clearest and most revolutionary (from a historical perspective) examples of the dreaming mind presenting solutions that the waking mind is unable to see.

Even further, musical giants such as Paul McCartney and Keith Richards allegedly attained the musical seeds of songs in their dreams (Walker 221-2). Then, of course, there are the many literary examples—authors, poets, writers of fiction—who claim to have had their ideas come to them in dreams. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*—all progeny of dreaming delusion (“Dreams”), and all, interestingly enough, novels of the gothic genre. Dreaming performs a process of “informational alchemy” (Walker 219) with the contents of our memory, most particularly our emotional memory. Fear and anxiety being two of the most potent and insidious sensations in our emotional lexicon, dreams driven by such are more likely to wake us, meaning we’re more likely to remember them. Correspondingly, a work of fiction which inspires fright or suspense—or evokes any sort of strong, sticking emotion—is highly likely to follow us into sleep, and into our dreams, to be processed by the REM-dream machine into something new. Such is the cycle of creativity.

As well as dreams acting as the gardener who plants the seeds of ideas, this particular gardener is also frequently featured as either a prevalent theme or critical plot device in all genres of fiction, but most particularly of the fantasy genre and its constituents and derivatives. This is most likely due to the mysterious nature of dreams as we experience them. They can, indeed, seem fantastical and otherworldly, especially because modern science has barely begun to understand what they really are. It can be hard to let go of the beliefs that have spanned thousands of years, that dreams are a sort of divine messenger or prophetic tool. Or even the Freudian angle, that dream imagery is a mask for our deepest fears and desires—those we dare not confront face-to-face.

Perhaps dreams are the stuff of fantasy, but contemporary and science fiction novels present their own uses of the dream theme. Of principal concern for me are Banana Yoshimoto’s *Asleep*, and Ursula Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*. The three stories in *Asleep* have a gentle approach to dreams, being more concerned with dreamlike images and occurrences. The focus is on atmosphere, emotionality, the connection of the protagonists to the world and people around them. *The Lathe of Heaven*, by contrast, approaches questions

of dreams and reality more directly, putting heavier emphasis on science, but pointing out the bizarre and nonsensical in dreams and reality.

If we consider *Asleep* and *The Lathe of Heaven* as two ends of a spectrum, I think my own novella, *Daydreams of Empty Skies*, sits somewhere between them. My initial attempt at writing about dreams attempted to foreground science and pseudo-realism, but was otherwise almost entirely lifeless and unsuited to my preferred method of writing. That being: to give myself over to the dream, as it were, focusing on the experiences of the characters. At the same time, a watered-down version of that once detailed plot is still present, as are some genuine scientific concepts and facts about dreaming, thanks to my own fascination with the subject, a fascination which also lies at the heart of this essay.

Dreaming Fictions and Fictional Dreaming

Given that dreaming is unavoidable, my personal interest in dreams could have started any time since I became self-aware enough to recognise and remember my dreams. There are some dreams I had in my childhood that I still remember—mostly the scary ones. I also remember having dreams centred around whatever fictions I was consuming at the time. Notably, I had *many* dreams about the world of *Harry Potter*, including a particularly memorable and exciting one in which I was accepted into Hogwarts and had a wonderful time in a magical sweet shop. There have also been several dreams—in my childhood, throughout my adolescence, and as an adult—that were intriguing enough for me to use them as the basis for my own fiction. Some obviously derivative, some not. None have spawned timeless masterpieces as yet, unfortunately.

What I am describing is what I like to refer to as the cycle of creativity. It might be a bit bold to claim that dreams are the source of *all* creative ideas, but what is certain is that REM-sleep dreaming is the rawest state of creativity. A dream is the most basic creative artefact, and dreams and dreaming are a tool which we cannot help but to use thanks to the necessity of sleep. Written fiction—a consciously-constructed creative artefact—works on the mind in ways that are uncannily similar to that of dreams. Having consumed a piece of fiction in this way, it then enters our memory, most especially if it affected us in some way: perhaps if we felt strongly for the characters, were intrigued by the plot and world-building, or if a particular

image or scene stood out to us simply because it was well-written. This fiction then becomes part of the informational slurry used by the REM-sleep dreaming brain to construct new dreamscapes, and perhaps, if we are of a writerly persuasion, what dreams may come from this unconscious concoction might lead to the creation of new fictions. Even if we don't knowingly pluck ideas straight from our dreams, we can at least consider REM-sleep dreaming as an important fertiliser for creative thinking.

Others have proposed similar models of creativity, such as Graham Wallas' Preparation, *Incubation*, Illumination, and Verification (in Oatley 53), and Kirby Ferguson's Copy, Transform, Combine, from his four-part online docuseries *Everything is a Remix*—the title of which certainly sums up creativity well enough, though Ferguson fails to explore the role of sleep and the unconscious, which to me seems a crucial part of the process.

Now would be a good time to cover how dreaming actually works in the brain. Or at least what the general consensus is right now; I have no doubt that there is much more to be revealed by those far more qualified and knowledgeable than myself. I can only recount what such people have had to say on the topic as it stands:

There are four main clusters of the brain that spike in activity when someone starts dreaming in REM sleep: (1) the visuospatial regions at the back of the brain, which enable complex visual perception; (2) the motor cortex, which instigates movement; (3) the hippocampus and surrounding regions . . . which support your autobiographical memory; and (4) the deep emotional centres of the brain—the amygdala and the cingulate cortex (Walker 195).

The hippocampus and amygdala have already been touched upon, but the visuospatial regions and motor cortex are, it would seem, equally as critical. These are the regions responsible for the vivid hallucinatory images, the perception of movement, and tactile sensations that may be experienced within dreams—all while the body is paralysed in sleep. Dreaming is a psychotic state. No matter how bizarre the scene gets, we believe in it fully. In the face of believably vivid images and sensations, and in the absence of the self-reflective reasoning needed to recognise images or events incongruous to a believable waking reality, we become “hopelessly delusional,” resistant, against all evidence, to the idea that what we are experiencing is anything but real (Hobson 89).

These are some of the things that make dreaming different from reading fiction. When we read, we are fully conscious, and able to reflect on what we read as we read it. We're also likely to remember it better than a dream. However, despite these critical differences, what interests me more are the fascinating *similarities* between observed brain activity in one who is dreaming versus one who is reading a piece of fiction.

While electroencephalography was a game-changer in neuroscience and oneirology, it was magnetic resonance imaging that provided the greatest insight into how the sleeping brain works. By putting an REM-sleep dreaming subject into an MRI, it became possible to predict the nature of the subject's dream by observing which areas of the brain were most active while in the REM state: whether the dream was strongly movement-driven, vividly visual, or intensely emotional (Walker 196-7).

Because of the MRI's accuracy in showing which parts of the brain are particularly active at certain times due to certain stimuli, in 2013 a research team in Kyoto, Japan were able to devise a method of loosely predicting the *content* of a dream. They recorded brain activation as the subjects looked at images of objects common in dreams (cars, furniture, etc), then compared these patterns of brain activation to those of the same subjects while REM-sleep dreaming. From this, they were able to predict what it was the subject was dreaming about with relative accuracy (Walker 197-8).

MRIs were also able to prove beyond doubt that lucid dreaming is a true phenomenon—that some people are able to become aware, in their dreams, that they are dreaming. With an established lexicon of eye-movement signals, the lucid dreamer could give a signal that they were, for example, about to clench their fist. Being in the full-body paralysis REM state, they could not physically clench their fist, but MRI scans nonetheless showed activation in brain areas associated with such movements (Walker 233). When subjects in an unrelated experiment were put into MRI scanners and instructed to read a short story, something very similar was observed:

At the points in which the story said a protagonist undertook an action, activation of the brain occurred in the part which the reader himself or herself would use to undertake the action. So, when the story-protagonist pulled a light cord, a region

in the frontal lobes of the reader's brain associated with grasping things was activated (Oatley 20).

This is essentially the point that I've been building up to throughout this discussion; the lynchpin in my argument that dreams and fiction are cut from the same metaphysical cloth. Dreams are sleeping fictions and fictions are waking dreams. I'm sure it wouldn't be a stretch to assume that similar brain activity happens while *writing* fiction.

Furthermore, both dreams and fiction, at their most memorable, have those sticky things known as emotions in the driver's seat. I've already covered how the emotion centres of the brain are notably active during REM-sleep dreaming—the hippocampus and the amygdala, both part of the limbic system. As Walker points out, many of our strongest memories, especially childhood memories, are “of an emotional nature,” or at least connected to some strong emotion (208).

The first example that springs to my own mind is an incident from preschool, involving a doll, the older girl who snatched the doll from my hands, and my knee-jerk reaction in snatching it back, followed by the older girl running to the teacher to tell on me. Oh, the indignation—the *fury* that coursed through my tiny three-year-old body as I, unrepentant in the face of the older girl's half-truths, was sentenced to spend the rest of the day sitting in the office, crying my eyes out, until my mother came to pick me up.

Now that I think about it, it's quite telling that even to this day I often have dreams in which no one will take me seriously or believe my version of the truth in the face of another's accusations—frustration; indignation; impotence in the face of injustice. What I feel in such dreams, what I felt that day in preschool, and what I feel whenever I see news stories of terrorist attacks, of peaceful protestors being brutalised and arrested, of innocent civilians subjected to corrupt regimes, segregation, discrimination, war. One, presumably, brings forth the other. Such strong feelings as indignation and hopelessness find their way easily into my dreams.

But I digress—into vaguely Freudian territories, where I'd really rather not stay long. Nonetheless, the centrality of the limbic system in the human brain serves as an appropriate metaphor for the centrality of emotional experience in our lives, both while asleep and while awake. And if it's the emotionally-charged memories we remember most of all, it only stands

to reason that it should be the fiction which evokes emotions—which conjures *feelings* of some description or feelings resisting description—which we remember most dearly and vividly.

I keep coming back to *Harry Potter*, because I'd be lying if I denied its prevalence in my childhood (...and adolescence), but the reason why it has always stuck so vividly in my mind is because of the sense of wonderment evoked by the idea of magic spells, big castles with many secrets, and the *many* vivid descriptions of great feasts and exotic sweets. More valuable to me now than the books and movies themselves are the *memories* of them and around them. And the fun dreams I had about them, of course, and the transparently derivative stories I wrote, none of which will ever see the light of day.

Speaking of Freud, I can hardly discuss dreams and not at least touch upon *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Though I am no particular fan of his, it is hard to deny that he was ahead of his time, and that his work was highly influential—and continues to be to this day, though not necessarily due to its scientific merits. It is precisely the unscientific nature of Freud's dream theory—essentially, that dreams are a form of wish fulfilment; that dream content symbolically hides the repressed desires of the dreamer, which are so horrifying that to appear starkly would shock the dreamer awake (Walker 200)—that has made it so seminal: “Science could never prove him wrong . . . But by the very same token, we could never prove the theory right” (201).

There were, of course, certain ideas of his that struck close to the truth, such as what he called “day residue,” the source of each night's dreams. While it is uncommon for anyone to go to sleep and immediately dream of that day's events, it *is* true that particularly notable events are likely—but not guaranteed—to find their way into one's dreams in some fashion, at some point. It takes the brain some time to get around to it—six days, according to Hobson: almost a week before any given day's “residue” is likely to appear in a dream (28).

Dream interpretation is not so different from literary interpretation. After all, when you have a dream, currently the only way to share it with others is to put it into words, and present it for analysis. Experiments attempting to prove or disprove Freudian theory have had different Freudian psychoanalysts interpret the same dream, each producing “remarkably different interpretations of this same dream, without any statistically significant similarity between them” (Walker 201). Freudian dream interpretations are rather like horoscopes, as Walker points out, a “one size fits all” (202).

One size *never* fits all. Even if dreams *do* mask some latent content, applying the same rubric of symbols and meanings is to assume that any given symbol means the same thing to everyone. But my blue may not be your blue, and blue to you may symbolise sadness, while to me it represents calm. To his credit, Freud himself was aware of the fatal flaws in his theory. He knew that science would one day come up with an explanation for dreams which could, beyond doubt, be proven, unlike his own theory. However, there will always be those who reject modern science—and compared to flat-earthers and anti-vaxxers, Freud followers seem rather sensible.

A Distance Greater Than Life and Death

The meeting between myself and *Asleep* by Banana Yoshimoto was a serendipitous one. As I was finishing up my second, more likeable draft of *Daydreams of Empty Skies*, I thought that it would be a good idea to find some sort of dream-related or dreamlike narrative by a Japanese author, considering the importance of Tokyo as *Daydream's* setting. I started by investigating Haruki Murakami, as one does, but then in the related books section on Goodreads I noticed Yoshimoto's most well-known book, *Kitchen*, and, upon further investigation, found *Asleep*. I had a good feeling about it, so I ordered it in to my local library, and when I finally had it in my hands to read it my instincts were proven reliable.

Asleep consists of three stories, mostly contemporary, but dipping casually into magical realism. In each, someone close to the protagonist has recently died—a brother, a rival, a close friend—and whatever vaguely supernatural, dreamlike occurrences the respective protagonists encounter are inevitably connected, in some way, to death. In “Night and Night’s Travelers,” the dead brother’s mourning lover sleepwalks through the snow at night. In “Love Songs,” the protagonist starts to hear singing as she drifts off to sleep, and thinks more and more of a woman with whom she once shared a lover, soon learning that this woman has died. In “Asleep,” the protagonist finds herself sleeping more and more, and more deeply, thinking of her recently-deceased best friend who worked as a sleep companion, and waking only to phone calls and visits from her lover, a married man with a comatose wife.

Each protagonist is in a sort of transitional period that can be likened to the bleary state between sleep and waking, where we might see and hear things that may or may not have

happened, like the aftereffects of a particularly potent dream. This dreamlike, reflective atmosphere, with the sense of something lost, or of being lost, or of searching for something, was what particularly stood out to me in each of the three stories. Much credit should be paid, mind you, to translator Michael Emmerich. I can hardly call myself fluent in Japanese, but I've learned enough to know that direct translations often sound awkward, incomplete, and lose the meaning and feeling of the original sentences.

When speaking of his translation method, Emmerich has said: "I try to focus very closely on what I'm feeling as an individual reader as I read a given sentence, and then try to create a sentence in English that makes me feel something as close as possible to that." I suppose one's own philosophies make a difference here, but given all that I have described about the cycle of creativity and emotion as the driving force and heart of all that is memorable, this seems to me a very authentic method of translation—heavily reflective of the dreaming creation process. Prioritising the feeling of a sentence over the exact transliteration, and translating that feeling into a grammatically, phonologically, contextually different language is not so different from how dreams process information. Surely it isn't a stretch, then, to consider dreams a translation, of sorts, of our own feelings and preoccupations?

In any case, Emmerich's translation has Yoshimoto's own blessing, and I certainly think he did a good job. The simplicity of language and description seems to, like the iceberg, hint at hidden complexities, as in this passage from "Night and Night's Travelers:"

The three of us walked on and on along the bank of the river. The roar of the water crashed through the air with such thunderous force that it somehow ended up seeming very quiet. Even so we were speaking quite loudly, and every little nothing we said seemed strangely pregnant with meaning.

I often remember that evening, the river flowing on into the distance.

And now a year had passed since my brother died (14).

The idyllic, dreamlike flashback of a poignant moment is brought to a sobering end with the directness of "a year had passed since my brother died," rather like, say... being jolted awake?

Am I beating the dream-horse a little too hard? I find it hard not to, since *Asleep* doesn't just concern itself with surreal dreams and dreamlike events, but mimics the ephemeral tides of sleeping and dreaming and waking; of life and death; of changing seasons, reflective of

Japanese traditions and philosophies—or at least what I understand of them, though I am certainly no expert.

The sense of something profound that you can't quite put your finger on. It's a feeling that I've wanted to capture in my own writing, because some of my favourite moments in everyday life are those moments of gentle profundity. The way the sunset colours the clouds; the yellowing branches of the willow that form a tunnel over the footpath; the rippled reflection of streetlights in the lake; a night sky so clear that the longer you stare the more stars there seem to be. *Asleep* has no shortage of such moments, which can be described by (if my understanding of it is correct) the concept of *yūgen*: a deep awareness of the universe.

The concept resists definition, and there is certainly no Western equivalent (like many concepts in Japanese aesthetics) but it can be found in moments such as the ones I described. Possible translations include “subtle grace,” “mysterious profundity,” and “elegant simplicity” (“Yūgen”), which, in English, aren't entirely analogous. *Yūgen* “carries the connotation of half-revealed or suggested beauty, at once elusive and meaningful, tinged with wistful sadness” (Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, qtd. in *Tsubaki* 57). *Wabi-sabi* is another concept worth mentioning. Beauty in imperfection, impermanence; in the ebb and flow of growth and decay. Always, there is the sense of something fleeting, temporary—the inherent sadness of beauty, and beauty in sadness.

The night glittered brilliantly then. The night seemed to be infinitely long. And I could see something stretching way off into the distance behind Yoshihiro, whose eyes sparkled with the same mischievous light as always. I caught sight of a vast landscape.

Something like a panorama.

I kind of wonder if that wasn't The Future, as my childish heart saw it. Back then my brother was something that definitely wouldn't die, he was both night and something that travelled through night (“Night and Night's Travelers” 38-9).

Shibami, the narrator-protagonist, reflects on her memories of her late brother with a matter-of-factness, a sense of restraint. What is said is almost equal to what *isn't* said. She expresses no apparent surprise or shock at the memory of this surreal occurrence centralised on this memory of Yoshihiro, this implication that he was, even back then, standing at the threshold

of some otherworld. The breadth of Shibami's grief is neatly summarised: "back then my brother was something that definitely wouldn't die." The impression left by permanent absence is greater and deeper than that of temporary presence.

Fumi, in "Love Songs," expresses a similar sentiment. Realising that Haru, her rival, the lover of her lover, with whom she had a complicated connection nonetheless, has died and is trying to reach out, Fumi goes to see Tanaka, a sort of medium. She enters a room that seems to exist in the space between the world of the living and that of the dead, where she is able to talk one last time with Haru, who enters the room from "a tremendous expanse of heavy ash-coloured grey" (94). As they part, Haru admits her romantic feelings for Fumi.

"I'm happy to hear that," I said.

But I felt unbearably sad. The ash grey outside was so heavy that I felt how great a distance separates us from the past . . . It was a distance greater than that between life and death, wider than the unfillable chasm that separates us all from one another (96).

Haru is representative of Fumi's past. Haru is also dead. *This* symbolism, at least, is rather plain. Fumi's meeting with Haru, courtesy of Tanaka, is not so different from Shibami's reflections on memories of Yoshihiro. By confronting the past, we might come to terms with it—we *must* come to terms with it. Tanaka warns Fumi of the dangers of stepping into the "ash grey:"

"There's just one thing I ought to warn you about, and that's that even if she invites you to leave, you can't step outside that door . . . [T]here have been plenty of people like that—people who leave the room and then realise they can't get back. A few of them never returned" (92).

Linger too long in the past, and you might just get stuck there. In each of *Asleep's* stories, resolution is attained when the protagonist finds a way to make peace with the ghosts of their past—somewhat literally. Life ends, as times end, and dreams end, and stories end.

Those Whom Heaven Helps

While the dream-theme in *Asleep* is subtly mingled with the pulse of the prose, the vaguely surreal, the musings on life and death and past and present, *The Lathe of Heaven*, by Ursula Le Guin, tackles dreams head-on. Not that I mean to imply any lack of masterfully-constructed, simple (yet economical) prose that hides vast complexities. Rather, Le Guin achieves these qualities *and* succeeds in writing a cogent science-fiction narrative, backed up by an evident wealth of knowledge on the topic at hand—providing plenty of opportunity for Dr Haber to soliloquise in proof of his superior intellect—exploring questions of dreams, reality, psychology, and, on a more metatextual level, creativity.

Where *Asleep* appeals to the heart and aesthetic sensibilities, *Lathe* appeals to the mind. Even while being *about* dreams, the changes that George Orr's dreams inflict upon the in-text reality rather resemble shifting dreams themselves; a fictional world constantly in flux, one that is experienced in parallel to its creation.

I love when I come across an interview with an author in which they say something about interpretations of their works, such as: "I do get asked to interpret myself, but I'm never sure that my interpretation is the right one," as Le Guin has been quoted as saying. She continues: "I think it is part of the nature of [*The Lathe of Heaven*] that in fact there is no final interpretation, or final meaning. The book is kind of an exercise in just saying you can't quite ever grasp reality" ("Bill Moyers interview").

The reason why I love this is because it essentially gives me free reign to interpret *Lathe* however I like without risk of being proved wrong. Thank you, Ms Le Guin! At the same time, I fully agree with that last comment about reality—it is not something that can be pinned down, especially once you bring dreaming into the mix. For dreams are themselves "like a reality" in that "they're real while you're there" ("Bill Moyers interview"), and this interplay of various dreamlike realities is the essence of *The Lathe of Heaven*.

"It is often said that in a dream you are able to see what you are thinking as it occurs" (States 13). This is an interesting point that I myself have thought about a lot over the last year. If we equate dreams with fiction, we have to admit that a dream is "a composition continually in progress" (28), whereas fiction, by nature, is complete. A dream will never get past the first draft—if that.

I can think of a couple of my own dreams which seem relevant to this point, and of course can't help but wonder to what extent they were influenced by my preoccupation with dreams and all I was reading about them. One starts to wonder if it's possible to dream about dreaming—and of course it is, because there's no reason that anything should ever be *impossible* in a dream.

I have to make my way through recently collapsed buildings, intentionally triggering further rockslides and obstructions along my way to delay a silent, invisible pursuer . . .

The chase replays over and over, going slightly differently each time . . . Every time I try to escape my pursuer, I fail in some way, and have to start again.

Being a perfectionist, I have *certainly* had the experience of trying to write the same scene over and over again and never being satisfied. I do have to admit, though, that I play video games fairly often, including the variety of platformer where you can expect to have to start the level over again if you make a mistake, and this dream certainly resembles that. Video games, I think, probably have a greater impact on my dreams than any other kind of media, possibly because they require the greatest amount of active input on my part. But I digress—again.

I'm sitting with my parents, somewhere with a view, watching an earthquake in the distance—the horizon trembles. A horrible notion strikes me, and I turn my gaze over a sparkling harbour to an island volcano, which does not resemble Rangitoto, being far too lean and steep, but I think of it as such nonetheless, with only a little uncertainty.

I look away, then look back, to see exactly what I was just hoping wouldn't happen: a column of bright yellow-and-orange fire or lava shoots skywards from the volcanic cone.

This dream, being rather terrifying and therefore memorable, goes on for quite some time—three pages in my dream journal! The volcanic eruption was, in a way, my own fault. It couldn't possibly be a coincidence, for the thought to occur to me, “Oh, gosh, I hope that volcano doesn't erupt,” followed by the volcano erupting. “In a dream you are able to see what you are

thinking as it occurs.” Fortunately for me, I don’t have George Orr’s ability to influence worldwide reality in my sleep. Dreams most likely have no prophetic qualities, though they may certainly influence one to act a certain way or take a certain path if they see it as predestined thanks to a pertinent dream. Dreams are, most certainly, the purest form of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

In *The Lathe of Heaven*, the volcanic eruption of Mt Hood is one of the few bizarre occurrences that George Orr’s dreams *don’t* directly cause. Instead it is the result of a stray nuclear bomb reflected back to earth by the alien invasion of the state of Oregon—and that’s the part that *is* caused by George’s dream. Bizarreness is one of the markers of a dream or dreamlike experience, and as Dr Haber underhandedly uses George’s reality-shifting dream talent for greater, sometimes horrifying, if well-intentioned purposes, the results are increasingly bizarre.

George dreams the skin-tone of all human beings into grey monochrome; dreams up a plague which brings the population down to a single manageable billion as compared to an overcrowded seven billion; and, of course, brings about the alien invasion—“peace on earth,” as it were, as now earth’s denizens are united against the greater threat of aliens on the moon. And to get them off the moon, they must come to earth—and once the aliens, the Aldebaranians, are able to communicate their non-aggressive intentions, they begin to assimilate into human society. Running an antiques and “junque” store, for example (152).

Not only are these changes in reality caused by George’s dreams, but the shifts themselves resemble dreams in varying levels of bizarreness. It’s all too appropriate that Le Guin herself has admitted to *Lathe* being “the first book I wrote that I pretty much winged it,” saying that it wasn’t a novel she could plan very strictly, because of the “constant change of the dreams. I sort of had to let George dream and find out what he dreamed and then figure out what Haber would do with it” (“Bill Moyers interview”). There’s almost a sense of indecision, or of jumping so many times through different worldlines (plotlines, possible realities) that the threads start to become tangled.

George is, in a way, trapped in a nightmare by Haber, who becomes increasingly frustrated by the roundabout way George’s dreams follow Haber’s instructions. Of course, only those who are skilled in lucid dreaming have any ability to control the minutiae of their dreams, and it is Haber’s hubris in believing that his own unconscious would do a better job at making

the world a better place that is his downfall—and George’s salvation. As Le Guin’s (admittedly rather free translation of) Chuang Tse goes:

Those whom heaven helps we call the sons of heaven. They do not learn this by learning. They do not work it by working. They do not reason it by using reason. To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven (qtd. in Le Guin 25).

George is frequently noted to be exceedingly ordinary, and perhaps it is this ordinariness or lack of ambition which causes him to be fearful and wary of his remarkable ability. Haber, meanwhile, is an ambitious man, a man of science, who wants to do good in the world but is arrogant enough to make “doing good” as much a matter of his own success and power as anything else. At his second appointment with him, George observes that Haber “was not, he thought, really sure that anyone else existed, and wanted to prove they did by helping them” (27). “Solipsistic” certainly seems as good a word as any to add to Haber’s list of epithets. Haber refuses to “stop at what cannot be understood,” and pays the price for it: a lifelong stay in an asylum. Destroyed, mentally, on the lathe of heaven.

More Dream Than Memory

Daydreams of Empty Skies is not quite the novella that I originally set out to write. The characters are more or less the same; the setting; the plot premise. Yet, in its present form, the only scene in *Daydreams* that directly resembles that failed first draft is the scene in which Astra, my abnormally-dreaming protagonist, meets Tenjin, the eccentric dream researcher.

So, what went wrong with attempt number one? Earlier I referred to *Asleep* and *The Lathe of Heaven* as being on either end of a spectrum, because while they are both about dreaming, the way they respectively handle the topic is markedly different. However, something that makes them alike—and something which, I think, contributes greatly to their success as dream-fictions—is that they are not just *about* dreams, but formally resemble dreams or some aspect of dreaming. Surreal, drifting, inherently introspective and emotionally-driven dreams. Vivid, intense, uncontrollably tangled dreams and shifting realities.

Reality of course plays a part: I think they both highlight the fact that it's not easy to stick a pin in the true nature of reality, and all attempts to do so are doomed to fail. Since fiction (as I've argued above) is a dream of a sort, it follows that it would be difficult to write a fiction about dreams that does not itself reflect these key dreamlike qualities. It's dreaming about dreaming.

Where I initially went wrong, I think, was in putting a strict division between the "dreams" and the "reality" that I portrayed in the text. The "dreams" that Astra was experiencing were adapted versions of my own dreams, which of course had nothing to do with anything else going on in the diegesis, and hence only reinforced this division. I was making the same mistake as Dr Haber, and—for that matter—as Tenjin. If they were doomed to fail, then so was I, trying far too hard to make use all of the interesting scientific research I had done when I really should have known to save it for this essay.

The next question to ask is: what makes *Daydreams of Empty Skies*, in its present form, more successful than the first attempt, at least in my own opinion? After all I just said, it should be obvious: by giving in to the dream, the aimlessness, the absence of easily defined meaning and conclusion, I made things much easier for myself as a writer, and hopefully for the reader as well.

Somewhat ironically, the key change I had to make was to, in a way, eliminate "dreams" altogether. Astra dreams herself directly into memories. The line between the past and the present, between dreams and reality, is always going to be blurry under such circumstances—and this, I found, suited me much better. There is no such hard division between dreaming and waking, because really, the whole thing is a dream. I mean this somewhat literally: it is an intermingling of my own memories and imaginings, driven by my interests, anxieties, and preoccupations.

The recurring image of the moon and night-time scenes is a good example of this, including the opening scene: "The moonlight blanched the world into a dim monochrome, making it less than it was, yet more than it had ever been" (3). There had in fact been a cloudy night last summer when I went outside and was transfixed by the presence of the full moon in the sky, and how different everything looked in the silvery moonlight. In my discussion of *Asleep*, I mentioned *yūgen*, the gripping sense of mysterious profundity that refuses to be captured in words. To me, there is no greater evocation of *yūgen* than the moon, the stars, and all the offerings of the night sky.

I would be lying if I even implied that I was intentionally trying to reflect Japanese aesthetic concepts, and, I think, inappropriate to try and claim that I have evoked them in some way. These are concepts I have barely begun to understand, given their heavily culturally-rooted relevance compared to my own Western background, and the fact that Astra, my protagonist, is from a similar background. This is inescapable. I can only ever write about Japan from an outsider's perspective, and do my best to do so respectfully.

That said, it's a culture I admire greatly, a language I dearly hope to one day be fluent in, and a place I dream of visiting again someday. An incredible amount of the audio-visual media I consume, and have been consuming since I was very young, is produced in Japan. It seems only fitting that Tokyo should be *Daydream's* setting. It is the centre of a lot of things that matter to me; a lot of the things I dream and daydream about. "Japan, and all her time spent there, had already started to feel more like a dream than a memory" (84). A variation of this line was something I wrote down as soon as I knew that, for my second draft, all of Astra's dreams would be memories. I knew it needed to be near the end, so it was simply a matter of writing towards that one sentiment.

My own memories of Japan obviously play a very important role—they are the basis of the setting. While I didn't rely entirely on my own memory to capture specific details about certain places, looking over my folder of photos I took during my two weeks spent in Japan in 2012 was just the thing to trigger a rush of memories, as mementos do, and greatly inform some of the scenes and images in *Daydreams of Empty Skies*:

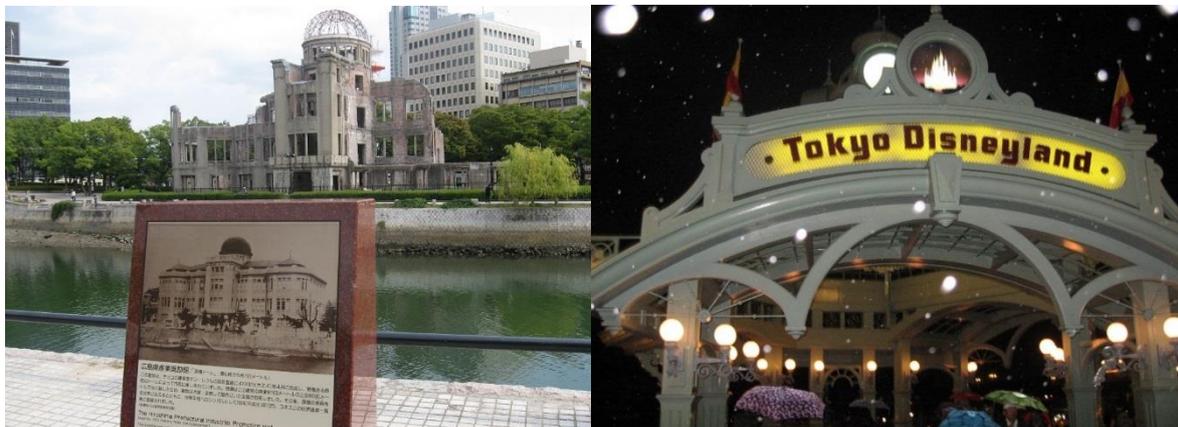
There's a bakery over there, and in the display window is a pyramid of bread cubes with cute little pandas stamped on one side. Like bread die, but any way you roll it, you get bread or panda (7).



What's that, up on the side of that tall building?

It's a panda face. Smiling, slightly eerily, staring out across the city with empty, all-seeing eyes (7).

"Maybe Tenjin will give us a whole weekend off sometime, and we can visit the Peace Memorial in Hiroshima. The ruins of the Industrial Promotion Hall." (47).



Astra looked around at the steady stream of people headed towards the big lit-up archway with its big lit-up sign confirming that this was, indeed, TOKYO DISNEYLAND. Everyone—*everyone*—was sporting either an umbrella or a plastic poncho (78).

The Golden Pavilion, imperious across the serene, mirror-like pond, surrounded by verdant Japanese pines . . .

On the pond shore opposite the pavilion, a young maple tree, leaf-tips tinted red, marked the perfect place for a photo opportunity (27).



I think it's interesting to mention that a Google Images search for "Kinkakuji" will yield many versions of what is essentially the same photograph as above—because, as noted, the gardens are set out in just such a way as to tell you exactly when to stop and aim the lens. It's almost like, being in front of the pavilion, you are unknowingly inhabited by the collective consciousness of the thousands of tourists who have been there before. I have no doubt that I would have seen such a photo as this before taking one myself, even if I didn't consciously remember as much. This, I think, is the source of the sense of unreality Astra experiences. It is true, though, that in this case she *is* actually dreaming.

The memory of a dream is no different from a memory of anything else, really. So why shouldn't it go the other way? A dream of a memory? The difference there is more evident, but in any case, I think the memories we think on continuously increasingly begin to resemble

dreams. Like my earlier-described memory from preschool. It's bizarre enough to resemble the sort of thing I dream about these days. I have another memory of a time I wandered off and nearly drowned, which appears very aesthetically pleasing in my mind's eye—everything is blue; the sunlight reflects off the water's surface far above as I helplessly flail my arms—and apparently this happened when I was all of eighteen months old. I *think* I remember it, but it could very well be little more than something I imagined, or dreamed.

When you're a young child, new to the world, these distinctions matter little. As adults, we care much more, possibly overmuch, about divisions of past and present, dream, memory, reality. For Astra, at the same time that she is coming to terms with the idea of being an adult, these divisions are slowly melting away.

This, of course, is thanks to the experiments conducted by Tenjin, a rather Haber-like figure now that I think about it, though much less aggressive. Unlike Haber, Tenjin eventually concedes defeat. What Haber has that Tenjin doesn't, however, is evidence that dreams can, in fact, be greater than just *dreams*. If Tenjin had such evidence, he would be far less likely to back down. What he lacks is confirmation that his efforts are not in vain.

Initially, I had intended for Tenjin to be more of an antagonist, but I made the mistake of growing fond of him, which resulted in the development of sympathetic qualities. This then led to the introduction of a "true" antagonist, which is where everything started to fall apart for the first draft. On second attempt, I decided to make his sympathetic qualities more notable: he is, essentially, lost. This is something that he, his sister Miyuki, and Astra all share, to some extent.

While I'm making comparisons, I found, while reading "Night and Night's Travelers," that Shibami rather reminded me of Miyuki. This could very likely have been simply due to them both being around the same age and the younger sister to a confident, striking older brother. Shibami had at one point become friends with Sarah, an exchange student from America—in other words, the white foreigner who isn't fluent in Japanese—just as Miyuki becomes close friends with Astra.

These are fairly superficial, coincidental similarities, but something else that struck me about Shibami is her quiet sense of caring. She clearly cared greatly for her brother, and cares also for Sarah, and for her cousin Mari, who had been romantically involved with Yoshihiro when he died (romantic involvement between cousins is not such a social taboo in Japan as

it is in the West) and is not faring so well. Of the three primary characters in *Daydreams*, Miyuki is the most difficult for me to describe in a few words, or even for me to pick out a few key characteristics of, but I think, like Shibami, she cares.

I can hardly neglect to mention the metafictional aspects of *Daydreams of Empty Skies*. Although, given that thus far the recurring theme in this essay is equating dreams with fiction, and therefore with the act of creation, it could be said that dream-narratives are inherently metafictional. But while this would be an easy argument to make for *The Lathe of Heaven*, for example, it might be a little trickier with *Asleep*; and the narrative perspective matters greatly here. *Asleep* is narrated in first person, while *Lathe* and *Daydreams* are in the third person.

By the strictest definition, moments of *Daydream*'s narration are indeed metafictional, but I think it might be more accurate to simply refer to it as self-aware. Lucid dreaming is a significant aspect of what scant plot there is, so if fiction is like a dream, then metafiction, self-aware fiction, is the lucid counterpart. In my case, I was just being playful with narrative voice; at a certain point, I started to think of the "narrator" as a separate character all her own.

After all, once a text has been written and left alone, it is static. The narrator was never really "me," but a projection of me, and a selectively filtered one, at that. The "fourth wall" is not something that can ever truly be broken, except in the mind of the reader—and who knows what dreams may arise from the fictions such readers consume?

In my case, I simply had no interest in hiding the artifice of the story. It is not real. It is constructed—disparate shards held together with golden lacquer, like the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*. I held a cracked mirror up to reality and the reflection is, as ever, more appealing.

A Nocturnal Orchestration

As I have been at such pains to establish, there are so very many things that make fiction alike to dreams. Another thing they have in common, something that everything has in common, is that they end. But while a dream may simply cut off wherever, whenever—when you are rudely awakened by the alarm, or by your neighbour mowing the lawn, or your pet demanding to be fed—written fiction is generally expected to be brought around to a definitive ending.

As I've also discussed, the three stories in Banana Yoshimoto's *Asleep* each end with the respective protagonists moving on from the dreamlike transitional periods they have been

in; escaping into the real world, ready to move forward with their lives. Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* similarly ends with Dr Haber taking on George Orr's reality-changing dream ability, thereby freeing him from it; freeing him from the dream.

So what, then, of Astra, in my *Daydreams of Empty Skies*? She believes that she is home, but something feels off. Then she sees the moon in the sky, and thinks she hears a voice— is it Tenjin's voice, looming into her dreams as always? Perhaps, perhaps not. It could be that she's dreaming. Or it could be that the experiment has left her paranoid; doomed, for the foreseeable future at least, to constantly question if what she is experiencing is real or not. Or could the answer be something else entirely?

Anything I say here necessarily falls into the realm of interpretation. It is the dream that has been put into words and presented for analysis. *I* am separate from *it*. The aforementioned "narrator," however, may know better than I—because the narrator is not separate from the text. The narrator *is* the text. This conceptualisation of the narrator may not be so very different from the unconscious mechanism that orchestrates my dreams at night; that which cannot "know" anything and yet holds all the answers. Whether or not Astra has escaped her own dreams, she cannot escape mine—and, in a way, nor can I, for to run from one's dreams is to run from oneself.

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*Daydreams
of
Empty
Skies*

空
上
の
空
想

*On a journey, fallen ill,
My **dreams** run wild
Over withered fields.*

夢
は枯れ野を
かけ廻る
旅に病んで

1

The moonlight blanched the world into a dim monochrome, making it less than it was, yet more than it had ever been. Perhaps that was just a side-effect of perspectives in flux.

The moon, the reality-shifting, moonlight-emitting moon, sat high and bright, full and round, making light of the night sky; making a dignified silhouette of the olive tree's most skyward-reaching branches. Offering an olive branch to the heavens, to the hazy clouds drifting aimlessly across the sky, too formless to do much more than gently diffuse the lunar illumination. *Illunamination*, you might even say.

No, she thought. That just sounds silly. As her mother had told her so many times: not every phrase demanded a portmanteau. She both agreed and begged to differ. Cognitive dissonance. Or... cognizance. Nice one.

A cold breeze combed through the trees, brushing her cheeks by way of the loose hair around her face, alight with the heady scent of spring nights and lemon verbena. Perhaps it was strange to be so fixated on the moon, but she couldn't take her eyes off it, even as another, stronger gust of wind sent a shiver rippling across her shoulders. The way the moonlight melted through the clouds that scudded before it somehow made them seem more real. The way the clouds dappled the surface of the moon somehow made *it* seem more real. She hadn't realised that they'd ever seemed *unreal*—but why shouldn't they? The moon, the clouds, the sky, the stars. They were not something she would ever touch, ever grasp with her hands. They were no better than a photograph. No more tangible than a dream.

Perhaps she should have had more faith in the stars, given her name—Astra. Star, but Latin. What's in a name, though? It was either lemon verbena or lemon blossom, this scent overwhelming her sinuses. In the dark, there was no difference: lemon scent by any other name would smell as lemony.

Tomorrow, she would be closer to the stars than she had ever been. In an aeroplane, thousands of metres over the sea, drifting across the sky like so many hazy, indistinct, unreal clouds.

All thanks to some strange dreams and the consequences of Googling her symptoms.

The wind changed direction, greeting her with the smell of the compost bin. A good time to go inside, perhaps. It was far too cold out here, anyway—mid-spring, and the temperature still struggled to stay above ten degrees. The seasons seemed to get lazier by the year. Climate change, maybe, or maybe a few leap years in a row were needed to shove the seasons back into their designated three-month slots. When they changed, they seemed to

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change suddenly enough, anyway, so they could at least be polite enough to conform to humanity's arbitrary mechanisms of timekeeping. Gosh.

There were no lights on inside. Everyone was probably asleep already, so Astra was careful not to make too much noise as she eased the ranch slider open to slip into the lounge. It wasn't much warmer in here than outside, but at least there was no wind. She closed the door behind her. The silence that followed served only to amplify the darkness. The moonlight had no power here, on the wrong side of the house, behind closed doors and blackout curtains. Hardly mattered—she knew her way around well enough in the dark.

Even with socks on, the kitchen tiles were like ice under her feet. Whenever she walked on a cold floor, she couldn't help but think of that one ad for floor heaters that had played so frequently on TV when she was a kid. The one with the singing penguins. "*Happiest feet in the world*," or something like that, which seemed a blatant rip-off of that one movie, *Happy Feet*, which also starred singing (and dancing) penguins. Although, now that she thought about it, she wasn't sure which of them had come first: the ad or the movie?

She could smell coffee, which wasn't especially unusual, since she was standing right next to the filter machine. But who would have made coffee at... whatever time of night it was? Time check. Wait, where was her phone? She didn't leave it outside, did she? Don't tell her she left it outside.

I can tell you that she didn't leave it outside, but—

"Astra?"

She whipped around, one flailing arm knocking several used glasses from the bench to the floor with a most ungodly sound, a shattering of avalanchesque proportions, as if the tiles were pulverising those poor, innocent glass cups back into sand.

So much for everyone being asleep.

"Astra, can you hear me?"

The voice was right by her ear—had been, and still was, even now that she was facing the other way. It was a voice she knew, a man's voice, with an odd accent...

Oh. Oh. Okay. This was a dream. Interesting. She looked up, then down, then up again, down again. Like nodding, but with only her eyes.

"Good," said the voice, "thank you. Now, I want you to—"

"Astra?"

Astra didn't hear what the voice wanted her to do, as another voice joined the say-Astra's-name-questioningly party. At the same time, the kitchen light flicked on, and if this were real, Astra would have been blinded. Those LED lightbulbs were no joke. Were they really this bright or was her memory just being melodramatic?

As for name-caller number two, Astra's mother stood there by the light switch in her dressing gown, arms wrapped around herself, squinting quizzically.

Astra glanced down at the mess by her feet. Yep, just a whole lot of sand.

“Don’t worry about it, Mum,” she said. “This isn’t even real.”

Her mother just blinked at her and looked even more confused. Astra had no time to deal with the dream/memory construct of her mother right now, however. She was trying to remember the signal for “please repeat instructions”—something to do with an eyeroll, but was it clockwise or counter-clockwise?

Some constructs didn’t like being ignored. “Astra,” Mum said, stepping forward, mindless of the glass sand that crunched under her slippers. “If you’re having second thoughts, it’s not too late to change your mind.”

“I’m not having second thoughts,” Astra said automatically. God damn it. *This is a dream*, she reminded herself.

“Astra,” said the other voice, the one outside the dream.

“Astra,” said her mother. “Just... if things don’t work out, there’s no shame in coming home sooner than planned. Okay?”

“Astra?” said the outside-voice. The smell of coffee was stronger than ever.

“Define ‘work out’,” Astra muttered.

Her mother stared blankly. “Astra,” she said. “Just... if things don’t work out—”

“I get it,” Astra said.

Dream-Mum barreled on: “I don’t want to lose you. Okay? I miss you.”

Wait. What?

“Astra,” said the outside-voice. “Everything okay?”

This was far too much to be dealing with before she’d even woken up. Closing her eyes, she looked left, then right, then left, then right. Like shaking her head, but with only her eyes. Then she opened them and found herself staring up at the stucco ceiling of a small research room on an upper floor of a high-rise building in Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan, six months later. That is, six months later relative to when the memory in that dream had originally happened. Just to be clear on that point.

The scent of coffee filled the room.

A sigh to her right. “This is why we aren’t making any progress,” said the outside-voice, which belonged to a man who insisted on being called Tenjin. Astra had known this all along, of course, but it’s nice to build some intrigue, don’t you think? “If you abort the sequence the minute you encounter something uncomfortable, we learn nothing.”

In Tenjin’s hand was a disposable cup of coffee, held mockingly close to Astra’s face.

“I wasn’t aware we were making progress in the first place,” Astra said, sitting up on the recliner, which resembled nothing so much as a dentist’s chair. She felt the pull of metal on her scalp as she did, and took a moment to remove the electrode cap.

Tenjin, sitting straight-backed and cross-legged in a hard plastic chair beside the recliner, was giving her a look of exasperation, as if he were dealing with an uncooperative child. Which was quite rude, because Astra was twenty years old—decidedly *not* a child.

“I keep dropping into memories I can’t work with,” she explained. “No point exploring a place I already know. And—” She stopped herself. That was none of Tenjin’s business. “You haven’t noticed anything weird on the monitor, have you?”

Tenjin frowned, glancing at the swivel-screen attached to the stainless steel box rigged up beneath the head of the recliner. “Not on my end. Miyuki?”

The young woman to whom Tenjin referred and deferred was sitting at a laminated worktable on Astra’s other side. Upon the table was a heavy-duty laptop and three bulky external hard drives, attached to the same steel box by a mess of wires that any budding Medusa cosplayer could take serious inspiration from.

“Normal,” said Miyuki, in her usual soft tone. Her eyes fixed on the laptop screen. “Except...”

“What?”

She hummed. “Probably nothing. I’ll look closer. Later.”

Behind Miyuki was the room’s single window, daylight peeking in from behind the drawn and shuttered venetian blinds.

“What time is it?” Astra asked.

“Nearly one,” Miyuki answered.

Astra turned to Tenjin. “Sounds like it’s time for lunch.”

Tenjin was still frowning. Balancing this project with his regular workload was taking its toll in the form of dark smears under his eyes and an increased tendency to scowl. Mayhap he was suffering from the double-barrelled afflictions known as “stress” and “sleep deprivation.”

“Very well,” he said. “You can go.”

“I’ll come,” said Miyuki, shutting the laptop with a snap. “L’Ueno?”

“Sure,” said Astra, hopping down from the recliner and fetching her coat and backpack from the chair relegated to the corner of the room, useful for nothing but coat and bag storage.

Tenjin hadn’t moved except to fold his arms and pose a thoughtful hand under his chin. Like The Thinker, with better posture and more clothes.

“Are you staying here?” Astra asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Likely, I will be here exactly like this when you return this evening.”

“Okay. Cool. Looking forward to it.”

Miyuki rolled her eyes.

Halfway down the hall towards the elevator, they had the misfortune of encountering Gabby. Her dyed-purple hair was looking a bit faded and worse for the wear. Definitely in need of a trip to the salon, it seemed.

“Is Tenjin still in there?” Gabby asked them, rather snippily.

“Good afternoon,” Astra deadpanned.

“He is,” said Miyuki.

Gabby shoved past them without further ceremony, managing to shoulder-check them both at the same time. It was almost impressive.

They glanced at each other, then watched Gabby’s briskly retreating back.

“That can’t mean anything good,” said Astra. “Should we go back in there?”

Miyuki hesitated before replying. “No,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Being that it was a Monday afternoon, past the usual lunch rush, Shinjuku station and the subway was marginally less crowded than usual. Tokyo was lucky enough to have intuitive infrastructure, so getting onto the Yamanote line took little more than waving their Suica cards at the electronic gates and hopping onto the next train that arrived at the platform—and, conveniently, they arrived every five minutes.

The Yamanote line went in a big circuit around Tokyo’s major city districts. Shinjuku, Shibuya, Harajuku, Akihabara, to name a few. The hotel where Astra had been staying for the past six months (she knew the manager by name at this point) was in Ueno, and to Ueno they went on this fine, slightly overcast afternoon.

The first thing you might notice, when exiting the train platform into Ueno station proper, would probably be the crowd. Plenty of tourists. Other than that, it would be the pandas. You walk towards the exit and think, wow, what is going on with the pandas? There’s a bakery over there, and in the display window is a pyramid of bread cubes with cute little pandas stamped on one side. Like a bread die, but any way you roll it, you get bread or panda. Win-win, if you ask me.

You step outside the station, cross the road, and go down the street a ways towards the big double staircase disappearing ominously into a tangle of towering trees. Look to your left. What’s that, up on the side of that tall building?

It’s a panda face. Smiling, slightly eerily, staring out across the city with empty, all-seeing eyes.

Astra only knew this particular panda in so much detail because her favourite café, charmingly and affectedly named *L’Ueno*, was just across the street from it. Her usual seat faced the window, and if she were on her own, the only face she could look at without feeling weird about it was that blown-up panda face.

The panda fixation was because Ueno zoo had a panda. Astra still hadn’t been to see it, but boy did she want to at some point, if only to confirm that it had a more lively look in its eyes than Mr. Building-face up there.

L'Ueno was typically Astra's usual breakfast depository, and Miyuki knew it, but after a late start that morning Astra had made do with vending machine snacks for breakfast instead. Not the end of the world, since it now meant that they could go there for lunch. Miyuki had rather a sweet tooth, herself. She would never say no to a melon bread (which only looked like a melon; there was no actual melon in it) or panda-stamped *anpan* (which had no panda in it, thank Christ, but was filled with *anko*—red bean paste—which was sweet but had a strange texture). Or any other panda-shaped baked confection. There were plenty to choose from. L'Ueno would have been better named *Panda Pastries*. They even had panda-shaped takeaway boxes.

Astra, for her part, had an honest addiction to this magical treat known as a curry bun, or *karee pan*, in Japanese, *pan* meaning bread, from the French *pain*, because no one does *pain* better than the French. Anyway, it was a pocket of fried bread filled with curry, as the name suggested. Astra's favourite breakfast (and/or lunch) as of six months ago. Maybe not the healthiest breakfast, and a far cry from the traditional Japanese fast-breaker, but it was delicious and easy to eat and usually that was all that mattered to Astra less than an hour after waking up. Or any hour after waking up, to be honest.

L'Ueno was, in fact, where she had first met Tenjin on the day she had touched down in Tokyo after an anxiety-ridden eleven-hour flight.

The first thing she had noticed, when she stepped off the plane, was how uncomfortably humid it was. She supposed Tokyo probably had a similar climate to Auckland, but travelling from one to the other was akin to time-travelling six months either way. No time to acclimate with the shifting weather. The last time she'd been on solid land, it had been a particularly chilly twelve degrees. Here, it was twenty-two at the very least.

It was unbearable.

She had her instructions in an email on her phone, for what she was supposed to do next. Find her way to the station, buy the right ticket, board the right train from Narita to Ueno. From there, exhausted and nervous and disoriented and sweating an incredibly unattractive amount, she had to cross the road and go down the street a ways, toward the staircase. Up there was Ueno park. On her left she noticed the giant panda face in the fading evening light. On her right was L'Ueno, and that was where she needed to be. Take a seat, said the email. Someone will come to explain things.

It was as Astra found herself a spare seat facing the window that the apprehension tickling the edges of her awareness began to rear up in earnest. Thoughts she'd wilfully been keeping at bay until now: what am I doing here, thousands of miles from everything I know, surrounded by conversations in a language I barely understand three words of? *Konnichiwa. Arigatou. Sayounara*. Under directions, no less, by some creep on the internet who claimed to be able to help her figure out what the hell was going on with her dreams for a reasonable

payoff and a free trip to Japan. Probably would have been better off just going to a shrink. If she was insane enough to accept the offer, then yeah, definitely.

“You must be Astra,” said a voice, a man’s voice, accent vaguely American but with a haziness that spoke of his Japanese origins.

The man—young man, really, as he was only a handful of years older than Astra—slid into the seat across from her, blocking her view of the street (but not of the panda face).

“Are you Himitsu?” Astra asked him.

“No,” he said. “Himitsu is my associate. You may call me Tenjin.”

“I *may*?” Astra repeated. “Should I be honoured?”

Tenjin chuckled pleasantly. “It isn’t my given name,” he explained, “merely a nickname I’ve held onto since I was a boy. Tenjin is the Shinto *kami*, or god, of scholarship, learning, and poetry; the deification of Sugawara no Michizane, a famous scholar, poet, and politician of the Heian era. He died in exile, and his wrathful spirit wrought plague and destruction until a shrine was built in his honour, and he was posthumously restored from exile.” He smiled, almost bashfully. It didn’t reach his eyes. “The kanji in my given name, Masamichi, and the kanji in the name Michizane are the same, but swapped around. I had a rather observant friend in middle school who recognised this and started calling me Tenjin, and I suppose the name stuck.”

Astra was a little taken aback. She wasn’t sure what she had expected, out of this “someone” who had come to “explain things,” but she sure hadn’t expected... this.

“Oh,” she said, with all the eloquence of a native English-speaker. “Well, uh, my mother wanted to call me Astraea. Like the Greek goddess? But my grandparents are strictly Catholic, and she was already pushing it by having a kid out of wedlock, so she... pared back a bit.”

“How interesting!” Tenjin said, and Astra couldn’t tell if he meant it or was just being polite. “A shame, though, really. Astraea would have been a lovely name for you.”

Oh, god. Was he *flirting* with her? He looked the flirtatious type, or at least the type who was used to getting his way with women: proud cheekbones, styled black hair, and a tailored business suit with a deep purple tie. He seemed unaffected by the mugginess, sitting there looking more like a fashion model than a dream researcher. At the very least, he looked like he spent a lot of time in front of the mirror in the morning. Really not Astra’s type. Not that she had a type; she’d never understood all the fuss about dating and such.

“Yeah, uh... I guess I just prefer Astra.”

“Just as I prefer Tenjin,” said Tenjin. “Which, of course, is written with different kanji than either Masamichi or Michizane, which both use *road* and *truth*. The road to truth, as it were. The character for *Ten* means heaven or sky, and *jin* means god. So while Sugawara-no-Michizane was but a man, a man of words and knowledge and learning, he eventually ascended to the status of a heavenly god.”

As opposed to a regular, *unheavenly* god, Astra supposed. “You must have pretty lofty aspirations yourself, then,” she said.

“You could say that,” Tenjin said, continuing to smile, as if his face were incapable of anything else.

“Thanks for the impromptu Japanese lesson, then.” One of many to come over the next six months, as it turned out. “So, what’s the deal? I’m gonna be a subject in some research project?”

“Yes. *My* research project, specifically.”

“I thought it was with... um, that research company.” Himitsu had sent her information about it, and she’d even received an automated email from their administration. Receipts, to prove that the whole thing wasn’t a hoax. She couldn’t remember the name, though. The nearest answer her brain supplied her with was *Ebola*, which was *definitely* not correct. Thanks for nothing, brain.

“Nebula Neuro Research and Development,” Tenjin supplied. “I work for them, yes, and they endorse the project and we will be using company facilities. But this is largely an independent venture, on my part.”

Strangely, Astra got the impression that this was not a topic Tenjin liked talking about. He *did* seem to enjoy talking about himself, however.

“Seems a bit extreme to reach out to the other side of the world to find a subject for an independent venture,” she commented.

“It was necessary. It’s fortunate that Himitsu found you on that forum. Dreams, ordinarily, are constructed from fragments of memory, mixed up and rearranged, interspersed with imaginative constructs to create entirely new landscapes and scenarios. For *your* dreaming mind to skip that essential step and deliver wholesale reconstructions of scenes from your memory is almost entirely unique, as I’m sure you’ve already gauged, and a crucial first step towards proving my hypothesis.”

Astra was sure that it was all just because her brain liked to mess with her, but she wasn’t sure how to explain that to Tenjin. He’d probably figure it out soon enough, that there was nothing more notable going on here than a brain which fancied itself a bit of a jokester.

“What is this hypothesis? Am I allowed to know that?”

Almost sheepishly, Tenjin glanced down at his interlocked hands on the table before him. “I’ll have to ask you to keep an open mind,” he prefaced. “It might sound rather... hm. Lofty was the word you used, I believe.”

Astra shrugged.

“To put it concisely, I want to test the reality of dreams.”

Astra waited for him to continue, but he seemed to be anticipating her comment. Oh, social cues, why art thou so obscure?

“The whole point of dreams is that they’re *not* real, isn’t it?” she obliged.

Smiling, Tenjin raised an enigmatic eyebrow. The left one, specifically, known to be more mysterious than the right eyebrow. “I knew you would say that,” he said. “But before we can truly claim that dreams ‘aren’t real,’ we need to be able to prove that *reality* is as real as we want to believe. Except we can’t, because ‘reality’ is wholly dependent on the perception of the individual. To each person, it’s slightly different. Dreams, too, are different for each person. Their form and content depend entirely on the individual. The biggest difference is that ‘reality’ is based on externally-generated stimuli, while dreams are internally generated.”

He was beginning to sound more like a philosopher than a neuro-whatsit. It sounded like he’d rehearsed his spiel. In front of a mirror, no doubt.

“I see,” Astra said. “And... where do I come in?”

“Being that you dream directly into the landscapes of your past,” Tenjin continued, “it may be possible to, using these memory-dreams as a starting point, explore the minutiae that you ignored the first time around. I believe that the human brain absorbs much more of so-called ‘reality’ than we consciously notice. Through dreams—lucid dreams, to be precise—we can begin to compare these external and internal realities.”

“Okay,” Astra said slowly. “One problem: I can’t lucid dream. I mean, I’ve tried, as anyone has, but... no dice.”

Tenjin chuckled at that. Then cleared his throat. “Don’t worry about that. Our first order of business will be to train you in lucid dreaming—which will be easier than you think, with my methods and Nebula’s equipment.”

Cool, free skill acquisition. *And* she was getting paid, *and* a free trip to Tokyo. A fantastic deal! She might even be excited, if she weren’t so anxious, so apprehensive that trying to return Tenjin’s Ken-Doll smile took as much effort as opening a jar of cornichons after her little brother had gotten impatient with getting it to go on straight, resorting to hammering it on with the hilt of a butter knife.

Thinking of that, a wave of homesickness crashed over her.

Already? she wondered, taking a deep breath. “I see.”

“You must be exhausted,” Tenjin said sympathetically. “I’ll show you to your hotel. It’s not far from here—you’ll learn your way around in no time.”

2 Astra's hotel room was a few floors up and nothing much to write home about. It resembled any other hotel room she'd been in—bed, couch, television, ensuite. The view from the window wasn't particularly special, though she could see the spire of Tokyo Skytree in a gap between the neighbouring concrete-block buildings.

Tenjin had told her that “someone” would come to “collect her” at nine AM sharp the next morning. The lobby was empty when she stepped out of the elevator only a couple minutes past the designated time, but sitting outside the glass-pane front door was a cat, a Russian Blue if she wasn't mistaken, kitted out in a walking harness that matched its emerald-green eyes.

There's a strange progression of thoughts that occurs when one encounters a cat on a city street. The first thought is the single-minded rush of excitement which can only be transcribed as: *Cat!!!!* The second is a vague wonderance about why there's a cat in a harness outside the hotel entrance, sitting there quite serenely, as if waiting for something. The third is: *Who cares it's a cat!!!! A cute cat!!!!*

Or at least that was what occurred in Astra's mind on this particular occasion. She couldn't say that she'd encountered such a thing before now, and figured it fairly safe to say that she never would again.

Tragically, when Astra stepped outside the hotel to approach the cat, it trotted away from her, hiding behind the legs of the human to whom it was attached via leash: a girl around Astra's age, chin-length hair eclipsing her face on all sides.

“He's shy,” she said, in clear English.

“Oh,” Astra answered. “What's his name?”

“Mikadzuki,” said the girl. “Or just Mika.”

Mikadzuki, Astra would later learn, along with a lot of other useful Japanese vocab, meant “crescent moon.” A fitting name for the dark blue-grey of the cat's fur.

“You're Astra?” the girl continued.

“Yes,” Astra said. “Are you the person Tenjin sent? Sorry, I probably should have asked your name before the cat's.”

She smiled, dark eyes shining with amusement. “It's okay. You know me as Himitsu. My real name is Miyuki Ishizaki.”

Astra blinked. *This* was Himitsu? This tiny Japanese girl, wearing cable-knit legwarmers in twenty-degree weather, who apparently took her cat for walks through Tokyo?

That was... totally rad, actually.

“Nice to finally meet you,” said Astra.

秘密

Miyuki bowed her head slightly. "You, too," she said. She glanced down at the cat pressed against her ankles, peering wide-eyed at Astra. "Mika is glad, as well. Secretly."

A middle-aged man in a suit holding a bulging suitcase hurried by them, but he wasn't in such a hurry that he didn't spare a quizzical glance towards the cat. A pair of women on the other side of the street were looking at Mika, too, giggling behind their hands to each other.

"Do you... usually take your cat for walks?" Astra asked.

"He likes being outside," said Miyuki, "but we live in an apartment."

"Fair enough."

Miyuki nodded. "Do you like coffee?" she asked suddenly.

Astra answered in kind: "Is water wet?"

She grinned. "Okay. Let's go to the café, then we can talk about important things."

"Sounds good," Astra agreed.

Miyuki lead the way to L'Ueno, Mika's leash clipped to the belt loop of her shorts. The cat trotted along at Miyuki's side, tail perked up, avoiding the feet of fellow pedestrians. As they drew closer to the station, and the crowd became dense, Miyuki picked him up and held him to keep him from getting squashed or kicked. Despite any shyness, Mika seemed quite happy with this arrangement, his adorable little paws hooked over Miyuki's shoulder as he took in the sights, like a tourist.

Astra, who was not quite a tourist but closer to, probably should have been paying more attention to her surroundings than to the cat. But she wasn't the only one in the mid-morning Ueno crowd whose attention was stolen by the emerald-eyed feline.

She'd known Miyuki for all of five minutes and was already jealous of her. It was hard to reconcile the first impression of this young woman and her remarkable cat with the impression that Astra had built up of *Himitsu*, the faceless, genderless, intimidating entity who had come across Astra's post on a dream analysis forum and hacked into the website's metadata to get her email, reaching out to her with an offer that she would be mad to refuse and insane to accept.

Tenjin and all his eccentricity had seemed to fit that mould a little better. Not that Miyuki wasn't equally eccentric, but it was a friendlier calibre of idiosyncrasy. Warmer. Or maybe Astra was just easily won over by cute cats.

Who *isn't*?

On her visit to L'Ueno the evening prior, Astra hadn't had much chance or presence of mind to investigate the menu. Once Tenjin had shown her the way to the hotel and helped her check in (the manager didn't speak much English), she'd been magnetically drawn to the bed, passing out fully clothed before her limp form even touched down on the coverlet. So, the last time she'd eaten had been on the plane. In the apprehension of meeting the "someone," and then the excitement of meeting a cat, it wasn't until she stepped through the bakery door and

was met with the smell of fresh baking that she realised her stomach had begun to consume itself in her mental absence.

If heaven was real, then this was surely what it smelled like. Not like Astra would ever find out, being atheist and all; born out of wedlock and never christened or baptised, to her grandparents' dismay. Bummer. Good going, Mum.

The girl at the counter looked over at Miyuki, but rather than objecting to the obvious hygiene hazard in her arms (cat), she simply smiled and waved.

"They know you here?" Astra asked.

"They know that I only stay long enough to spend money," Miyuki answered smartly. "If it's okay with you, we should go sit in the park to eat."

"Sounds nice," said Astra. "Now..." she turned to the racks of assorted baked goods before them, some of them familiar to her, many of them panda-shaped or bearing the likeness of a panda, but many mysteriously shaped and wholly intriguing. "Which of these would you suggest to a foreigner who has absolutely no idea what she's doing?"

Miyuki was very patient in explaining the many, many options, and in waiting for Astra to make a decision. When they eventually thanked the energetic cashier, bowed out of the door, and made their short way into the park, Astra had quite the exciting assortment of baked goods in one hand and a coffee in the other. She was starting to think that perhaps she wasn't so insane to have accepted this offer. She hadn't been this excited about anything in *years*.

Or maybe that made her more insane. It was literally just bread.

But it was *good* bread.

She'd ended up getting one of the panda cubes out of a sense of obligation. Aside from that, she'd gotten a curry bun and a melon bread and they were both amazing, obviously.

Traditional Japanese cuisine was filled with wonders, but even the things that had initially been foreign to their shores had been adapted into their own unique takes. Astra supposed this was natural for just about any culture, but she couldn't particularly think of any unique bread products in New Zealand. Not even Fairy Bread could be claimed—Australia had that one, damn them.

Up the stairs from L'Ueno, the entrance to the park was somewhat like a courtyard, surrounded by tall trees instead of buildings. There were multiple elevated dirt-plots with yet more trees, and a fountain in the middle. They sat on the low wall surrounding one of the tree-plots to eat. Miyuki let Mika off his leash, and he sniffed around a bit before settling into a fluffy loaf at Miyuki's side, enjoying the breeze in his fur.

They ate in a strangely comfortable silence. Strange because Astra wasn't used to being comfortable with silence. Generally she felt responsible for it, as if it were due to her lack of conversational skills. But there was something about this scene, this atmosphere, that made the silence more peaceful than awkward.

After a while, Miyuki checked the time on her phone.

"Masa wants me to bring you to Nebula by ten," she said. "We should go soon."

"Who?"

"Oh... Tenjin, I mean."

Astra lowered her melon bread to her lap. "Right. He said his real name was... something."

"Masamichi." She made a face. "He *prefers* to be called Tenjin, but to me he's Masa. I'll call him Tenjin around you, though, so it's not confusing."

So, there was some history there. "To you...?"

"He's my brother," Miyuki said, giving Astra a dour look.

Fair enough. "Does that also explain why you both have such good English? Like, all the signage and stuff around here is in English, which is helpful, but I kinda doubt all the people are so fluent. Like, the hotel manager. The only thing he said to me last night was 'no English, sorry'."

Miyuki smiled. "Yes, most people here will know a few words, at least. But our family lived in America for a few years when me and Tenjin and our sister were young."

Aha. That explained the accent, too.

"Our father was a businessman," Miyuki continued, "but he was also a researcher."

"Let me guess: neuro-something?"

Miyuki nodded. "Nebula was his company. He was working with an affiliate in New York while we lived there. We moved back so that Masa—so that Tenjin could attend the same university our father did."

"You can just call him Masa. I don't mind," Astra told her.

"Neither do I," Miyuki countered. "I just wish he would stop using that nickname."

Well, it *was* the name of a deity; a mortal man who'd ascended to godhood. It said something about how Tenjin viewed himself. Or wanted to view himself.

"*And*," Miyuki went on, "a twenty-seven-year-old man should not still be using a nickname from middle school."

"At least he got given a nickname he actually liked," Astra said. "None of the nicknames I got in school were very flattering."

"Neither," said Miyuki, but didn't bother to elaborate. Which was fine with Astra, because then she would feel obligated to do the same.

Another brief silence fell, filled with nothing but city chatter. Cars beyond the trees, the trickling of fountains, the distant calls of birds. Mika's gentle purring, as Miyuki, having finished eating, smoothed her fingers over his fur.

Astra finished off her melon bread and her last lukewarm mouthful of coffee. "So where do you fit in to all this?" she asked. "Tenjin's project, I mean."

“I just finished a degree in computer science,” she explained, “but... I don’t want to work for a corporation. I’ve been freelancing for a while, as ‘Himitsu’ online, so Tenjin hired me to help him find you. Or, someone like you. Now I’m helping him use the brainwave software.”

“Brainwave software?”

“It converts brainwaves into binary, then you can analyse the data in a few ways.”

“That sounds complicated. And a little terrifying?”

“It’s pretty simple.” She clipped Mika’s leash back onto his harness and stood, scrunching her bakery bags into a ball in her fist. “We should go.”

That day was Astra’s first experience with both L’Ueno’s bread selections and the Yamanote line. Truly, a day of firsts. Ueno to Shinjuku; Shinjuku to Ueno. Over the next six months, she would make the trip between those two major stations more times than she cared to count. She went to every other stop on the line, as well. Why shouldn’t she? Who wouldn’t want to see the famed Shibuya crossing; the cosplayers of Harajuku; the idyllic Meiji Shrine; and Akihabara, pop-culture central?

On that first day, Miyuki took her straight to Shinjuku, and straight to the high-rise headquarters of Nebula Neuro Research and Development, founded over forty years ago by the late Hideo Ishizaki—Miyuki and Tenjin’s father. The company had started up as a small developer of technologies and tools for the neurosciences, and quickly become one of the leading voices in all things neuro. Their main area of research in the past decade had been brain–computer interfaces, neural prosthetics, and, until Hideo’s death by heart attack last year, dreams.

One of these things is not like the other, Astra thought, but when she pointed that out all she got was a shrug from Miyuki and a clipped explanation about dreams being the baseline for human consciousness.

It was mid-morning, so the ultra-modern marble-and-steel lobby was practically empty, but for a couple of men in suits chatting in low voices by the vending machines. The young man at the reception desk didn’t even look up from his phone when Miyuki (and Mika) lead Astra through the front doors into the air-conditioned reprieve from summer’s lingering humidity. There was a pleasant scent upon the air, warm and woody and at odds with the clinical cleanliness of the visual aesthetic. Sandalwood, maybe.

They took a spacious elevator up to the fourteenth of fifteen floors. The plush-carpeted hallway at the top seemed to be absorbing all the sound in the world; even their footsteps made nary a scuffle. Only a distant mechanical buzzing could be heard, and it was such garden-variety white noise that even that was hard to notice.

At the end of the hall was the tiny research room which, over the next six months, Astra would form quite the love/hate relationship with, because while it was cozy and well-ventilated,

always at the perfect temperature, and always with the gentle smell of sandalwood upon the air, it was also the place where most of the *research* was conducted. And this research was more often frustrating than enjoyable.

Also, the room was rather small, which got a bit crowded when you had three or four people and all the necessary equipment.

Tenjin wasn't there when Miyuki pushed the door open, but there was another man about of about the same age and height.

"Oh," said Miyuki. "Astra, this is Daisuke."

He looked up from where he was plugging some wires into a very complex-looking... box... thing. Yeah, even after six months, Astra would never really learn what all the equipment was and did, which was probably negligence on her part. If anything went wrong, would she even have a case in court? Not likely.

"Hey there," Daisuke said, smiling broadly and offering a hand for Astra to shake. "Just call me Dice. I'll be out of your hair in a sec. Just setting things up."

He was Japanese, or at least he looked it, but unlike Miyuki or Tenjin, who had slightly blurry pronunciation at times, this guy's accent was a hundred percent American. A *hundred* percent. What part of America? Couldn't tell you. But definitely somewhere in the Land of the "Free."

"Nice to meet you, too," Astra said. "What exactly *is* all this?"

Dice chuckled. "We call this the DIM," he said, patting the box he was plugging things into. It was attached to a fancy medical-looking recliner chair thing, and had all manner of arms and peripherals, including a swivel-screen on one side, and what looked to be some sort of cap hooked over the headrest. Except the cap looked like it was built by a spider, and not just any spider, but a spider who spun metal wire from its spinnerets. A *robot* spider. The cap looked like it could get tangled in one's hair fairly easily, and Astra would later find that this assumption was very, very correct.

"I'm assuming that's an acronym," she said.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Dream Induction Machine," Dice explained. "Apparently, it was going to be called the Dream Induction *Device*, but that acronym is already taken by Dissociative Identity Disorder. They didn't want to risk the PR nightmare of fearmongering journalists trying to conflate what Nebula does with... I don't know, inhumane psychological experimentation or something." He grinned. "We strictly deal in *humane* psychological experimentation."

"That's... comforting?" said Astra.

"Where is he?" Miyuki asked, apparently done with this conversation.

"Guess," said Dice.

Miyuki sighed. "He's waiting for us, isn't he?"

"You know how he is."

Astra felt like she was missing a crucial piece of knowledge necessary to understand this conversation. She gathered they were talking about Tenjin, but beyond that...

"Come on," said Miyuki, turning on her heel back towards the elevator.

Astra and Mika hurried to follow, and Astra wasn't even on a leash.

"Wait, what's happening? Where are we going?" Astra asked.

"Basement library," Miyuki said expressionlessly. "Just... brace yourself."

A *basement* library? What a waste of a perfectly good library! You could at least put it somewhere with some nice views. Although, the specification of *basement* library held the implication that perhaps this building was home to more than one library.

"So..." Astra began as they stepped back into the elevator, "that guy back there..."

"Tenjin's friend," Miyuki explained. "From school in America. His parents are Japanese, but he was born there, so he has dual citizenship. Well..." she offered a furtive look. "Japanese law requires you to pick one citizenship by the age of twenty-two, but plenty of people don't. They don't enforce it."

What an interesting bit of trivia, don't you think? That explained the accent, at least.

"He works for Nebula, so it's more useful for him to have both passports," Miyuki concluded. "The division he's in works with Supermassive a lot."

"Supermassive?"

"Nebula's affiliate in New York."

"I see."

As soon as the doors slid open on sublevel one, a lilting piano tune drifted over to caress their eardrums. Astra was certain that libraries were supposed to be quiet, but gentle classical music supposedly enhanced concentration or something, maybe. She may have read something like that in the headline of a clickbait article while disinterestedly scrolling through her newsfeed one night or another.

"As I feared," Miyuki said. She unclipped Mika's leash, and the cat rubbed once around her ankles before sauntering off between rows of shelving units, tail swishing through the air. The basement library was really more of an archive room, which made more sense. More fun to refer to it as the "basement library" though.

"Is that okay to do?" Astra asked.

"Yes," said Miyuki. "The archivist gives him treats and there's a couch he likes to sleep on."

"Oh," said Astra. The cat liked to hang out in the library. What else was there to be said?

Miyuki, seemingly reluctant, lead her through the shelves to the other side of the room. The piano music got louder as they approached. Astra vaguely recognised the piece, but she could probably say that about a lot of classical music, since it was used so frequently in every variety of audio-visual media to ever exist. Including television ads. Particularly bank ads.

Beyond the shelves was the library equivalent of a forest clearing, with two plush couches arranged around a wooden coffee table. There was a handsome upright piano off to one side, at which sat Tenjin, spine so straight it could have been mistaken for a metal rod; neck just slightly bent, angling his face towards the keys as his fingers plinked out the tune with no apparent effort. No doubt this was exactly what he was going for.

Miyuki covered her face with both hands. "Why is he like this?" she muttered into her palms.

Tenjin paused in his playing, turning his head towards them.

"Oh, hello!" he exclaimed grandly. "I didn't see you there. Forgive me, I was merely getting in some practice. Chopin's Nocturne in E flat major, if you were curious. Not his most complex of pieces, or even his most complex Nocturne, but certainly a classic in every sense of the word. Utterly timeless."

"Well," said Astra. "That's nice."

Miyuki let out a long-suffering groan. "Why do you always do this?"

"Do what?" Tenjin countered innocently, brushing non-existent dust from his slacks as he stood.

Miyuki turned to Astra. "He has to make sure everyone he meets knows how smart and talented he is. Please don't fall for it."

Tenjin scoffed. "Why, Miyuki, my dear sister, I thought *you* of all people would appreciate the fine arts."

"Fine arts are fine, but you're just showing off."

Astra wasn't sure she wanted to be stuck in the eye of this disagreement between siblings. She had a younger brother herself, so she knew *exactly* how petty and ridiculous such things could be. At the same time, she had to admit: Tenjin's playing *had* been very nice. But it was undisguised posturing, for sure.

"To be honest," Astra interjected, "I'm still confused as to why there's a library in the basement."

"Simple," said Tenjin. "Too much exposure to natural light ages the paper more quickly. Now, shall we return to the fourteenth floor?"

Miyuki still looked thoroughly unamused, but said nothing further as Tenjin lead the way to the elevators.

When they returned to the research room, Dice had apparently finished plugging things in and was leaning against the table in front of the window, invested in something on his phone.

"All done?" Tenjin asked.

He looked up. "Yep, you should be good to go. Need me to help with the needles?"

Needles?

"I think I can manage," Tenjin assured him. "You have somewhere to be, don't you?"

“Unfortunately.” Dice made a face. “I’d rather stick around, but...”

“It’s fine. You’ve been a big help.”

“Later, then. *Jaa na.*”

Dice paused as he passed Astra on his way to the door. “Don’t look so worried,” he said. Then he was gone.

“I heard the word ‘needles’ and my fight or flight instinct started kicking in,” Astra said. “Please tell me he was joking.”

“Regrettably not,” Tenjin said gravely. “But we have anaesthetic gel.”

Small comforts.

Miyuki had slipped around the table to the hard plastic chair on the other side and was busying herself with the laptop. Astra was afraid to take a single step in this room in case she tripped on one cable or another. It was like that scene from the first *Harry Potter* movie, with the mandrake roots under the trap door. You know the one. Hopefully.

Tenjin had pulled another chair to the side of the DIM, and was tapping on the swivel-screen. “Alright, I should explain to you how this is going to work,” he said. “The DIM does most of the work in inducing the dream state, first through gentle sedation—one hundred percent safe—then through modulating your brain activity to coax it into the ideal REM state. This is the point at which we attempt to induce dream awareness, usually by just telling you that you’re dreaming. You’ll be able to hear me just fine, you see.” He paused his monologue as he tapped through another menu. “It *will* be disorienting at first, and your mind will resist the notion that what you are experiencing is not waking reality. You’ll get better at coming to awareness, however, and then you’ll get better at navigating the dreamscape. That is when our research *truly* begins.”

He finally turned to her, and though his smile was wide with enthusiasm, there was something about the set of his eyes that didn’t sit right with Astra. A sort of manic glint. Or maybe she was just projecting her own nervousness.

“So, are we... getting straight to it, then?” she asked.

“If you would like,” Tenjin answered. “Feel free to take a moment, if you don’t feel adequately prepared.”

Astra couldn’t really see any way to prepare herself any more than she was already. She was uncomfortably reminded of a dentist appointment as she climbed up into the recliner.

“Some people find that they can speak while asleep and dreaming,” said Tenjin, trotting around to the other side of the recliner to fiddle with the box. “But for the most part, the only way for the dreamer to communicate with those on the outside is through eye movements. The eye movements in REM sleep correspond with eye movements made in the dream, by the dreamer. We’ll set up a lexicon, of sorts, once you build up some proficiency in gaining dream awareness.”

“Oh. Cool,” was all Astra managed to say. In any other situation, that would have been a fascinating little tidbit.

“Now,” Tenjin continued, holding out a hand. “Your arm, please.”

3 Strange how quickly six months pass when you spend most of the time sleeping. It was so *normal* now, so routine. Every day, Astra woke up, left the hotel, got breakfast (usually at L'Ueno), then took the Yamanote line to Shinjuku. Then she would go back to sleep in that tiny research room, and dream herself into the past. In the afternoon, they would take a break. Maybe they'd all go get a late lunch together, especially if Dice was helping that day. Or maybe they wouldn't.

Then it was back to dreaming for a couple more hours. After that, it was around dinner time, and unlike lunch, they rarely had dinner together. Usually Miyuki would go home and do her programming and web design work over a cup of instant noodles. Tenjin, as far as Astra could tell, stayed at Nebula until whatever time, and probably had dinner from the vending machines in the lobby (which, to be fair, served cup noodles).

Astra wasn't very confident in her Japanese, even after six months of casual and often impromptu lessons (usually from Miyuki) so if she was left on her own for dinner she'd usually grab something from the sushi place or convenience store near her hotel and spend the rest of the night wasting time on her laptop. Browsing the internet, watching Netflix, playing a game. Not a bad way to spend an evening.

The dreams themselves were still not really dreams, but Astra had to admit that finally gaining some level of proficiency in lucid dreaming had changed things. She wasn't entirely sure how yet, though, which was frustrating. Both to her and to Tenjin, who had been growing increasingly impatient, which, in a way, was fair enough. It had taken much longer than projected for Astra to stop jolting awake when Tenjin's disembodied voice loomed into her dream-memories to tell her she was asleep. But on the other hand, Astra really was trying her best and wasn't sure what else Tenjin wanted her to do.

In any case, the dream-memory she'd had just today (the one way back at the beginning—you can go back and reread it if you need a refresher) didn't sit right with her, somehow. As she and Miyuki strolled through Ueno park munching on curry buns and stirring up the last fallen cherry blossoms with each step, it bobbed back to the surface of her mind. It was one of those niggling thoughts that refused to be ignored. Like drowning a rubber duck in the bath—as soon as you stop pushing it down, it pops back up.

"I don't want to lose you. Okay? I miss you."

It seemed innocuous, perhaps, but... Astra couldn't remember if her mother had really said that. The fact that she had doubts about it probably meant she hadn't, right? But if that were the case, why had the dream-spectre been so insistent upon putting it out there, even while Astra was trying to wrest control of the dreamscape?

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Maybe she was just overthinking it. Maybe she was just tired. For the past six months, she'd barely dreamt at all while sleeping in her own time—which either meant she wasn't dreaming anything notable enough to remember, or she wasn't sleeping deeply enough to dream. Hence exhaustion.

"It's Dice's birthday," Miyuki said, breaking the silence that held Astra prisoner in her thoughts. "We're going out for dinner tonight, if that's okay."

Miyuki had such weird ways of putting things. *If that's okay*, she said, instead of, perhaps, *if you want to come*. It was a given that Astra would come. No self-respecting human being ever says no to a meal when someone else is paying, and that's a fact. And someone else *would* be paying, because Tenjin was, all at the same time, loaded with inheritance from his aggressively traditional (read: a bit misogynistic) father, surprisingly well-paid in his position as a junior researcher, and aggressively traditional (read: ...chivalrous?). A dangerous combination for his poor Armani wallet.

"Sounds good," said Astra. "Where are we going?"

"Not sure yet. There's a katsu place Dice likes in Akihabara, but there's also that *kaiten-zushi* place we went to the first week you were here."

Kaiten-zushi, literally translated, means "rotation sushi" and refers to those restaurants with sushi on a conveyor belt. The most fun a piece of sushi could ever have.

"I guess it's up to Dice," said Astra.

"Yep," Miyuki agreed. She checked her phone. "We should head back."

"Alright."

They turned to head back towards the train station. Lunch break over.

"What about you?" Miyuki asked after a brief spell of quiet, the two of them just enjoying the crisp spring air and the sweet scent of fading *sakura*.

"Well, I love katsu," Astra said, "but you know I'm a big fan of the *dango* they do at the kaiten-zushi place."

Miyuki giggled. "Not what I meant," she said. "It's your birthday next week, isn't it? What do you want to do?"

So it was, Astra thought. She'd barely been paying attention to the date. She'd barely been paying much attention to the passing of time at all; ever since she'd settled in here it was almost like time had ceased to exist, like she could mess around in Tokyo for as long as she liked with no limits, no deadlines, no responsibilities. She called home every now and then, of course, but it always felt... strange. Heavy. As if the concept of home was a tangible weight that she had cut herself loose from—but eventually, it would get its claws back into her. She wasn't sure what would happen after that. The gaping maw of the rest of her life was wide open and pitch black before her, and it filled her with the sludgy horror that could only be described as *existential dread*.

She was turning twenty-one next week. She would truly, unambiguously, be a twenty-something. On the bright side, she would no longer be in the uncomfortable limbo between being a teenager and being an adult—at least nominally. On the not-so-bright side, she was no closer to figuring out what the hell she wanted out of existence than she had been when she was five, eleven, sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

So long as she was here, though, away from everything that had ever defined her life, she was safe from the piercing fangs of that terrifying beast. She could enjoy a suspended existence, moment by passing moment.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Just... dinner, I guess.”

Miyuki made a face. “Boring,” she commented, and she was right, of course. “Why don’t we go to Disneyland?”

“Disneyland?”

“Disneyland!”

“I feel like that’s just you finding an excuse to go to Disneyland,” said Astra.

“Yep,” Miyuki admitted. “But you can’t tell me you’ve never wanted to go to Disneyland.”

Damn her, but she had a point.

Astra shrugged. “Okay, then,” she said, “let’s go to Disneyland.”

“I knew you would see sense,” said Miyuki. Then she pulled out her phone again, and her pleased expression dropped like the other shoe. “So that’s what Gabby was doing,” she said.

“Oh, no. What?”

“We’re being kicked out.”

“*What?*”

Now is probably a good time to explain, precisely, the deal with Gabby Meisner.

By profession, she was the assistant liaison officer employed by Supermassive Technologies, in New York, and embedded in Nebula’s board. Despite their early success, Nebula had fallen on some hard times toward the end of Hideo Ishizaki’s life and reign, putting them in a bit of an awkward position, financially speaking. Now Supermassive, who were supermassively successful, were in talks to acquire Nebula as a subsidiary.

That was how Astra understood it, at least. She did not speak fluent businessese, she just remembered the words that Tenjin spouted rather bitterly at least once a week, often followed by an insult to the integrity of Nebula’s board of directors. Usually the word “cowards” came up at least once.

So, though she’d worked here since before negotiations began, Gabby’s job was rather critical at this juncture. All of that would probably be enough to understand any ill-will Tenjin might have towards Gabby, but if it weren’t enough, they already had a rocky personal history. Astra didn’t know all the details. She was curious by nature, sure, but when it came to other

people's personal lives she tried her best not to be nosy. Not even Miyuki or Dice knew everything, though, because for all that Tenjin was an ostentatious exhibitionist, he was fiercely private about those sticky things known as *actual emotions*.

All Astra knew was this: at one point, Tenjin and Gabby had been together. Then they broke up. Now they hated each other.

And that was the deal with Gabby Meisner.

"What do you mean, kicked out?" Astra asked.

"Of the research room," Miyuki clarified. "They need it."

"Who needs it?"

She shrugged. "Some new team. Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

"Nope."

"But... what now? Where's the DIM and all the stuff gonna go?"

"There's only one place *to go*," said Miyuki. An austere smirk crept onto her face.

When the elevator touched down and the doors slid open, Astra half expected to hear Tenjin's piano playing drifting up to greet them from the other side of the basement library. But there was nothing more than bookish silence. As might be expected from a library, but it was hard to keep consistent expectations with the company Astra kept these days.

"It's quiet," she said, "*too quiet*."

"Thank god," said Miyuki, as they set off through the shelves.

"I think there are still a couple of Nocturnes we've yet to hear. I'd have thought Tenjin would take any opportunity to regale us with an aria or two."

Miyuki shrugged.

Tenjin was sitting on the piano bench, when they reached the other side, but he wasn't playing. He was facing the wrong way for that, unless he intended to *really* show off by playing backwards, which would admittedly be impressive. The stony look on his face said he wasn't in the mood, however.

Dice, ever the reliable professional, was setting up the DIM. Again. Except, the medical recliner was absent. He seemed to be setting it up around one of the couches, while Mika sat in his usual neat little loaf right in the middle of the centremost cushion.

"Am I being replaced by the cat?" Astra wondered.

Dice chuckled. "Not yet, so far as I know," he said. "Cats aren't known to be cooperative when it comes to these things."

"Fair enough. Oh, happy birthday, by the way. Er—*tanjoubi omedetou?*"

"That's right," said Miyuki.

"*Arigatou* very much," said Dice.

Tenjin barely reacted throughout this exchange, simply sitting there with his legs crossed one over the other, hands poised stiffly over one knee.

“So, what’s the deal?” Astra asked. “Something about us getting kicked out of upstairs?”

Dice shrugged. In lieu of the proper chair with its bracket under the headrest for the DIM box with all its multi-jointed appendages, he was setting it up by the arm of the couch on top of a metal stool with a warped leg, a book shoved under it for stability. The usual mess of cables was localised to the space between the couch and the coffee table, which was the new home of the laptop and hard drives.

“Pretty much,” Dice said.

“It’s sabotage, is what it is,” Tenjin finally spoke up.

“By Gabby?” Astra asked, then realised that that was probably a shitty thing to ask.

“No. I’m sure Gabby would relish any opportunity to see me take a tumble, but she doesn’t have that sort of authority. They’ve taken the room to test a new device developed with Nebula’s research and Supermassive’s resources. They’re proving a point.”

“Point being?”

“That this acquisition is for the best. That it’s going to happen no matter what I do. That I should just give up, give up the last hope for Nebula’s independence.” He huffed, kinda like an angry cat. “If they had any integrity, they would be *helping* me—not redistributing the few resources I have to projects of lesser importance.”

“Wow, careful what you call *lesser*,” Dice said.

“You’re on the new project?” Astra asked him.

“No, wrong department. One of my friends is on the team, though. She’s pretty excited about the new tech.”

“Yes, because new tech is all anyone seems to care about anymore,” Tenjin said bitterly, “since everything that isn’t new is already more than halfway towards obsolescence.”

“Ever consider that being kicked out of that room has nothing to do with you?” Astra suggested. “When you talk about how this is sabotage and whatever, and how the board has no ‘integrity’ for not helping you with your *independent* project, you really start to sound like a dude with a persecution complex.”

Dice snorted, but tried to pass it off as a cough. Miyuki, sitting *seiza* at the coffee table with the laptop, ducked her head slightly, but since she had her back to Astra, it was hard to tell if she was hiding a laugh or bracing herself for Tenjin’s reaction.

“I’ll admit that I may be mildly paranoid about it,” Tenjin said coolly. “I think I have every right to be, however, considering the wealth of knowledge I have of this situation compared to your own amateurish observations.”

“Low blow,” said Astra. “But, okay. You can’t have all these vocal complaints and then expect me not to wonder why, exactly, it matters to you so much that Nebula remains

independent. Like, I know it was your dad's company, and all, but you've said yourself that the financial situation is on the rocks, so..."

"You're right, the financial situation *is* 'on the rocks,' as you say," Tenjin said briskly, so much so that Astra could almost feel the icy current of his words blasting her in the face. "But not so much as Nebula's reputation. Which is why it's so important that I succeed with this project. I won't bother to explain the minutiae, because frankly it isn't any of your business."

"You've got me there," Astra conceded. "I guess I'll just take a nap now and bare the entirety of my unconscious mind to you for your super-important project which is definitely none of my business."

"I'd appreciate that."

Okay, so it may have been said earlier that while Astra was curious, she wasn't necessarily *nosy*. It seems that, objectively speaking, that was a bit of a lie.

But, hey. Who needs self-awareness, anyway?

Sometimes, even something you see with your own eyes mightn't seem real. When you become used to only seeing picturesque views or amazing sights through the tempered glass of a phone or computer screen, it becomes an almost dissociative moment to see it for real.

That was how Astra felt, seeing *Kinkaku-ji*. The Golden Pavilion, imperious across the serene, mirror-like pond, surrounded by verdant Japanese pines. The pond was so still it reflected the entire scene perfectly, as if you could dive through the surface and find gravity turned on its head and nothing otherwise changed. Except it's all flipped around. And when you start to think like that, you can't help but wonder if reflections hold more realism than reality, especially when the sight you're faced with looks more like a photograph than anything your own two mundane, hyper-ordinary eyes could ever be graced with in full, immersive 3D.

There are far more than three dimensions to a scene, though. It was the weekend, so it was tourists galore. A gravel path skirted around the circumference of the pond; a strolling garden, it was called. *Kaiyuu-shiki*. On the pond shore opposite the pavilion, a young maple tree, leaf-tips tinted red, marked the perfect place for a photo opportunity, and the perfect place for a small crowd to form across the path. At the eye of the storm, a group of girls resplendent in spring-coloured *kimono*, even though it was autumn, stood there under a single parasol as if they, too, were part of the spectacle. They were probably tourists, themselves, but they *did* look lovely.

It was all so idyllic. Astra stood slightly apart from the photo-eager crowd, at the polished-bamboo barrier that served as a reminder that it was not a good time of year to go swimming. The humidity had finally gone down, so the temptation was absent, anyhow.

Miyuki and Tenjin were a little way behind her, bickering about something or other. Where to go after they were done here, perhaps. It was Sunday, their day off, so Tenjin had

suggested a daytrip to Kyoto to visit some temples and shrines. Not that there weren't plenty of temples and shrines in Tokyo, but no two were quite the same, and Kyoto's sights were rather special.

Kinkakuji was special, indeed. Covering a whole building in gold leaf was so admirably extra, Astra could see why Tenjin was so fond of it. The maintenance must have been a nightmare, but it was picture-perfect from every angle. As Miyuki pointed out, the gift shop probably made a fortune that justified the effort. Astra herself thought the historical significance and harmonious beauty of the place (the pavilion, the pond, the garden) was probably enough justification, monetary opportunism aside. But maybe the rose-tint of tourism was getting to her. Maybe.

Maybe that was to blame for the sense of unreality. At the same time, though, it was almost too real—the crowd of tourists, the loud chatter, the autumnal weather that was too warm to wear a jacket but too cold to go without. The exhaustion of getting up insanely early to catch the *Shinkansen*. The budding ache in her feet from all the walking they'd done so far today, in shoes that were apparently not fit for purpose. The fast-paced bickering between Miyuki and Tenjin, which was quickly becoming familiar. They always started in English, then shifted to Japanese as Astra tuned out and left them to it.

All too real, and not quite real. Could easily be one or the other. Schrödinger's Garden Stroll.

And there it was, just the thing to break the spell—Astra's phone buzzing in her pocket. Miyuki had helped her set up a data plan using a Japanese SIM card, because it was just cruel to let her be completely cut off from the internet whenever she wasn't near a Wi-Fi hotspot. The payoff was that sometimes when she was in the middle of beholding some incredible landmark, her friend Elise would inadvertently ruin the moment by sending her a cat meme. Not that she didn't appreciate it. Usually she showed Miyuki, and they would coo about it together. Actually, it was sort of hard to call Elise a "friend" since they didn't really chat and hadn't hung out since high school. The exchange of cat memes was the extent of their relationship.

No memes today, tragically. The name over the message notification was not one Astra had expected to see anytime soon, or ever again, given how the "friend" in question, Serena Wilson, had spontaneously decided to start ignoring Astra's existence as of a few years ago. Astra still didn't know what she'd done to deserve that, and probably never would. She didn't even care anymore. It was fetid water under a rotting bridge.

Serena had at least, it seemed, unblocked her on Facebook, to send a message that read: *Hey. Been a while. I hope you're doing well, we should catch up some time. xx.*

How... out of character. Astra was half-tempted to respond with *I think you sent this to the wrong person?* when she heard her name.

“Astra.”

It was Tenjin’s voice, clear even over the chatter. She turned, expecting him to be standing right behind her, but he and Miyuki were still locked in verbal battle, shoving their phones under each other’s noses to prove their own points.

A group of teenage boys, maybe a cram school field trip, bustled past, filling the space between Astra and her companions. As teenage boys are wont to be, they were rowdy and over-excitably, joshing about and generally being idiots. As part of some friendly romp, one boy pushed another, who knocked into Astra’s arm—the arm attached to the hand with which she held her phone. Her elbow knocked painfully on the railing and her fingers flailed open in a dramatic show of agony, because that shit *hurts*, sending her poor phone flying. Phones aren’t known for their aviation skills, however, so it didn’t get very far before it landed in the pond with a heart-rending *plop*.

The boys prostrated themselves before her in an embarrassed mess of bowing and apologising. *Gomennasai* was the word they should have been saying, the form of apology typically used in these situations if Astra wasn’t wrong, but their speech sounded garbled. She couldn’t quite make out the words.

“Astra? Can you hear me?”

Tenjin and Miyuki had noticed the kerfuffle and came over to dissolve the situation, since, at this point, Astra still hadn’t known much Japanese.

“You’re dreaming.”

Well, that much was obvious now.

“Give the signal if you understand.”

Look up, look down, look up, look down. While she was at it, she told the dream to pause. Unlike last time, it obeyed her.

“Are you in a memory you can work with, this time?” Tenjin asked, and though she may have been asleep, Astra was more than aware of his acerbic tone.

She gave the signal for yes.

“Good. Take a look around, see if you can find anything you didn’t see the first time. Explore a room you couldn’t get into. Something like that.”

“Nah, I was thinking I’d just hang out here for a while,” she said aloud. “It’s not like we haven’t done this a hundred times already.”

Of course, he couldn’t hear her. Up, down, up, down. That was all she could do.

“Okay, so, a question,” said Dice. He pointed his chopsticks at Miyuki. “I think I know the answer, but I want to hear it from your mouth. If there were ever a situation where you had to choose between Tenjin and Mika, who would you pick?”

“Mika,” Miyuki answered, before Dice had even fully closed his mouth.

Tenjin did a double-take. “Excuse me, I do hope you’re joking.”

“Nope.”

“Humans live a good deal longer than cats!”

“Not my problem.”

Dice laughed. “As I expected.”

“It was pretty obvious,” said Astra.

“Not to me!” Tenjin protested. “Personally, being the morally superior one here, I would always choose my *dear* sister over an animal.”

“In what world are *you* morally superior?” Dice scoffed.

Miyuki grinned. “Would you choose me over your project?”

Tenjin’s mouth gaped open to say “Yes, of course,” no doubt, but stopped before any sound escaped. He genuinely looked conflicted. His mouth closed with a click of teeth.

“Thought so,” said Miyuki, sipping her tea. She seemed relatively unaffected by the knowledge. Then again, she had just disavowed her brother’s life in favour of her cat’s.

“Well, I’m sure you’re perfectly capable of helping yourself,” said Tenjin. “My research, meanwhile, could potentially impact the future of humanity.”

“How so?” Astra prompted, snagging another plate of dango from the conveyor belt before it drifted on by. There were a lot of things on that particular train line that Astra wasn’t sure she was brave enough to even *think* about eating, but dango—three sweet rice dumplings on a stick, to put it simply—was tried and tested and delectable.

It helped that it didn’t have any mysterious varieties of raw fish in or on it. Look—sushi is great, nigiri is awesome, sashimi is amazing, but there were some things that choo-choo’d by their table that no amount of suspension of disbelief could make seem edible. She knew, of course, that it was a matter of conditioning. You put a white girl raised on lamb chops, cottage pie, and fish and chips in Japan and present her with a dish that looks like something out of a *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie (the one with all the tentacles), and she can’t help but feel taken aback, at best; repulsed, at worst.

She got the feeling that Tenjin and Miyuki, sadists that they were, derived enjoyment out of seeing her react negatively to certain foods. Like *nattō*. Fermented soybeans. It smelled like vomit, it looked like vomit, it tasted like vomit, it felt like vomit, and it sort of made Astra want to vomit. Miyuki had laughed so much she’d almost choked. Which would only have been poetic justice. She herself ate the stuff as if it were nothing more than a bag of chips, except considerably healthier, it had to be said. Each to their own.

Tamago kake gohan was another one Astra couldn’t quite get on board with. Literally translated: egg on rice. With a bit of soy sauce for seasoning. Sounds fine in theory, until you learn that the egg is raw. Which isn’t *that* bad, in fact it probably made for a protein-packed breakfast, but... the idea of slimy, uncooked egg just didn’t sit right with Astra.

Food is just one of the cornerstones of culture, and the culture you're raised in is so deeply etched into your very being that it becomes almost impossible to escape. Some cultures are totally fine with eating cats and dogs, which is horrifying to those of us who put them on the pedestal of "friend, not food." Other cultures don't eat cows, or goats, or pigs. Snakes are standard fare in some parts of the world. Crocodile. Alligator. Kangaroo.

On the flip side, there are plenty of animals that would probably benefit from being farmed and eaten, simply because it would give humans incentive to keep them around rather than letting them die out, as could easily have been the fate of sheep and cows and other farm animals if not for the fact that they were farmed animals. There are certain mental barriers you just can't get past, though. No one likes the idea of eating an adorable kiwi bird, for example. That's just plain wrong.

There are plenty of people who spurn the idea of eating animals altogether. To them, it seems only logical—the facts are all *there*, if you look for them, that human beings can get all the nutrients they need from a plant-based diet. No need to murder innocent beings. They can't understand why everyone can't see it the way they do, except for the barrier of taste sentimentality. Some people just won't give up the bacon, no matter what you tell them. Don't even get them *started* on the negative impact of dairy farming on the environment.

To the bacon-lovers, however, the steak-eaters and milk-drinkers, perhaps the plant-pushers seem delusional. There are essential nutrients that we can *only* get from meat. Humans are omnivores, after all—they need both! It's simply a fact of life. Don't they know that their plant-based alternatives are farmed under inhumane conditions; practically *slave labour* out in those quinoa fields. What a hypocritical notion, to condemn animal cruelty while enabling human rights violations.

Meat can be cloned in labs, anyway. And if meat can be cloned, plants probably can, too. They both consist of living cells. As do we all. With lab-meat and lab-veggies, we'll be right as rain when carbon levels have made the earth's atmosphere unbreathable and humanity is forced to live in underground/underwater bunkers.

But, you know. *C'est la vie*. Anyway, where were we?

"How so?" Astra questioned, and Dice and Miyuki glanced at each other with "oh, brother" expressions. *Here we go again*, they were probably thinking, remembering Astra and Tenjin's earlier disagreement.

Of course, neither of them were present for another conversation that happened earlier, though not as earlier as the just-mentioned.

After the dream session, they'd all headed for the restaurant. Miyuki, however, had to take a detour to drop Mika home at her apartment, leaving Astra, Tenjin, and Dice to go ahead and grab a table. As soon as they did, Dice excused himself for a visit to the restroom, leaving

just Astra and Tenjin, sitting opposite each other in the booth, by the conveyor belt. Various tantalising smells wafted by, doing nothing to dissolve to awkward atmosphere.

Astra did not do well in awkward situations.

“Sorry about earlier,” she blurted. She wasn’t even particularly certain that she *was* sorry. “I guess I stepped out of line, accusing you of having a persecution complex and stuff.”

Tenjin was silent for a moment, watching the sushi roll by, giving no indication that he’d even heard Astra’s outburst. Then he sighed. “I suppose I’m not used to people being so direct,” he said. “However, in this instance you were right. Being evicted from the research room had nothing to do with me, personally. The new device they’re testing is the prototype of a neural implant to help restore lost motor functions. It’s only natural that it would take precedence over my own experiments.”

“Wait, when did you find this out?”

“On the train here,” he said. “I reached out to some contacts.”

Of course he did. “Within Nebula?”

“Obviously.”

Okay, that *was* pretty obvious. “But you’re only a junior researcher...?”

“That is correct,” Tenjin said. “However, many of the senior researchers and even some of the people on the board or in management are people my father worked with for years. We had them over for dinner; I’ve performed piano pieces for them; some of them even attended my graduations. Then there are those such as Dice, part of the new generation. People I’ve studied with, people I’ve grown up with. People I see more often and possibly know better than my own older sister.”

“You have an *older* sister?”

“Yes. Megumi. She’s married, with a young daughter. Her husband’s family owns a ski resort in Hokkaido. They live there with our mother. We rarely see them these days.”

“That’s... unfortunate,” Astra said. Back home, she herself still lived with her mother, stepfather, and teenage half-brother. Once she figured her life out, though, where would she end up? Would she go somewhere far away, like Japan for example, and only see her family on the rare, special occasion?

The thought preceded a pang of homesickness. She was still barely more than a child, really, and certainly felt like it whenever she started missing home. Miyuki was only a couple years older, but as far as Astra knew, she hadn’t lived with her parents since she was eighteen. Did *she* ever feel homesick? Not necessarily for a place, but for a bygone time? For *family*?

“So,” Astra said, swallowing back the hard lump that had arisen in her throat. She wasn’t sure if it was just homesickness, or guilt, or the strange dread that had been lingering at her shoulder since yesterday’s dream session. “You think this project can help you... what, save Nebula from bankruptcy? Restore it to its former glory?”

“Yes,” Tenjin said simply. His hands gripped together tightly on the table top. He seemed to be debating something with himself. “If I succeed, it will justify my father’s... transgressions.”

Then Dice joined them. “Man, this place has *one* toilet. From the amount of patronage they get you’d think they might consider expanding.”

And now that we are privy to this earlier conversation, though both Dice and Miyuki still have no idea obviously, we might as well return to the current conversation.

“My research, meanwhile, could potentially impact the future of humanity,” said Tenjin.

“How so?” asked Astra.

Tenjin shrugged. The atmosphere at their table had become tense—possibly because Dice and Miyuki were clearly anticipating another passive-aggressive argument.

“Simple,” he said. “It will define the limits of consciousness and redefine the very notion of ‘reality’ as we understand it.”

Right. This philosophical piffle again.

“Forget I asked,” Astra said, turning her attention back to her dango.

Does anyone actually enjoy doing laundry? Okay, stupid question, of course they don’t. It would be an immensely weird thing to enjoy. It was much more normal to put it off until you were basically running out of clothes—and this was especially pertinent to someone who only had enough clothes to fill a large suitcase, such as Astra. She’d bought a few things while she was here, but shopping for clothes in Japan was rather a depressing experience. Whatever size you are, when you’re in Japan, add two.

It was almost midnight when she realised she had no clean clothes for tomorrow. Fortunately, the hotel had its own laundry. It was in the basement, and it was rather suffocating with vapor from people who had the audacity to wash their clothes in anything other than cold water. Those people probably even *separated* their laundry, which was even more strange. Why do any of that when you could just shove it all in at once, set it to cold, and have everything come out fine? Very efficient.

There was also a washing powder dispenser. Just the right amount for a full load. Very handy.

She was thinking about the dream-memory again, about the dream-spectre of her mother who had said something she may or may not have actually said. Astra honestly wasn’t certain, and that uncertainty gave rise to a simmering uneasiness in the pit of her stomach.

It was worse when she remembered the message, the one from Serena Wilson. She found herself unsure about that, as well. She *had* dropped her phone into the pond at Kinkakuji, but she couldn’t remember exactly why she’d had it out—it seemed reasonable to assume that it was because she was checking her messages, but... *surely* she would remember if

she'd been contacted by *Serena Wilson* of all people. She'd have to check her message history, to see if she'd remembered to reply when she'd gotten her new phone.

Why didn't she remember remembering, though? Or did she? She was probably just overthinking it; probably just overtired. Maybe it would be in her best interests to ask Tenjin for a few days' break. For her birthday next week, maybe. He had a firm work ethic, but he wasn't completely cruel—he *had* to grant her that, at least, right?

She turned the washing machine on and took her phone out of her pocket. It wouldn't hurt to just check her message logs.

The door opened and she jumped so violently she dropped her phone. It landed with a loud clack on the concrete floor.

It was just the hotel manager, Mr Takagawa, probably doing his rounds or something before heading to bed. He was an old man, at least seventy, and though he didn't speak much English (nor Astra much Japanese), he was still friendly and seemed more or less willing to help however he could, whenever he could.

Right now, he looked as alarmed by Astra's reaction as Astra had been by his sudden appearance.

"*Daijoubu?*" he asked sincerely. Are you okay?

Astra nodded the affirmative. "*Bikkuri shita.*" You surprised me.

"Ah, *sumimasen,*" Takagawa apologised. Then he said something Astra didn't fully understand, though she heard the word *dare*, meaning "who."

"*Watashi dake,*" she answered, hoping it was the right thing to answer with: It's only me.

Takagawa smiled kindly and nodded. "*Sore dewa, Ojou-san. Oyasumi nasai.*" Well then, young lady. Good night.

Astra bowed. "*Oyasumi nasai, Takagawa-san.*"

He left, and Astra was left alone in laundry with the chugging of a pre-paid washing machine and the heady, ambiguously floral scent of washing powder.

She retrieved her poor phone from the floor. The screen was a latticework of cracks. Pressing the home button turned the display on, but the touch screen was unresponsive. Dead. Sighing, she pocketed it. At least she wouldn't have to get another new SIM card.

*A cloud of **blossoms***

The temple bell—is it Ueno?

Or Asakusa?

鐘は上野か
花の雲
浅草か

4

It was one of those sunsets that either preceded or concluded a day of rain, and everything was drenched in watery golden light. Golden hour, indeed. The perfect hour for dinnertime.

“Ezra!” Mum called for what was either the third or fourth time. No one was counting.

“Wearing headphones, maybe?” suggested Marshall, Astra’s stepdad—but he might as well have been her real dad. For all intents and purposes, he was.

“Maybe,” said Mum. “Astra, can you go see what the hell your brother is up to?”

“Not sure I *want* to know.”

“Astra...”

“Yeah, I’m going, I’m going.”

She took the stairs two at a time and arrived at Ezra’s bedroom door. He had one of those “KEEP OUT, OR ELSE” signs pinned up, but Astra was pretty sure it was supposed to be ironic. It was hard to tell. She’d thought teenage humour had been obscure when *she* was in high school, but within only a couple of years it seemed to have escalated to a whole other language that only those who were in the know could vaguely comprehend and no one, no matter how eloquent, could hope to explain. It was beautiful, in its own way.

She knocked. “Ezra? Dinner’s ready.”

No answer. She couldn’t hear anything behind the door, either, and even with headphones on, Ezra never had his volume any lower than seventy-five percent. Maybe he was asleep? Or he just wasn’t there at all, which created a mystery that begged solving.

“I’m coming in,” she warned. Still no answer.

The room was empty. It was also an absolute tip, but that was to be expected. Astra couldn’t say that hers was much better, but at least hers was *organised* chaos. This was unadulterated chaos.

In any case, Ezra was MIA and the window was wide open, stays pulled off. Ezra wasn’t really a sneak-out-and-party kinda kid, so that wasn’t a concern. He *did*, however, have an overactive imagination and zero sense of self-preservation, and only one of those is not an inherently bad thing.

Astra picked her way across the room and peered over the window sill. Sure enough, there he was, sitting on the stretch of roof just under his window. One leg dangling off the eaves, the other hiked up with a book balanced against his knee. It was a nice enough view, a sliver of glistening ocean just visible across the strait of trees and terracotta rooftops.

“There are more comfortable places to sit and read,” she pointed out.

Ezra looked around at her, unstartled. He shrugged. “I like it here.”

神隱

“Did you not hear Mum calling for dinner?”

“No.”

“Well, dinner’s ready.”

“Tell her I’ll be a minute.”

“She already called, like, three or four times. You’d better come now.”

“Alright, fine.” He folded the corner of the page he was on (heathen) and closed the book.

“You can go, now. I’m right behind you.”

Astra shook her head. “If you fall off the roof again, I don’t want to miss it.”

“Nice to know you care.”

“Any time.”

He steadied himself on the window frame as he stood, roof tiles clinking under his bare feet. Astra stepped back from the window to give him space to climb back in.

“You’re like a cat,” she commented.

“Meow,” said Ezra.

“Nice. Now come get your dinner, Mr. Tibbles.”

She turned to leave. As she did, she caught sight of her reflection in Ezra’s dusty wall mirror. The whole world seemed to waver slightly, as if it were having trouble keeping its balance. She’d seen her reflection out of the corner of her eye, but when looking directly at the mirror it was difficult to make out, somehow, like there was a beam of light shining on all the dust at an awkward angle. Maybe that was all it was, but—

She looked left, then right. Up, then down. *I am awake*. Then she waited for Tenjin to say something. He didn’t.

Okay. That was weird. She turned to face Ezra again, but he was gone. As if he’d dived out the window again the moment her back was turned.

When she woke up, she was momentarily disoriented and confused to find herself in bed in her hotel room, rather than on the recliner in the research room—or, well, on the couch in the basement library. She’d just been dreaming, she was pretty sure. A memory from home. The details were already drifting away, stolen by the gentle current of cool air that wafted in through the open window, smelling of exhaust fumes and the fried chicken sold at the convenience store down the street.

Astra arrived at Nebula early—earlier than usual, that is. She didn’t have anything better to do, so she figured she’d browse the shelves of the basement library a little. Not that she’d be able to understand much of it. Maybe there’d be the occasional recognisable Kanji, and then she could feel good about herself for actually sort of partly understanding something for once. Small victories, you know.

She was surprised to hear piano music when the elevator doors slid open, even if it wasn't remotely surprising. But then she wasn't entirely certain it was Tenjin playing—this piece wasn't one of the fancy, complicated etudes or nocturnes or sonatas that he loved to show off with. It was... softer. Warmer. Familiar, as well, though Astra couldn't place why.

Tenjin's sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, posture a little less perfect than usual. Clearly, he wasn't expecting an audience. Astra, who always felt some second-hand guilt whenever Miyuki interrupted his playing, quietly took a seat on one of the couches, and just listened.

Astra knew precious little about music, so she couldn't pin down what it was about this piece that stood out to her. Particularly in comparison to the cold, clinical way Tenjin played most other pieces, this was like a warm, gentle breeze in early summer, sitting under the awning, sun warm on your legs, drinking iced tea and staring up at the clear, endless blue. There was something melancholic in the melody, as well, and as soon as Astra noticed it, the homesickness rushed up into her throat again.

She'd barely thought much about home these past months. She was too busy *here*, and even most of the memory-dreams she had were fairly recent, recent enough to be usable in their experiments. It was easier to verify the accuracy of her explorations when the places she was exploring weren't leagues across the sea. So why did she keep thinking about home lately? Dreaming about it? Why did she feel so... *sad*, almost guilty, about being away?

The song ended softly. As soon as the ring of the last note faded, Tenjin said, "You're here early."

Astra cleared her throat. "Skipped breakfast. That was a bit different. Didn't sound like Chopin."

Tenjin frowned. "Far from it. *Inochi no Namae*, by Joe Hisaishi."

"*Inochi no Namae*," Astra repeated. "Name of... something?"

"The Name of Life," said Tenjin. "Have you ever seen the movie *Spirited Away*?"

Aha! That was why it sounded familiar. "Of course I have. Never really picked you as the type to want to play... well, *anime* music, though."

"It's not about playing 'anime music' or not. Joe Hisaishi is an eminent Japanese composer. I'd be remiss not to admire his oeuvre, and that of others whose music is predominantly known through their inclusion in films, video games, and the like."

Well, the high horse was back. "So to put that in a less pretentious way, the media that the music is made for doesn't devalue the music itself?"

"Essentially," Tenjin conceded. "Nobuo Uematsu, for example, has been referred to as the 'Beethoven of video game music', but there's no reason to claim that his music is good *for video game music*. It's simply well-composed music, and that's all there is to it."

Now *there* was a name Astra recognised. “So what you’re saying is,” she said, “You can *totally* play the theme from *Final Fantasy X*?”

Tenjin rolled his eyes. “The original, or the piano collections version?”

“I knew you were secretly a nerd.”

“I’ve never played the game,” he said coolly. “But it *is* Miyu’s favourite.”

“Dude, it’s so good. I’ve played it like three times and cried at the ending each time. You’re missing out.”

“So I’ve heard,” Tenjin sighed. “You and my sister are far too alike. If I’d known that the dreamer she’d found was basically her own intellectual clone, I’d have told her to find someone else.”

“Thank you,” Astra replied.

“You’re welcome.”

“So, do you just play the piano in the hopes that some sort of audience will come to you so you can talk at them about music, or...?”

“Of course not,” Tenjin said. He almost sounded offended. He brushed his left hand over the keys, almost reverently. “This is the only practice time I get. I don’t have a piano in my apartment.”

“Why not?”

“It’s an apartment,” he said simply. “There’s no room.”

This was Tokyo, after all. Astra had seen Miyuki’s apartment, and it was little better than a cupboard. Then again, she’d visited apartments of friends who lived in central Auckland, and *those* were little better than cupboards, as well. Perhaps cupboard-apartments were part of the universal city-living experience. Astra couldn’t honestly say that her hotel room was much better than a cupboard, but it was a hotel room, so she didn’t really think of it in those terms.

“I would have thought you could afford a bigger one,” Astra said.

“Perhaps, but there wouldn’t be much point. I spend more time here than at home.”

Funnily enough, Astra also spent more time here than at “home.”

“I guess,” she said. “Well, I think it’s pretty cool, anyway. That you play, I mean. I kinda always wanted to be able to play an instrument, but I don’t really have the patience. I did start learning the flute, but that didn’t last long.” A week, to be precise.

“My parents’ philosophy was that if we start something, we should stick with it, or there was no point in starting in the first place,” said Tenjin. “There were certainly times when I wanted to quit playing. Still are, I suppose. When I have several bad practices in a row, or when it feels like my hands are too stiff, or too loose, or like they refuse to obey me. But then there are times when everything goes right, and it feels less like I’m playing music, and more as if I am merely a conduit through which the music must escape. As if the music is playing me.”

The whole time he spoke, he was staring at his fingers hovering over the keys, as if talking to the piano rather than to Astra, who was at a complete loss as to what to say that wasn't horribly awkward. Tenjin was always spouting pseudo-profundities, and Astra was usually capable of coming up with a suitable zinger to shoot back at him. That was the bulk of their dynamic. But of all he had soliloquised about the nature of dreams and reality, none of it ever felt so genuine as what he had to say about music.

She felt rather as she had when she'd first walked in—as if she'd stumbled across something she wasn't sure she wanted to see. Tenjin's public mask was many layers deep; even his name was obscured by multiple layers of meaning. Artificiality was his most prominent trait, and that was so familiar that it didn't feel right to get even the slightest glimpse beyond the façade.

"Well that's... good," she said, to fill the silence more than anything. "Uh, anyway. You never finished telling me about your plan to save your father's company?"

Tenjin's hand dropped from the keys. He lowered the wooden lid. "What more is there to say?" he said, turning sideways on the bench and primly crossing his legs. All business. Familiar territory. "If this project succeeds—if I can prove that there's *more* to dreams than just unconscious fantasy and memory consolidation—then I may be in a position to help Nebula get back on its feet. So that we don't need Supermassive's help."

"But why is the acquisition such a bad thing?" Astra asked. "I mean it's not like a takeover, right? It'll still be Nebula."

Tenjin fixed her with an even stare. "I suppose you wouldn't understand," he said. "You're too young, perhaps. Or maybe..." He looked away.

"Maybe what?"

"Nothing, but... It's my father's fault that Nebula is in this situation," Tenjin said. "He put a lot of money into investigating dreams and reality, and the most he achieved was the DIM." He nodded towards the box on its rickety perch by the couch. "Beyond that, his efforts were a net loss. Then he had a heart attack." He shrugged. "And now, an American company, a company my father helped get off the ground, wants to acquire us."

Astra grimaced. "Okay. I guess I can see why that would be a bit of a sore spot."

Tenjin raised an eyebrow.

"A few reasons why," she clarified. "But, basically... sorry if I sound insensitive, but you basically think you can succeed at something your father failed at? With assumedly far more resources than what you have, if he wasted that much money."

Tenjin was silent for a long, tense moment. "I..." he finally said. "I suppose... it does seem... arrogant."

Yeah, no shit. Astra would have said as much aloud, but Tenjin had lapsed into silence again, staring into the empty space between the DIM and the coffee table with deep creases between his eyebrows.

Clearly Tenjin was just having one of those mornings.

“Right,” said Astra.

He snapped out of his trance and glanced at his watch, on the inside of his left wrist. “It’s almost ten,” he said. “If you skipped breakfast, you should go get something to eat from the vending machines in the lobby. It will be very distracting if I have to listen to your stomach rumbling while I’m trying to direct you through your dreams.”

“Rude,” said Astra. “But point taken. I was getting hungry, anyway.”

We’ve somehow come this far through the story without once mentioning the magic of vending machines in Japan, selling everything from cold drinks to hot drinks to instant ramen (hot water included) to umbrellas. Anything you could ever possibly hope to get from a vending machine, there was probably one somewhere in Japan that sold it. All that, and, in Astra’s experience so far, they all actually *worked*. Her limited experience with the sadly limited number of vending machines in New Zealand had, fifty percent of the time, resulted in the machine taking her money and not giving her the damn drink, or not even taking her money at all, just flat-out refusing her patronage. Temperamental, is how she would describe them. But not Japanese vending machines. No. They were very polite, very accommodating, and very convenient.

In Nebula’s lobby, there were four vending machines: one for hot noodles, one for hot drinks, one for cold drinks, and one for snacks.

Astra set the hot-drink machine to make her a coffee, maximum strength, two sugars, one cream. It did occur to her, the irony of drinking coffee when she was technically about to go to sleep. Or, maybe not irony. Futility? Although, she had noticed that drinking coffee right before a session made it easier to gain control over the subsequent dream. Could have been placebo effect. Or correlation, but not causation. Either way. She needed her coffee. You can’t begrudge a person their singular vice, even if caffeine was described by Wikipedia as “the world’s most widely used psychoactive drug,” which... sounds a bit terrifying. Technical terms just be like that sometimes, though. Definitely nothing to worry about. Coffee is *good* for you! So long as you’re reading the studies that say so and ignoring the contradictory reports. Yep.

While the machine played its catchy little “makin’ coffee” jingle into the cavernous, empty lobby, making the receptionist look up from his phone with a scowl, Astra got herself some rice crackers and a couple of strawberry-cream Kit-Kats from the snack machine. Certainly a healthy, balanced breakfast. I’m not even joking. Grain, dairy, and fruit. It’s perfect.

As Astra was retrieving her second Kit-Kat, she heard a sharp, irate sigh behind her. She straightened and turned around, half-expecting it to be the receptionist coming to smash

in the coffee machine's speakers. She wouldn't blame him—he probably heard this jingle several times a day.

It wasn't the receptionist. It was Gabby, though Astra took a second to recognise her since her hair was now a fresh, vibrant shade of sea-green. It was a nice colour, actually, and she was wearing matching eyeshadow. A striking look, if perhaps more suited to the main street of Harajuku than a corporate building in Shinjuku. More power to her, though, if she could have the job she had while looking the way she did. A reflection of Supermassive's corporate environment, perhaps? Think "quirky tech start-up," except it's a quarter of the way towards becoming a Google or an Apple or Samsung or Microsoft.

Gabby was glaring at the coffee machine. Perhaps she hated the jingle as well, but given that her eyeline seemed to be directed to the "in progress" light, Astra got the feeling that wasn't the case.

"You can just take mine if you're in a hurry," Astra offered.

"I'm lactose intolerant," Gabby snapped.

"Oh. Well, sorry."

She raised a thin, pencilled eyebrow. "About stealing my coffee-making time, or about my lactose intolerance?"

That sure as hell sounded like a trap. "...Both? I don't know how I was supposed to know that this was 'your' coffee-making time, but I can't stand black coffee so I guess I'd be pretty upset if that was all I could stomach. Literally."

"It's better for you, you know," Gabby replied, practically instantly. "Technically speaking, all humans are at least slightly lactose intolerant." She sniffed. "I guess I'll forgive you. Just know that ten to ten is *my* coffee time, and I prefer to not have to delay it."

The jingle stopped and a little voice inside the machine thanked Astra for waiting and warned her that the coffee was hot. Astra sure as hell hoped so.

"*Arigatou gozaimashita* to you, too, machine-san," she muttered as she took her coffee. "All yours," she said to Gabby.

"*Thank* you." Gabby stepped forward, embroidered coin purse at the ready. "How are things downstairs?" she asked, just as Astra was about to walk away. "With Tenjin's project?"

Another trap. She was *not* subtle.

"Okay, I guess," Astra said non-committally. "I mean, he wasn't too happy about being kicked out of the research room, but honestly I kinda like it better in the library."

"I'm sure he made quite the show out of it," Gabby said, confirming her coffee preferences. The jingle started up again. The receptionist looked like he wanted to die. "Tell me, did you sign any contracts when he recruited you as his test subject?"

“Yeah, of course. Consent forms, and stuff. I read over them to make sure there wasn’t anything, like, life-threatening in them.” Though there’d been a lot of empty legalese she’d skipped over because it didn’t make for the most compelling reading material.

“Did *he* sign anything?”

“Uhh…”

“You’re not very smart, are you? You realise that if something goes wrong, or if he goes against his word, you won’t have much of a leg to stand on, legally-speaking.”

Astra blinked, taken aback. Sure, she was a bit naïve, so she hadn’t thought about this sort of stuff at *all*, but it was just plain rude to call her unsmart. “Does that… matter?” she asked. “I mean, if he does anything bad, then that’s already illegal, isn’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” Gabby sighed, as if she were dealing with a particularly dense two-year-old, which was sort of how she was making Astra feel. “If he kills you or something, then yeah, he’s in big trouble, that’s murder. But most anything else he could do to your brain can be brushed off as an accident or an unintended side-effect, and since you signed a consent form that no doubt acknowledges the risks, he would get away scot-free.”

“Okay, but this is just conjecture,” Astra said. “You’re talking as if you *expect* him to screw me over, or something.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Gabby said. “Look, I’ve known Tenjin—or, Masamichi, I should say—for a long time. He’s many, many things, but honest is not one of them. But he’s not necessarily *dishonest*, either, which is part of what makes him so impossible to deal with.”

The coffee machine finished its jingle, and Gabby’s coffee. The machine voice thanked her for waiting. Gabby did not reply to it.

“Don’t you think you might be a bit… biased?” said Astra.

Gabby scoffed as she collected her coffee, lifting up the lid to peer into it, perhaps checking for traces of lactose. “Sure, maybe. It’s not just me who thinks so, though. You’re good friends with his sister, aren’t you? Ask her. If I weren’t anti-gambling, I would bet you a thousand yen that she would agree with me.”

“Right. Good to know you’re so confident in your assertions that you would hypothetically put money on them,” Astra said.

Gabby laughed, just slightly. “Well, you know.” With her free hand, she reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled out a metallic purple business card holder. “Look. If you start to suspect that something fishy is going on, or things aren’t quite as they seem, or maybe you just want out of the contract for whatever reason? Call me. I have connections.” She offered Astra a card. “And before you ask, yes, I *am* that eager to screw over my ex, but I’m not such a bitch that I would sabotage his project unless he were already on track to doing so himself. Okay?”

“Uh... okay. Sure. Fine.” Astra took the card. It was rather nice, actually. Good quality card. Black, with a background graphic of a fiery circle like the corona around a black hole. *Gabrielle Meisner, Assistant Liaison Officer.*

“Hopefully for you, you won’t have to use it,” Gabby said. “Oh, and one more piece of advice while I’m here: never date younger guys. Just don’t.” Then she strutted away towards the elevators.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Astra muttered. She pocketed the business card, bothered, despite herself, about what Gabby had said. *Was there something Tenjin hadn’t told her? Wouldn’t tell her? Was there a better reason why she was so tired lately, why she had such a sense of dread and foreboding and wrongness about some of the otherwise innocuous things she’d been seeing in her dreams? In her memories, rather. They were always memories. Finding out why didn’t seem to be something Tenjin was even remotely interested in—and wasn’t that a warning sign? For all he’d exposted about it, Astra still didn’t entirely understand exactly what it was that Tenjin was trying to achieve. Maybe he didn’t, either.*

She realised she’d forgotten to ask him about taking a few days off from the experiments. For her birthday. To get some proper rest. Surely that was all she needed.

Maybe this was what Gabby had intended. To sow doubts in Astra’s head; make her distrust Tenjin and covertly sabotage him in that way. Earlier, though, Tenjin had seemed genuinely unsettled. *Why was that? Guilt?*

She took a long sip of her coffee. It was hot. Just shy of being *too* hot. Can’t say she wasn’t warned.

“Astra?”

She looked up. Miyuki was standing there, with Mika on his leash beside her, peering up at Astra with his all-seeing emerald eyes. What a good boy.

“Oh, hey. Morning.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Astra lied. It was an automatic response. She couldn’t have stopped the word from falling from her lips even if she’d wanted to. Perhaps she would talk to Miyuki about it. About what Gabby had said, maybe even about her own doubts and the weird turn her memory-dreams seemed to have taken lately. Not right now, though. Later, perhaps.

She held up the coffee and snacks. “Couldn’t be bothered getting breakfast, so. Yeah.”

Miyuki hummed, though she still looked suspicious. “Should we go downstairs?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

They walked towards the elevators together.

At least Astra now had a better idea of why Gabby and Tenjin’s relationship hadn’t worked out, or maybe why they’d been drawn to one another in the first place: they were both narcissistic, self-aggrandising windbags.

5 Tokyo is such a metropolis that it's hard to imagine any respite from the busy streets and tall buildings. But like any city, there are pockets of nature, of culture, of peace. Ueno park is one, of course. So is Meiji Shrine, which can only be accessed by walking through a forested path, a world away from the cement and steel which is, really, just on the other side of the trees.

Astra's favourite, though, would have to be Sensōji temple in Asakusa, but maybe her opinion was influenced by the fact that they visited it at night. Everything was lit up, as you expect buildings in the middle of a city to be—but these were softer lights; the main hall, the temple gates, and the neighbouring pagoda resplendent in glowing gold. They entered the temple through the Nitenmon gate, avoiding the crowds of the main gate and the Nakamise shopping street. The main hall was closed at this time of night, so there were only a few others loitering around the temple proper, the brisk air filled in equal parts with musky incense and the far-reaching scent of street-food stalls.

"The Kannon Bodhisattva is in the main hall," Miyuki explained as they washed their hands in the purification area, which, at Sensōji, was a fountain with a detailed statue of some sort of deity. A clutch of dragons at his feet spewed clean water into the basin.

"The... what?"

"The Buddhist deity of compassion and mercy. She's a Bodhisattva, which means she could choose to attain Nirvana, but delays doing so in order to help those who are suffering. Sensōji is dedicated to her."

"Huh. Nice of her to do that, I guess."

Astra couldn't help but compare Kannon to her own namesake, Astraea. Kannon delayed her ascension to aid those in need, while Astraea fled to the heavens rather than stay to witness humanity's misery and wickedness. Goddess of innocence indeed. What is innocence, really, but the sister of ignorance?

One day, so said the legend, Astraea would return to earth to herald the new Golden Age on earth. Utopia. No more suffering. Maybe then poor old Kannon could attain her well-deserved Nirvana.

Miyuki smiled wryly as they moved on to the incense burner in the temple courtyard. "We could come back during the day sometime when the hall is open if you wanted to see her, but it's usually crowded."

"Not really a fan of crowds." Was anyone though? Astra coughed slightly as she accidentally inhaled a mouthful of smoke. "I'm guessing this has a function other than choking me and smelling nice." A group of people had been standing by the incense as she and Miyuki



were washing their hands, and they'd seemed to be bathing in the smoke, rubbing it into their arms and surrounding their heads in it before moving on.

"Luck," Miyuki answered.

"Predictably."

"It's supposed to be healing." Rather unenthusiastically, she used both hands to waft the smoke towards her head. "By healing your head, you become smarter. Supposedly."

"You don't seem too convinced."

She just shrugged, and they moved on, away from the temple, towards the Hōzōmon gate, which lead to the shopping street. The smell of something sweet and deep-fried reminded Astra's stomach that she hadn't had dinner.

The moon was out, a neat semi-circle in the dark sky, slightly fuzzy along the flat side, as if ripped imperfectly in half.

"According to legend, the temple was built when two brothers fished a statue of Kannon out of the Sumida river," Miyuki said, as they passed through the gate, between the wide red support columns and under the three massive, ornate lanterns. "They tried to return it to the water, but it kept coming back to them. They presented it to their village chief, who decided it was an auspicious sign, and that they would build a temple to honour Kannon." She turned back toward the temple proper and waved an arm. "And here it is. Hundreds of years later. Some of it had to be rebuilt after World War II. There's a monument where the old Pagoda used to be."

"That seems to be a recurring theme."

"Yes. Maybe Tenjin will give us a whole weekend off sometime, and we can visit the Peace Memorial in Hiroshima. The ruins of the Industrial Promotion Hall."

"That sounds... well, incredibly depressing, to be honest."

"It is."

Well, then. That was about all there was to say on that matter.

They didn't go all the way down Nakamise street, because there was still a considerable crowd, but they went far enough in to grab some eats. *Kibi-dango*, fried manjuu, and these cute little pastries called *ningyō yaki*, literally meaning "fried doll," which was slightly alarming, but it was only because they were shaped like little birds and dolls and filled with red bean paste. Astra bought like five of them. Quite a few of the shops were closed, since it was nearly eight o' clock, and the ones that weren't would be soon. The rolling shop doors were painted with murals of cherry blossoms and kabuki scenes.

They made their way back through the Hōzōmon gate and into Asakusa park and the temple gardens. The trees were, for the most part, bare of leaves or greenery, but the tangled silhouettes of their branches still made for picturesque scenery in the lantern-lit night.

The temple itself may have been dedicated to Kannon, but the gardens featured statues of and monuments to a handful of other deities, including Buddha himself, naturally. A small stream flowed through the garden, apparently filled with koi, but it was too dark to see them. Maybe they were asleep. Did fish sleep? *Could* they? Astra wasn't up on her marine biology, unfortunately.

There was no one around, so they half-sat, half-leaned on the railing of the little bridge over the stream to finish eating. It was a freezing cold night, thanks to the clear sky, and even three layers and a thick scarf had failed to combat the chill, but having warm, fried pastries to hold and devour made it a little easier to deal with. At least while they lasted.

Over the tops of the trees before them, and over the glowing curved eaves of the temple, the sleek, neo-futuristic spire of the Tokyo Skytree lit up the night in gradated shades of icy blue. It was hard to look at without thinking of the Auckland Sky Tower, which struck a similarly distinctive shape on the city skyline and was always similarly illuminated at night, in varying colour schemes based on occasion. Giant neon towers: a staple of metropolitanism?

Thanks to the light pollution, there were no stars to speak of—none that could be seen, at least. Astra found she missed the stars, a bit. Just out of reach of the Skytree's coil-like antenna, however, hung the disaffected half-moon.

"You really like looking at the moon, don't you?" Miyuki asked.

Astra snapped out of the reverie she hadn't realised she'd fallen into. Miyuki was staring at her. She hadn't even noticed. "I could have been looking at the Skytree."

"You weren't, though." Miyuki shrugged. "You look at the moon a lot."

"I guess," Astra conceded, gaze drifting back to the sky. "There's just something about it."

"What?"

"I don't know. It's like... it makes me feel so insignificant. Not in a bad way, just... I don't know."

Miyuki hummed, and they lapsed into silence again.

But now she'd gotten Astra thinking, because somehow, before now, she'd never taken much notice of how much notice she took of the moon.

"I guess it just reminds me," she tried again, "that there's always going to be so much *more*. Than me, I mean. More than anything I've seen or ever will see." She could feel her cheeks heating up, despite the cold air. "It's impossible to see everything. I don't know. It's silly."

"You never know until you try," Miyuki said quietly.

"Maybe."

"You could just go to the moon and look at the sky from there. Then when you come home, you can say that you've seen the whole world."

Astra looked at her. She was smirking, so she was joking, but... she wasn't wrong.

"Maybe I will," Astra said.

She had the feeling there was something else she'd been meaning to talk to Miyuki about. This would probably be a good time to do it, if only she could remember what it was. No matter. If she could forget it so easily, it probably wasn't anything important.

It was strangely jarring to encounter other people in the Nebula building. Usually in the elevator, or occasionally in the hallway on the way to the research room. Astra rarely saw anyone in the lobby (except for the poor, sweet, jingle-tortured receptionist) because she had a call-time of ten AM, hours later than most employees arrived, and she tended to leave around seven PM, hours after all but the most unhealthily hardworking had left. Not even the receptionist stuck around past four. Come to think of it, Astra wasn't even sure what the receptionist *did* all day, or what a research and development corporation needed a receptionist for. But it did seem appropriate that such a big, fancy, professional building would *have* a receptionist. It was just one of those staples, you know?

Generally, the only time Astra was guaranteed to see at least a few other people in the Nebula building was during lunch. Since they started late, they tended to have lunch late, but they were hardly the only ones to do so. Astra sometimes had to share the elevator with one or two others, not including Miyuki, or even Tenjin, on the ultra-rare occasion that he deigned to join them for lunch.

When she was on her own, encountering others in the hallway or the elevator or the lobby was a little more stressful, because oh god what if they tried to *talk* to her? And she couldn't understand them? She'd learned a lot of Japanese since she'd been here, but not enough to hold a proper conversation! What was that phrase again? Uh, *sumimasen, Nihongo o...* wait, no. *Sukoshi dake Nihongo o hanashimasu.* Was that it? I only speak a little Japanese? Do you speak any English? *Eigo o hanashimasu ka?* I am a dumb foreigner. *Baka gaijin desu.*

When she was on her own, these were the phrases she rehearsed in her head as she prayed the elevator wouldn't stop before reaching the lobby. When the elevator *did* stop, door sliding open to admit a stranger or two, done up in tailored business attire, often with harried, distracted, tired expressions to match, Astra's heart would kick into double time and refuse to calm down until she was out of the building headed towards the train station. It was weird, actually, that it made her so nervous. She hadn't been anywhere *near* as anxious when she'd made the decision to jump on an eleven-hour flight to go be a test subject for someone she'd never met. The more she thought about how weird it was that she'd done that, the weirder it became. Don't you ever think back on a moment of impulsivity and wonder, *why the hell did I*

do that? It was as if there were some invisible, guiding force behind her actions. But that was entirely ridiculous. Improbable. Inconceivable. I mean, what is this, a novel? Absolutely not.

Feeling a primal anxiety at the idea of being trapped in an enclosed space with a stranger who spoke a different language wasn't all *that* outlandish. Nothing more than a hyperactive preservation instinct. Worse on some days than others, like the tendency to get side-tracked, to use a completely random and unrelated example.

On one such occasion that the elevator stopped before reaching the lobby, Astra's heartrate had already started to panic before she saw that one of the employees on the other side of the doors was, in fact, Dice. It was mildly relieving. She didn't know Dice well, but he at least spoke English.

He was with an older man, and they were laughing about something as the doors slid open.

"Oh, hey!" Dice said when he recognised Astra. Switching to Japanese, he introduced Astra to the man, then back to English to introduce the man to Astra. He was Shuichiro Watanabe, one of the lead researchers in the neuroprosthetics department, and Dice's team leader. He got off only a couple of floors down, bidding Dice and Astra a polite goodbye, and then there were no more strangers in the elevator. Phew.

"Going to lunch?" Dice asked.

"Yep," said Astra.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Sure, I guess."

"Cool. If you like ramen, I know a good place not far from here."

Astra grimaced. "I mean, I *like* ramen, but ramen shops are kinda... stressful. You know?" Wait. Was it offensive to say that? Hopefully not. "I mean, you get your ticket, you wait in line, and then when you get a seat you kinda feel pressured to eat quickly because you know there are other people waiting, and I'm not really a fast eater, and the added pressure kills my appetite a bit so I can't even finish it half the time, which is *super* rude, and I hate to be rude. So. Yeah."

"No, no, I get you. McDonalds, then?"

"One cultural staple to the other, huh?"

"What can I say? Reminds me of home."

McDonalds was one of those universal constants. No matter where you are in the world, there's probably a McDonalds. The flipside of that universality was defamiliarization, because it was always, *always* interesting to see how the menu had been adapted to the host culture. You've always got your Big Mac and fries, but then you've got the more interesting stuff you can't get at home. Like a Teriyaki Mac, Teriyaki Filet-O-Chicken, or Filet-O-Shrimp. You could

get fries with wasabi seasoning, if that's your thing. Then there's the McCafé menu. Let's not even get started on the McCafé menu.

There were several McDonalddses in Shinjuku, including one just a few blocks down the street from Nebula. It was far from empty, but the worst of the lunch rush was over, so they didn't have to wait long to order. Astra, being a tourist, almost felt obligated to order one of the culturally adapted items off the menu and went for the shrimp burger. Dice, being a dual citizen who lived most of his life in the US, eating McDonalds as a treat every other week after soccer practice in elementary school, apparently, got a Big Mac.

"How fluent actually *are* you in Japanese?" Astra asked him as they waited for their number. "Just out of curiosity."

"Fluent enough," Dice said. "But only verbally. My reading is *terrible*. I'm pretty lazy with it. I know about as much kanji as a middle schooler."

"And that's... how much?"

He shrugged. "More than you, but fewer than Tenjin and Miyuki. Considerably fewer. Sometimes my brain completely blanks and I forget how to read simple kana, as well."

"Same," Astra sympathised. "But I at least have an excuse."

"Hey, so do I. I—"

Their number was called, and Dice stopped in the middle of whatever he was saying to go and retrieve their tray. He cheerfully thanked the server with a small bow and a smile, which certainly seemed to make *her* happy, returning both the bowing and the smiling.

They grabbed a table tucked away in the corner, next to the playground entrance. No children around on a weekday, thankfully.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Dice continued, once they sat down. "I sometimes feel like just as much of a foreigner as you are."

Astra raised an eyebrow. "You think?"

"Okay, well maybe not *just* as much. But there are a lot of culturally contextual things that you miss out on if you don't grow up here. Even in the language itself. I'm sure you've noticed the heavy emphasis on context and implication."

She sure had. It was one of the most difficult things to try and understand about Japanese. A verb root such as *ganbaru*, for example, had no exact translation but was used as a sort of motivating statement, like "good luck," or "do your best." *Ganba. Ganbatte kudasai*. It seems like a perfectly innocuous thing. But, as Miyuki had tried her best to explain to Astra, there could also be an element of accusation in it. If someone is having a hard time in their job, and you say to them, "*ganbatte kudasai*," you could unintentionally be implying that they just aren't trying hard enough. If they're already doing their best, how can they do better?

Of course, this sort of thing isn't unique to Japan or the Japanese language. High- versus low-context cultures and languages exist on a spectrum, after all, like most diametrics.

Growing up on one side of the midpoint and trying to navigate a culture on the other side was bound to cause difficulties—and both New Zealand and the US are about as low-context as you can get. Say what you mean and mean what you say, otherwise you might as well be lying. Astra could only imagine how *strange* it would be, for lack of a better word, having roots on both sides like Dice did.

“Do you know what *honne* and *tatemae* are?” Dice asked.

“I’m guessing they’re not food?” said Astra.

Dice snorted. “Definitely not. They’re social concepts, to describe how people act versus how they really are. *Honne* is your true feelings and desires, and *tatemae* is the way you present yourself in public, which might contradict your *honne* if those feelings and desires go against what might be socially acceptable or expected.”

“Okay. Interesting.” Astra wasn’t sure where this was going, or if it was going anywhere at all. Maybe he was just making conversation. She would be perfectly content to just enjoy her shrimp burger without the anthropological discussions, but she assumed Dice had a point he was making his way around to.

“The whole point of *tatemae* is to avoid conflict. You might even have to lie to hide your *honne* in order to get along in society.” He paused, fishing a slice of pickle out of his burger. “I’m not really explaining it very well. I don’t fully understand it myself—I mean, Americans might have their own version of a public image versus their private self, but we’re nowhere near as subtle. If I worked for any Japanese corporation other than Nebula, I’d probably have a harder time than I already do trying to figure out what is and isn’t appropriate to say. I’m not completely cued in to all the social mores.”

“What makes Nebula different?” Astra wondered.

“They at least know it’s not my fault if I say something dumb,” Dice joked. “And they’re more tolerant to foreign employees, on the whole. Tenjin’s dad started that process, with the Supermassive affiliation. We have an exchange program, of sorts, where we host some of their researchers, and they host some of ours. For the sake of progress, you know? Different cultural perspectives.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Astra.

“There was a point I was working up to,” said Dice, looking thoughtful. “But I’ve totally forgotten it.”

Astra laughed. “No worries, I do that all the time. I have the attention span of a squirrel with ADHD.”

“Same, evidently,” Dice chuckled. He finished off his burger and squashed the box flat with one hand. “Should we head back, then? I need to talk to Tenjin.”

“Sure.” Astra squashed her own box and offered to take the tray to the disposal area. As she was headed back, she heard the voice.

“Astra.”

She whipped around, confused as to what Tenjin was doing here.

Because he *wasn't* here.

“Can you hear me now?” he said, from his fixed position to her right, as if she were wearing an earpiece.

Now? What did he mean?

The McDonalds had frozen around her. Dice was standing with his hands in his coat pockets, staring at the street outside through the cut-out M in the frosted window.

“Astra?”

With a feeling like she had lost her balance, Astra blinked and woke up on the couch in the basement library.

Tenjin, perched on the edge of the coffee table because there were no hard plastic chairs down here, frowned at her. “What happened?” he asked. “Why didn’t you respond?”

Astra removed the electrode cap and sat up with a shrug. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know. What did you mean when you said ‘can you hear me now?’”

“So you *did* hear me,” Tenjin said. “I’d been trying to get you to respond for ten minutes. All the readings showed that you were in the dream state, but you weren’t responding to external stimuli. I had to adjust the waveform settings.” He put a thoughtful hand to his chin. “Despite all our training, it seems...” He trailed off.

“Seems...?” Astra prompted, glancing at Miyuki, who was squinting at whatever she saw on the laptop screen. Astra still didn’t entirely understand what she did. Converting brain waves into binary in order to analyse them. Analyse *what* about them, specifically, she had no clue.

“Neural environments aren’t exactly static,” Tenjin finally said. His expression was blank. Too blank to be anything but careful; intentional. “Something is changing inside your head.”

Astra jumped when she felt something brush against her elbow, but it was just Mika. He was headbutting her arm. “What do we do, then?” she asked. She smoothed her hand down the soft fur on Mika’s back, then scratched behind his ears. Purring, he climbed into her lap. A good boy, he was. A very, very good boy.

“Astra.”

She looked up at Tenjin. “Yes?”

He blinked at her. “What?”

“Astra!” Tenjin said again. But it wasn’t Tenjin. It was Tenjin’s voice, but Tenjin’s lips weren’t moving.

Astra stared, uncomprehending. The whole library seemed to roll over, a full three-sixty, with her stuck fast to the couch as if tightly strapped into a Disneyland ride.

But she was lying down again. She opened her eyes and the ceiling peered down at her. Her heart changed gears, beating a little harder and faster than strictly necessary. There was a weight on her stomach. Mika. She brushed off the electrode cap and sat up. Displaced, the cat leaped onto the back of the couch, offering her a doleful glare.

“Are you okay?”

She looked to her right. It was just the same. Tenjin sitting on the edge of the coffee table, Miyuki tucked behind it. They were both staring at Astra, Tenjin with that blank expression, Miyuki with open concern.

“What?”

“I said, are you—”

“I heard you.” She rubbed a hand over one side of her face. “What the *hell*.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Astra saw them exchange a glance.

“You need to signal as soon as you hear me,” Tenjin said. “In the dream, I mean.”

“I know!” Astra snapped. Her panicked heart was making her voice shake. “It just, I can’t respond when—”

“When what?” Tenjin asked.

She looked from him, to Miyuki, to the polished piano, to the towering archival shelves behind them. There were no windows in here. Just an aircon system shoving sandalwood-scented recycled air down their airways.

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s just—I think something’s changed. I don’t have as much control as I did.”

Tenjin frowned, then looked at Miyuki, who also frowned. “There are... some anomalies.”

“Anomalies.”

They were all silent for a moment, silent but for the enduring hum of the air conditioning.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Tenjin said quietly.

“Okay. Well. Good. I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” said Astra, practically leaping up from the couch, grabbing her stuff, and beating an exit through the shelves, towards the elevator, as fast as she could. She needed to get out of here. To escape. To get some fresh air. To get some kind of confirmation that she was most definitely and unequivocally *awake*.

She fled so swiftly, in fact, that she left the narrative behind. A little rude, if you ask me.

Tenjin stood up from the coffee table and started to pace the stretch of carpet between their makeshift set-up and the piano. If there was one benefit about being here, rather than in the research room, it was that he had room to pace.

Miyuki watched him.

“Maybe you should go see if she’s alright,” Tenjin suggested, switching to Japanese.

“I think she probably wants to be alone,” said Miyuki. “I’ll text her later.”

“Right.” He returned to his pacing. Slow, calculated steps. Andante. Four-four time.

Miyuki turned back to the laptop screen. The software, still in development, tentatively named Acumen, was designed by the engineers in Nebula's technology department for use in conjunction with the DIM. The DIM recorded the electrical impulses of the subject's brain, and Acumen converted these impulses to strings of binary. From there, you could convert the binary to just about anything you wanted. Images or sound, even. They always turned out to be nonsensical, just abstract shapes and colours or unintelligible white noise at varying frequencies, like alien signals. Deemed mostly unhelpful by the Nebula techs, but still included in the program because they went to all that effort to code it, after all, and it was undeniably fascinating.

The program's UI left something to be desired, and Tenjin knew it, and he knew that she would be interested by the software and everything that went into it. Miyuki knew he was trying to convince her that she should work for Nebula, that she should have a vested personal interest in the company's fate. For her own career's sake, if not for the sake of familial virtue. But she was quite happy working for herself. Maybe someday she'd start up a massively successful company of her own. She'd let Tenjin work for her, she *supposed*.

Miyuki kept a separate window open to display the image conversion while Astra was dreaming, because, yeah, it was *super* cool, but it wasn't much more than vague entertainment. The software did most of the work by itself, flagging anomalies as compared to the six-month backlog of Astra's dream-state brainwave patterns. There were more and more lately, great spikes or dips in the waveforms. As the anomalies had increased, the shifting shapes in the image window had changed. They'd become softer, more formless, with a greater array of colours, shifting and pulsating with much greater speed than they had before.

She wondered what she'd find if she converted it to sound. Months ago, she thought she'd almost been able to hear Tenjin's voice, too muffled to be certain, but that had since faded into greater quantities of nonsense humming. What would it be now?

"Something *has* changed," she said. "Is changing. You know it, too."

Tenjin stopped pacing. The sudden lack of his metronomic footsteps across the carpet was deafening.

"Yes," he said. Or maybe the closer translation would be "I know." *Wakatteru*. Base verb *wakaru*. To understand; to recognise. Either way, it was an acknowledgement. An admission.

He sat down on the piano bench, resting a hand on the piano cover.

Miyuki sighed. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just concerned."

"With the lack of progress?"

"It's not a *lack* of progress. It's the direction of that progress. It's not—not quite as I had hoped."

Miyuki narrowed her eyes. He was being obtuse, which was to be expected, but it was still disappointing.

"I keep wondering what Dad would do."

At that, Miyuki had to scoff. "Whatever the answer to that is, you should do the opposite."

Tenjin looked at her sharply. "Why would you say that?"

"Our father was not a good person."

"He did great things."

"Doesn't make him a good person." Or a good father. He was hardly ever around when Miyuki was a teenager, even though they'd moved to America and back just so their family wouldn't have to be separated. Lot of good that had done. "He hurt people for the sake of his research." He hurt *us*, she didn't say.

Tenjin pushed up the piano cover, but he didn't play anything. He just stared at the keys, black and white and black and white and white again, as if the spaces between ebony and ivory might hold whatever answers he was looking for. Miyuki sure as hell couldn't offer much in the way of answers, not when she didn't have the full picture. And he would never let her see that full picture, because as much as he acknowledged her technological prowess, he would never *truly* see her as anything more than his stubborn baby sister.

Which was fine, because Miyuki had trouble seeing "Tenjin" as anything more than her intelligent but also rather stupid and in many ways disappointingly immature older brother. Older only in years.

He looked like he was about to say something, but Miyuki wasn't sure she wanted to hear it. "Play me something," she said.

Tenjin looked startled, but then he smiled and rolled his eyes. "What?" he obliged.

"*Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence.*"

He laughed softly. "I don't know if I remember it all."

Of course he did. He resituated himself on the bench, flexed his fingers and started to play the delicate opening measures, light-fingered arpeggios and a soft, lilting melody. Miyuki had never seen the movie this song was from and named for, despite how often Tenjin endorsed it as the best war movie of all time. Possibly *because* he kept insisting that she should watch it. She knew the song all too well, though.

She remembered, years ago, when they'd just returned to Japan from America. Sitting on the back porch at their hilltop house in Chiba, south of Tokyo, looking out at the foggy grey line of the distant ocean. It was pouring with rain, cascading down from the eaves and onto the gravel path, splashing her bare feet. And in the room behind her, sliding doors open to the storm-scented air, Tenjin was playing the piano. *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence.* But it was only July.

Miyuki closed the laptop and set it aside. In the space she had made, she rested her folded arms, lay her head atop them, and listened.

6 The clouds were gathering, slowly creeping, spreading like a plague, northward bound. At least, she assumed they were clouds. That was the only logical explanation for the utter absence of stars in the western sky. For now, to the north, the light of a million-trillion dying suns shone starkly in empty space. It was that crossover phase between the previous moon's retirement and the new moon's ascension, giving centre-stage to the occasional zip-flash of a meteor between shining points of constellations she could never remember the names of.

"This isn't as exciting as I expected," Astra remarked, speech made difficult by the chattering of her teeth. Being July, the mostly-clear night sky only served to drain the air of residual daytime warmth. The icy roof-tiles they were sitting on didn't help matters. The roof-tiles, much like the floor-tiles in the kitchen, were not heated. It *would* be rather a pointless investment.

Ezra, sitting beside her, pulled his legs up to his chest in a futile effort to retain more heat. "Yeah, when they say meteor *shower* you really expect... a shower of meteors."

"Yeah," Astra agreed. "This is more like a meteor trickle."

He snorted. "A meteor drip."

"Meteor dribble."

"Running-out-of-meteors shower."

"Someone-else-is-using-the-meteors shower."

"Meteor..." He paused. "Uh... leak?"

"That'll do," said Astra, satisfied that this particular joke had run its course. "Oh, look!"
Another bright streak of light across the sky.

"That's thirteen!" said Ezra.

"Lucky, or unlucky?"

He shrugged. "Guess we'll find out."

Astra nodded. For a while longer, they sat there shivering, eyes fixed on the sky, waiting for another tell-tale flash of golden-white on black.

"So," Ezra said suddenly; stiffly. "You're not going back to uni?"

Astra glanced at him. He was staring intently skywards.

"Did Mum tell you?"

"I overheard her and Dad talking about it." He scoffed. "As if anyone ever tells me anything."

"It's not really your business," Astra told him. "But it's not like it's this big secret that was being kept from you."

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“Yeah, whatever. So, are you, like, failing, or...?”

“No!” Astra objected. “It’s not like I’m *never* going back, I’m just... taking a break. Look, a year or two from now, you’ll have Mum and Dad and all your teachers getting on your case, telling you that you should be thinking about what you want to *do*, who you want to *be*. And maybe you’ll know, and you’ll go study that, and it’ll all be great and you won’t experience a single second of doubt. In fact, I hope you do.” She shrugged. “But then again, you might not. Either way, you’ll understand a bit better.”

“So, basically, you’re dropping out because of an existential crisis.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but it... wasn’t entirely inaccurate. She sighed. “Yes, Ezra. I am dropping out because of an existential crisis. Though, we twenty-somethings prefer the term *quarter-life crisis*.”

“Ha, shame,” said Ezra, with all the tact and sensitivity of a fifteen-year-old boy.

Astra rolled her eyes. She scanned the sky, but there was no sign of a fourteenth meteor.

“Well, anyway, I’m bored,” she said. She pulled her feet up onto the clinking roof tiles and, carefully, *very* carefully, stood. She grabbed the windowsill for balance, narrowly avoiding braining herself on the open window. “My severely atrophied attention span can’t handle all the waiting. Also, it’s cold.”

“Wuss,” Ezra accused, as if he himself wasn’t currently shivering so hard he looked as if he might split off into several pieces at any second, like a fragmenting meteor.

“Rude. I’m telling Mum,” Astra monotoned, clambering through the window. Ezra’s room was only marginally warmer, but the difference was instant and noticeable. There were no lights on upstairs, but the glow of the downstairs kitchen light was visible in the rectangle of the doorway. She was careful not to trip over anything as she crossed the room.

It was after midnight, but Mum was still awake, leaning over the kitchen counter scrolling through her phone with unnecessarily sharp jabs. She didn’t even acknowledge Astra, who tip-toed across the frozen tiles to flick the jug on. Astra almost wanted to ask what she and Marshall had been arguing about this time, but didn’t bother. It was a bit insensitive. And she knew she wouldn’t get an answer, anyway.

Mum’s head snapped up just as the jug started to hiss.

“Astra,” she said urgently. “Could you go get your brother for me?”

“Uh, sure,” Astra said.

As she headed back up the stairs, a sour ache bloomed to life in her right temple. A delayed side-effect of the cold, perhaps, radiating pain from vain attempts to stop her teeth chattering by clenching her jaw. Or maybe some sort of portent. Or maybe just her wisdom teeth moving around again. Nothing *wise* about those things, unless whatever smartass named them mistakenly belief that pain lead to growth. In this case, it was the other way

around, and there was nothing to learn from these growing pains except that evolution was stuck in traffic and going nowhere fast.

Too impatient to wait for her eyes to readjust to the darkness, she simply flicked on the light in Ezra's room, flinching away as the sudden flare of light angered the pain in her head. Should have thought that one through a bit better.

"Ezra," Astra called as she crossed the room, "Mum wants you."

She reached the window, but Ezra was gone. Confused, she leaned out, looking left and right in case he was playing some dumb trick on her. He was nowhere to be seen. Bracing herself on the window frame, she leaned further, peering over the edge of the roof. But even with the light spilling out behind her, the space below the eaves was thick with swirling darkness.

Sighing, she relaxed back onto her heels, glancing up at the sky. A meteor streaked from east to west, reddish trail disappearing into the vast, starless emptiness. The clouds were travelling faster than anticipated. Soon there'd be nothing to see, nothing but endless black. Nothing but nothing.

As Astra turned from the window, something caught her attention in the corner of her gaze. A flicker of movement.

It was only the mirror. Her own reflection, playing tricks on her. There was something not quite right about it, something she couldn't put her finger on. She stepped closer, narrowing her eyes. Her reflection squinted at her. Dark hair, pale skin, grey eyes. Yep, that was her, all right. The same reflection she'd been seeing for twenty years. Or, at least, as long as she'd been cognizant enough to comprehend such a thing as a reflection.

She stepped closer.

Her reflection smiled serenely, tilting her head just slightly to the left—to Astra's right. To where the headache was. To where the door was.

Astra looked to her own left, to the watery, cloud-filtered sunlight that reflected off the dust on the windows, making them silvery-opaque. She turned back to her reflection, who watched her levelly. She had the distinct feeling that she was forgetting something. She had the distinct feeling that she'd been doing that a lot lately.

She tread carefully down the stairs, hyperaware of every creak in the floorboards. Resenting that her presence, in moments like this, could be anything but silent.

The kitchen and dining room were empty, and it was dark, even though the curtains were open—but the stormy skies outside had little to offer the world in terms of light and warmth. It was cold and wet and dark, though it was too early to be dark. The sun was out there somewhere, way above it all.

Astra jumped at a thunderous knocking at the door. *THUD. THUD. THUD.* Measured beats, almost like a heart, but without the off-beat. *(thud-)THUD. (thud-)THUD. (thud-)THUD.*

Either no one else in the house heard it, or there was no one around to hear it. Astra opened her mouth to say something, to call out, anything, but the eerie, groaning howl of the wind in the trees scraping against the kitchen window made her think twice. She might as well just get the door herself.

But when she opened it, there was no one there.

Astra arrived in the basement library with Miyuki at a few minutes before ten the next morning. They were both surprised to be greeted by silence. Tenjin was nowhere to be seen.

“Probably getting coffee,” Miyuki suggested. “Our elevators might have passed each other.”

“The vending machine in the lobby isn’t the *only* place to get coffee, is it?” Astra asked.

Miyuki gave her a quizzical look, then shrugged. Astra was only asking with the mental well-being of the poor, long-suffering receptionist in mind. The coffee machine’s jingle wasn’t quite on the level of “It’s a Small World,” but it was still overly cheerful and jingle-y, which was enough to drive anyone to distraction when it echoed throughout the empty foyer multiple times an hour for seven hours straight.

She really just wanted to get this session over with. Then she would ask for the rest of the day off, and tomorrow, as well. Tomorrow was her birthday. Tomorrow they had plans to visit Disneyland, and drive themselves to distraction with “It’s a Small World,” after all.

Last night, when she’d fled the basement library, it had been raining. She burst through the revolving lobby doors into the water-blurred neon evening and found herself soaked within seconds. The late-night streets were still crowded with pedestrians, undeterred by the weather thanks to the matching, clear-plastic umbrellas they all wielded. Perhaps there was an umbrella vending machine nearby. It didn’t matter. Astra found she didn’t much care about the pelting raindrops, or the chill that sunk its claws into her spine and gripped the gaps between her ribs.

Besides, if there was any one thing she was used to, it was rain.

For her efforts or lack thereof, she received several disgruntled glares and stares of consternation as she made her way through Shinjuku station and onto the Yamanote line. It was prime nightlife hour in Tokyo, but the subway, or at least the train, or at least the train car she found herself on, was only sparsely populated. Just two others. A portly salaryman, sitting with his arms crossed, mouth fixed in an unhappy frown, eyes shut tight, probably sleeping. And a rough-looking woman, maybe middle-aged, maybe older, maybe younger, wearing several mismatched layers, a long, threadbare skirt, and an oversized beanie, with straggly hair and a bulging, battered suitcase. She was so thin her ankles rattled against the collar of her filth-soaked sneakers. Maybe she was homeless. The number of homeless people roaming Tokyo’s streets day and night was frankly depressing.

Astra huddled in the furthest corner of the train car, dripping rainwater onto the floor. She needed time to think, but thinking wasn't exactly constructive. The more she thought back over the past week, the more she wondered how much of it had even been *real*. When, exactly had she had that conversation with Gabby? Yesterday? Two days ago? A month ago? When was it that she and Miyuki had visited Sensōji Temple in Asakusa? It had been... colder, then, right? It was spring now. But it was still cold. It was raining right this second, heavy on the roof of the train, just audible over the chugging of the engine. Her visit to McDonalds with Dice... that *had* to have been a while ago. Before they were kicked out of the research room. Right? Why else would she have needed to take the elevator *down* rather than *up*?

But they'd only been kicked out of the research room just last week. Hadn't they? Had it been longer than that? Less than that?

She had no clue. How could she be certain, when there was every possibility that, right this moment, she was dreaming? Any second now she might hear Tenjin's voice, affixed in empty space by her right ear. Any second. Or not. Because something was going wrong, wasn't it? Tenjin knew it, Miyuki knew it. They were the ones who could see the readings, the recordings, the obscure numbers and lines that were nothing more than meaningless nonsense to Astra. There could be a million things they weren't telling her. Maybe she hadn't been responding to external stimuli—or maybe they were just *telling* her that.

Now she was just being unreasonably paranoid. Maybe the coffee machine's jingle had driven her a little mad, too.

It was such a ridiculous thought that she laughed out loud, clapping a hand to her mouth when the salaryman stirred. The ragged woman didn't even look up. She was staring into space, lost in her own head, her own world. Just as the salaryman was lost in sleep, lost in dreams. Just as Astra was lost in dreams.

Gabby's business card was burning a hole in her jacket pocket. This jacket was expensive, too. Almost ten thousand yen. High-quality denim, well-tailored, stylishly long, more like a coat than a jacket, really. Drenched, but oh well. She'd bought it on the fifth floor of the 109 in Shibuya. A landmark upscale department store; a distinctive shape across the famous multi-directional Shibuya crossing. She'd had to buy at least *one* thing, *one* fancy clothing item to rival Tenjin's propensity for suede peacoats and alpaca-wool scarves. Miyuki was a little more sceptical, a steadfast dissenter in the face of rampant consumerism, but she'd helped Astra pick it out, nonetheless. That had been a couple months ago. Just after New Years.

She knew that, at least. She knew that. She knew something.

The rain had tired itself out by the time she shuffled out of Ueno station, still very damp and shivering. It had been tempting to never get off the train, to just sit there going around and around and around the centre of Tokyo, with her two companions: tired salaryman and

homeless woman. But it turned out that umbrellas were invented for a reason, and Astra wasn't interested in making herself sick.

She hadn't had dinner, though she wasn't particularly hungry, but out of a sense of obligation she stopped by the convenience store near her hotel and picked up some *karaage*, fried chicken, leaps and bounds better than KFC even without the eleven "secret" herbs and spices, and probably healthier. Not that Astra even tasted it, picking at it with disposable chopsticks as the hotel elevator chugged up to her floor.

Sorely in need of a distraction, she spent the next few hours sitting on the bed with her laptop playing an indie game she'd found for a couple of bucks on the internet. The graphics were nothing to write home about, just standard 2D pixel art. The music was average, probably royalty-free stock tunes. The gameplay was nothing more complicated than turn-based battles and the occasional puzzle. But the story was interesting. It was about four friends who inadvertently get pulled through a rift in the fabric of reality after meeting a strange boy with strange powers. They find themselves in the realm between realities, a kingdom of beings who never existed, filled with shadowy monsters who prey upon them for being real.

The strange boy turns out to be a phoenix, trapped in human form and looking for a way back to his home realm, inadvertently dragging the four humans along with him. One of the humans becomes possessed by a shadow. Another discovers that she is the true heir to the Unreal Throne. A third becomes a pawn in the king's plot to destroy reality. The fourth just loves his friends and does anything he can to help everyone get home safely.

It was a handful of old tropes tipped into a pot and stewed into something a little different, a little quirky. It was a bit confusing to follow each of the characters' individual storylines at times, and a few plot points were convoluted and poorly explained, but it was still fun. It had heart, and that was what mattered.

She didn't notice when she fell asleep. She woke with a start in the pitch-black night, heartbeat pushing all the air out of her lungs. A blistering headache pulsed in her temples, and a malignant, dread-like feeling pressed against her diaphragm, like a cold stone wedged under her rib cage.

The world was grey and depressing the next morning, grey buildings and grey pavement and grey skies blurring into a hazy grey singularity. It wasn't raining, but the grey clouds had a menacing quality to them, threatening to burst into another round of watery deluge if you so much as looked at them the wrong way.

Miyuki was leaning on the wall outside the hotel, waiting, wearing a bright blue raincoat as if in defiance of all the grey. Though, combined with her usual red sneakers, Astra couldn't help but be reminded of sweet old Paddington Bear.

She looked relieved to see Astra. Mika trotted over to rub around Astra's ankles the second she stepped through the door.

“You weren’t replying to my texts,” Miyuki said without preface.

“Oh, yeah, I broke my phone again,” Astra said. She’d meant to tell her about it earlier, but with things as they were, was it any surprise that it had slipped her mind?

Astra wanted Miyuki to smile and roll her eyes, but instead her brow furrowed even further. “How broken?” she asked.

“Toast,” Astra said, digging into the side pocket of her backpack, where she’d stored the phone out of habit, at some point after breaking it. “Burnt toast.”

When she pulled it out, it looked perfectly fine.

Miyuki blinked. “Software issue?”

“No, I—” Astra stared at it. She’d dropped it. She was sure she’d dropped it. The screen had been shattered past recognition, practically reduced back into sand. It had been, in a word, fucked.

“Or apparently not,” she muttered. She glanced up at Miyuki, who was looking at her the way you might look at someone who had just been told they have a week left to live. Sympathetic, concerned, but with no idea what the hell to even say. “I guess I must have just dreamed it,” Astra joked, though it wasn’t particularly funny.

Miyuki hummed, noncommittal. “If you say so,” she said. She checked the time on her own phone. “If we hurry, we have time to get breakfast.”

“Right. Yeah. Breakfast. Good idea,” said Astra, bending down to finally give precious Mika a gentle pat on the head. She was probably just imagining it, but he seemed to be looking up at her with much the same expression as Miyuki.

Tenjin appeared at ten on the dot, with a rather dark expression and a steaming cup of what was probably double-strength black coffee with no sugar. He seemed the type, didn’t he? He was the type, Astra knew this for a fact, having observed it multiple times. The dude had no concept of “too hot,” or maybe he’d been drinking too-hot drinks for so much of his life that the inside of his mouth was lined with heat-resistant scar tissue.

He emerged from the stacks and stopped, looking between Astra, sitting on the couch with Mika, and Miyuki, in her usual spot on the floor, initialising her fancy software.

“I just talked to Dice,” he said. “He can’t come tomorrow, unfortunately. He’s accompanying Dr Watanabe on an errand to New York.” He locked eyes with Astra. “He’s very sorry he couldn’t tell you himself, but they’re working to quite a strict deadline.”

That was one less for Disneyland. “Well, that’s okay,” said Astra. “It’s not a big deal.”

To be honest, she wasn’t entirely sure she still wanted to go, herself. Disneyland was a cheerful place. It didn’t seem right to sully that sacred land of cheerfulness with doubt and dread and mental exhaustion, and it didn’t seem likely that she would be able to leave it all at the sparkly gate.

Tenjin nodded curtly. “Right. Let’s get on with it, then. I have a meeting later, so we only have this one session for today. Or we could do two in a row, if you two don’t mind.”

“Can’t,” said Miyuki. “I have a meeting at one.”

She received two questioning looks. “*You* have a meeting?” Tenjin parroted, incredulous. “A job interview?” He sounded hopeful.

Miyuki rolled her eyes. “No. A meeting. With a client. Small business, needs a website. Elderly couple, don’t know anything about technology, so they want to discuss it over lunch.” She shrugged.

“I see,” said Tenjin. His gaze drifted over to Astra.

“Doesn’t bother me,” said Astra. “I was gonna ask for the rest of the day off anyway.”

“Don’t tell me *you* have a meeting, too.”

“Of course I don’t. But it *is* my birthday tomorrow, if you haven’t forgotten.” That, and she was badly in need of an extended break from the dream nonsense. Of course, her dreams were messed up no matter what—she had to sleep, after all—but it wasn’t the dreams themselves that were causing her issues, right? It was messing with them that made things complicated. Right?

Maybe some time away was all that was needed to reset. Just a good break. She could go to a museum, maybe finally visit Ueno zoo. Perhaps she and Miyuki could go to Asakusa again; visit Sensōji Temple during the day, maybe early in the morning to beat the crowds, and pray to the Kannon Bodhisattva for some compassion and mercy.

“I mean...” Astra continued, “maybe we could take Wednesday off, as well? I’m sure we could *all* use a break, right?”

“Seconded,” Miyuki agreed instantly.

“We *just* had Sunday off,” Tenjin said.

Sure didn’t feel like it. They had *every* Sunday off. It barely even felt like a proper day off because it was so... regimented. Mandated.

“I’ll think on it,” he concluded. “I suppose I myself have other tasks to see to, which I’ve been neglecting in favour of...” He listlessly waved a hand at their setup. Miyuki’s station, the couch, the DIM. “This.”

Either Astra was imagining things, or Tenjin seemed uncharacteristically unenthusiased about his research today. Seemed she was right about them all needing a break. Or maybe, whatever was changing, whatever was going wrong, was not something Tenjin had anticipated. Perhaps Tenjin had as little idea as to what the hell was going on as any of them, and that wasn’t exactly a notion that inspired much confidence.

“In any case. Astra, if you would?” He indicated the couch again.

However, there seemed to be nothing that could stop him from continuing full speed ahead. Maybe his confidence was something to be admired, but the more days that passed

the more certain Astra became that Tenjin's "confidence" was little more than momentum. Astra could relate: the only reason she was back here today was because she didn't know what else to do. To deviate from routine would be like diving overboard without a lifejacket.

She still had Gabby's business card in the pocket of her jacket, slung over the back of the couch. The card was frayed and warped from getting wet last night, but she still had it.

"Alright," she sighed. "Let's get this over with."

The moonlight blanched the world into a dim monochrome, making it less than it was, and yet, somehow, more than it had ever been.

Perhaps it was just a side-effect of perspectives in flux.

The moon itself, the reality-shifting, moonlight-emitting moon, sat high and bright, full and round, making light of the night sky; making a dignified silhouette of the olive tree's most skyward reaching branches. Offering an olive branch to the heavens.

Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

There were no lights on inside. Everyone was probably asleep already, so Astra was careful not to make too much noise as she eased the ranch slider open to slip into the lounge. It wasn't much warmer in here than outside, but at least there was no wind. She closed the door behind her. The silence that followed served only to amplify the darkness.

Even with socks on, the kitchen tiles were like ice under her feet. Whenever she walked on a cold floor, she couldn't help but think of that one ad for floor heaters that had played so frequently on TV when she was a kid. The one with the singing penguins. "*Happiest feet in the world*," or maybe it was "*Warmest feet in the world*," or something like that. She wasn't sure what penguins had to do with anything, since there certainly weren't any floor heaters in Antarctica. Unless you count global warming.

She could smell coffee.

"Astra?"

She turned slightly to her right, on instinct, but there was just a pile of dishes.

"Can you hear me?"

Up, down, up, down. Loud and clear.

"Good. Okay, I..." Tenjin trailed off, and was silent for a long moment.

It was amazing how convincingly cold these kitchen tiles were, when, in reality, Astra was still wearing shoes. Which was probably quite rude, considering she was lying on a couch. Oh, well. Not like she could do anything about it right now.

She lifted her eyes towards the ceiling and slightly to the right. *Waiting*.

"Before or after?" Tenjin asked after another second.

Astra looked left. Before. Before arriving in Japan. Not long before, but still before.

Another stretch of silence. The glasses stacked on the bench glinted in reflection of what meagre moonlight strained through the heavy curtains.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tenjin sighed. “I’m going to try something different. Just for a change.”

Well, that was unexpected. “Okay then,” she said quietly, knowing he wouldn’t hear.

The kitchen light flicked on. “Astra?”

Ah, there she was. Arms wrapped around herself against the cold, squinting against the painfully bright light.

“Evening,” said Astra cordially.

Softly, somewhere off to her right, music began to play. Piano music. A song she recognised. It was—

She laughed in surprise.

It was the main theme from *Final Fantasy X*.

“Tenjin, you nerd,” she muttered under her breath.

“What are you doing up so late?” Mum asked. “We have to be at the airport by seven.”

Astra shrugged. “I’ll just sleep on the plane,” she lied, knowing full well that she had not, in fact, gotten a single *second* of sleep on that god damn eleven-hour flight. Who was capable of truly sleeping in those cramped chairs? Without drugs, that is. Astra was now well-versed in the magic of sedatives, even if it meant she often had trouble getting to sleep without them, nowadays.

Mum frowned, staring at Astra searchingly. Astra wondered if that was really how she’d looked at her.

“Astra,” Mum continued. “If you’re having second thoughts, it’s not too late to change your mind.”

Somehow her words had more potency with this highly emotional piano music playing in the background. It also highlighted how surreal this entire shitshow really was.

Astra sighed. “I’m not having second thoughts.”

“Just... if things don’t work out, there’s no shame in coming home sooner than planned. Okay?”

“I know,” she said softly. Something dense was blooming to life in the back of her throat.

Dream-Mum’s eyes were misty. “I don’t want to lose you. Okay? I miss you.”

That dense something had grown quickly and spread to Astra’s chest, heavy and dry and bitter, making it harder to breathe; to speak.

“What does that *mean*?” she asked. “What are you talking about?”

“I can’t,” Dream-Mum whispered, kitchen lights reflecting off the tears that spilled over onto her cheeks.

Astra closed her eyes, opening them to the library ceiling as the song ended in a soft ascending scale.

“Something different, huh?” she said into the new-born silence, mortified to discover the scratchiness of her voice.

“Trying the same thing over and over wasn’t yielding results,” Tenjin explained, standing from the piano bench. “I thought... I might as well.”

As he spoke, Astra had removed the electrode cap, sat up, and covertly cleared her throat. “Fair enough,” she said. “But, um... what does that mean for the project?”

Tenjin folded his arms, mouth pressed into a hard line.

Miyuki stretched her arms over her head. “It was a lot more interesting for me, at least,” she said. She smirked at her brother, snapping the laptop closed. “I knew you’d put that songbook I got you to good use. Anyway, I need to go.”

“Have fun,” said Astra.

Miyuki seemed to seriously consider this directive as she gathered her things. “We’ll see. Mika, *kite*,” she said, clicking her fingers.

Mika leapt down from the back of the couch and trotted over to her, staying obediently still as Miyuki clipped the leash onto his harness, the other end attached to her belt loop, as always.

Seriously. What a good cat.

When Miyuki had left, Tenjin was still standing there between the piano and the couch with crossed arms and a serious expression.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Astra prompted, putting her feet up on the coffee table, then thinking better of it and just putting them on the floor. She was still wearing shoes, after all. She’d been all around Tokyo in these things. Who knew what kind of dirt and pavement germs were wedged in the treads?

“I don’t rightly know how to answer,” Tenjin admitted.

“You’re stuck.”

He sighed. “Yes.” He came around the coffee table and perched on the other couch, clasping his hands between his knees and staring at nothing in particular. “Perhaps I set my sights too high.” He said it quietly, so quietly that it would be fair to assume he was only talking to himself.

“I mean... / could have told you that,” Astra said. She couldn’t help herself. “You were trying to... what, prove that dreams are real?”

“In a fashion,” said Tenjin. “Or, rather, that they’re no less real than what we call reality. But the parameters are too unpredictable, and the results are almost impossible to reliably record. Even with all of Nebula’s or even Supermassive’s technological advancements... it will be many years before we’ve come far enough to properly tackle such theories.”

“If you already know that, why were you so determined to do it now?” Astra wondered. “Beyond ‘saving the family business’ and such.”

“My father... had several *lofty* hypotheses regarding dreams. I’ve read his journals many times since he passed away. There’s a particular theory which suggests that it could be possible to attain a sort of divinity through dreaming. He even lists a lot of convincing evidence.” Tenjin shook his head. His next words were stilted and robotic: “I believed it to be my duty, as his son and heir, to continue his life’s work. To uphold and maintain what he created. Since he... cannot.”

“No offense, but that theory sounds completely insane,” said Astra, putting her feet up on the coffee table.

A smile quirked on Tenjin’s lips. “It is,” he admitted. “To be honest, I’m not sure I even *like* neuroscience. Or business.” His gaze drifted over to the piano. “Not my father’s version of it, at least.”

He still hadn’t looked at Astra. Not even a glance.

“There’s something you’re not telling me, isn’t there?” she questioned. “Something about this experiment. Or something about these changes that have been happening. Anomalies, or whatever. You know more than you’re saying, and whatever it is you know isn’t something you’re very happy about.” She narrowed her eyes. “If I didn’t know better, I’d even say it scares you.”

Tenjin finally met her eyes, but he’d drawn the fire curtain on his earlier uncertainty. “Does it scare *you*?” he asked coldly. “If it’s evident from code and readings that something is changing, you must have noticed it yourself. But you haven’t said anything. Why not? Because you’re afraid. Speaking it aloud is what makes it seem more real. Am I right?”

Damn him, he absolutely was. But he also inadvertently gave Astra the answers to her own questions. There *was* something he wasn’t saying. He *was* afraid of it, and that was why he didn’t want to say anything.

“Yeah,” Astra said. “It scares me. I’m never entirely sure whether I’m dreaming or not. I feel stuck in an endless cycle of waking. I don’t trust my memory anymore.” She stopped. She could say more if she forced the words up her throat, past that horrible, dry denseness, but she didn’t feel inclined to go to the trouble. *I constantly feel like I might have forgotten something important*, she could have said. *And it’s your fault.*

Tenjin’s emotional fire curtain collapsed. He looked taken aback, like he’d expected Astra to return fire with ice and sarcasm. He looked more uncertain than ever. He looked away.

“My father,” he said, bringing it back around, because he sure had some serious daddy issues, “had several failed experiments for every successful one.” It sounded physically painful for him to admit.

“So it goes, I guess,” Astra intoned.

“Some of the failures were nothing short of catastrophic. Permanent brain damage. Institutionalisation.” He took a deep breath. “That’s where all the money really went—paying off the families of the subjects. The *victims*.”

Oh. “Holy shit.” The revelation did very little to ease Astra’s concerns. Quite the opposite. She was pretty sure she didn’t have brain damage, though. She’d... *probably* notice that. Maybe. She felt a little unhinged lately, with all her difficulties in telling the difference between dream and reality—but the important thing was that she *knew* what the deal was, more or less. She wasn’t, like, hallucinating or anything. Yet. Oh, god. Don’t even go there.

“I’m sorry,” Tenjin said sincerely. “I truly, *truly* wish that we had met under better circumstances. And I only have myself to blame for the fact that we didn’t.” He checked his watch. “I should go.”

Astra could think of nothing to say as he swiftly collected his jacket and briefcase from beside the piano, then disappeared between stainless steel shelving units.

Under “better” circumstances, they wouldn’t have met at all. But, despite everything, Astra couldn’t truthfully say that she regretted having done so.

He still wasn’t her type, and she still didn’t *have* a type, and maybe she was still no less naïve and idealistic than a ten-year-old, but... she liked to think that they’d at least become friends, of a sort. That she was, in his eyes, more than just a test subject.

*The **moon** sets*
And all that remains
Are four corners of a desk

入る月の
跡は机の
四隅かな

7

It was almost midnight when Astra realised she had no clean clothes for tomorrow. Fortunately, the hotel had its own laundry. It was in the basement, and it was rather suffocating with vapour from people who had the audacity to wash their clothes in anything other than cold water. Those people probably even *separated* their laundry, which was even more strange. Why do any of that when you could just shove it in all at once, set it to cold, and have everything come out fine? Very efficient.

There was also a washing powder dispenser. Just the right amount for a full load.

Feeling the *déjà vu*?

Astra turned the washing machine on, and was about to take her phone out of her pocket when she paused. She thought she heard something. It was probably nothing to worry about, but hearing a strange noise in a basement in the midnight hour was surely enough to make anyone's heart shrivel back, preparing to react in fear.

The door creaked open and she jumped so violently she would have dropped her phone, had she been holding it.

There was no one there.

Her heart engaged the fear protocol.

She stood frozen, listening, hearing nothing but the rumbling of the washing machine and the rushing of blood in her ears.

Slowly, quietly, she crept towards the door.

There was no one on the other side. Nothing, but for the boxy little elevator, waiting for her, doors wide open.

Slowly, quietly, she stepped into the elevator. Miyuki and Tenjin stepped in right behind her, the latter with a steaming cup of maximum-strength black coffee clutched in his hand, no serviette or anything to muffle the flow of heat through thin cardboard to soft flesh. There was no way it wasn't burning the hell out of his hand, but he showed no sign that it hurt, calmly hitting the button for the fourteenth floor.

Maybe, Astra thought, all that piano playing had hardened the flesh on Tenjin's hands. Or deadened the nerves. Something like that. Maybe.

"What was today's Nocturne, then?" she asked. "You never said."

Tenjin smirked. "How do you know it was a Nocturne?"

"Do you ever play anything else?"

"Opus seventy-two, number one. E minor," he answered. "One of the simpler Nocturnes of Chopin's repertoire. Too simple to satisfy Chopin himself, perhaps, as it was only published posthumously. But 'simple' is a deceptive way to describe it. No such thing as a 'simple'

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Chopin composition.” He paused to take a sip of his coffee. “If you’re interested, I would highly recommend looking up Arthur Rubinstein’s renditions—he was able to capture the soul of Chopin’s pieces in a way that few have. I myself can scarcely hope to attain that level of understanding, even if I live to the age of ninety-five. Which Rubinstein did.”

The elevator dinged their arrival on floor fourteen, and Tenjin strode out without further elaboration. Miyuki shot Astra a look, like, *why would you ask him about that you know how he is*, before hurrying after.

Astra smiled to herself, and followed them, catching the research room door just as it was about to swing closed. The air outside was warm and wet, like the air in the bathroom when she took a shower without turning on the fan. ‘Muggy’ was the word Grandma had used. It was muggy tonight.

Even with the back lights on, she could barely see further than the swing set. Beyond that, the electric green of the freshly rained-on grass faded into dead black, up and up all the way into the sky. The smell of the cut grass, swept into a big pile by the shed, was almost overpowering.

“Come on, Astra, don’t stand in the doorway.”

There was a puddle at the bottom of the porch steps. Not a big puddle, but deep, maybe. There was no way to tell, with how muddy and murky it was. Standing on the bottom step, she looked down at her feet. At her brand new purple gumboots. She didn’t feel like getting them dirty. They were *new*. And *purple*.

“Astra,” Mum said impatiently.

“There’s a puddle.”

“Just jump over it.”

“Okay.” Like a cat, she carefully lined up her jump, then attained lift-off with an easy spring, landing well clear of the puddle. Muddy water hidden under the grass splashed up onto her boots.

She frowned at her feet.

Mum, with her long grown-up legs, stepped over the puddle and held her hand out to Astra. “We can clean them up later,” she said.

“Okay,” said Astra, taking Mum’s hand, warm from the summer heat, dry from pawing through a hundred old books in the study all day and all week and all month and all year.

Together, they walked past the swing set, into the darkness, the ground squelching under their feet, until another light loomed out of the darkness. A torchlight, in the distance, moving around.

“That you, Nora?” called a voice. Granddad’s voice.

“Yep,” said Mum. “We’re ready.”

“Right-o, then!” said Granddad. Then Astra could hear the flicking of a lighter, then a long hissing. Granddad jogged towards them, torchlight swinging. Behind him was a bright, dancing light, like a sparkler. Or a *fuse*.

The firework let off a big bang and a whistle, shooting a bright rocket into the air. Astra clung tightly to Mum’s hand with both her own. Another bang, and the rocket exploded, blooming into a massive red and gold flower in the black, black sky.

Fireworks. *Hanabi*, in Japanese, comprised of the characters for “flower” and “fire.” Fire flower. Flowers of fire, high and bright in the sky, like the sharp curve of a bright half-moon, just out of reach of the Tokyo Skytree’s coil-like antenna, lit up in blue.

“You really like looking at the moon, don’t you?” Miyuki asked.

Astra snapped out of her reverie. Miyuki was staring at her. She hadn’t even noticed. “I could have been looking at the Skytree.”

“You weren’t, though.” Miyuki shrugged. “You look at the moon a lot.”

“I guess I do,” Astra conceded, gaze drifting skywards once again. “You know, there’s something different about my dreams lately. Something that feels wrong. Misplaced details. Or at least I think they’re misplaced, because when I wake up I can’t remember if they were there in the first place, or if...” She trailed off. If *what*? She didn’t even know. “It just makes me... doubt. Everything. Myself.”

Miyuki was still giving her the same intent, thoughtful look. Unable to formulate an appropriate response, or taking her time to do so.

The brief silence was interrupted by Astra’s ringtone, slightly muffled, strangely distant. Pachelbel’s Canon, except every note was a “meow.” The most annoying rendition.

“Oh, hang on.” She reached for her pocket, but her phone wasn’t there. It sounded like it was behind her. But there was nothing behind her but the stream.

Astra stood and turned to get a proper look, but the shadowy trees blocked out the streetlights and dissolved the space between into empty darkness. And from within that darkness... *meow, meow-meow-meow, meow-meow-meow...*

She leaned further over the barrier. It was only knee-high. She overbalanced, toppled forward, and jolted awake.

...*meow-meow-meow-meow-meow-meow-meow, meow-meow-meow, meow-meow meow...*

Thoroughly disoriented, Astra scrambled out of bed to grab her phone off the arm of the couch. She usually put it there so she would have no choice but to get out of bed to turn her alarm off in the morning. She’d disabled her alarms last night, since the one thing she wanted for her birthday was to sleep in, but she’d turned her sound on, correctly suspecting an incoming phone call. Wasn’t sure why she left her phone on the couch, though. Habit?

“Hello?” she answered breathless.

"Happy birthday!" her mum sang on the other end of the line.

Astra flopped onto the couch, coughing to clear the grog of sleep from her voice. "Thanks, Mum."

Mum laughed. *"Did I wake you up?"*

"No, not at all," Astra lied. "Er... what time is it?"

"Just gone one, here. I thought I'd waited long enough to call! But I suppose you deserve a good lie-in on your birthday."

"My thoughts exactly," said Astra. So it was ten in the morning, Japan Standard Time. Fun fact: no such thing as daylight savings in Japan.

They talked for a while. About meaningless things, mostly. About a cute cat Mum saw while walking to the beach. About the cherry blossom ice cream Astra had tried in Akihabara last week. About the nice shells Mum had found at the beach, that would make a nice bathroom decoration once they were strung up on some fishing line. About how Astra was going to Disneyland later. About how it was steadily getting colder in Auckland. About how it was steadily getting warmer in Tokyo.

Meaningless things.

"So... do you reckon you'll be coming home soon?" Mum asked out-of-the-blue.

Astra frowned. "I don't know. Maybe. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wondering," Mum said quickly. Too quickly. *"I miss you!"*

"Mum," said Astra. "What is it?"

A long pause, filled only with phone static.

"I didn't want to tell you on your birthday," Mum finally said, in what was almost a whisper, blending into the buzz. *"But Marshall and I have decided... that it would be for the best. If we split up."*

"Oh." It wasn't surprising, but it was still a bit of a shock. Was she upset? She couldn't tell. Her first thought was of Ezra. He was still a kid. And Marshall was his actual father—he'd never been more than a surrogate to Astra. Even so... "I see."

"But don't worry about it too much, okay? We've got it all sorted. We're not selling the house, it's in my name so I'm taking out a mortgage so I can—oh, it doesn't matter right now. You don't need to know all the details. I just want you to enjoy yourself while you're over there, okay? Have as much fun as you can and take as much time as you need. Okay?"

"Okay," Astra repeated. "I'll—I'll do that."

"Just don't worry about it," Mum repeated, a platitude about as effective as telling water to stop being wet. *"Anyway, my tummy's rumbling. I'd better go make lunch."*

"Alright. I'd better, uh... get dressed."

Mum laughed, a little manically. *"Yes, good idea! Anyway, love you!"*

"Love you, too."

“Bye!”

“Bye.”

“Bye-bye!”

Astra hung up. Outside the window, it was another grey day. Supposedly rainy season wasn't until June. It wasn't even May. The weather was getting an early start.

She tossed her phone onto the bed, where it landed with a flump. She wanted to do nothing more than sit here on the couch a while longer.

“Shit,” she breathed.

Eight hours later, she wasn't particularly in the mood for Disneyland. Miyuki seemed excited, at least, and Astra was trying not to ruin it for her. It's just that when you feel anxious and miserable, The Happiest Place on Earth is the last place you want to be, because nothing sucks more, when you're anxious and miserable, than being surrounded by happy, smiling, screaming children having oh-so-much fun.

It was a weekday, and an evening, so the crowds wouldn't be so bad. It was just the two of them now, Tenjin having called Miyuki at the last second to say that something had come up and he *unfortunately* wasn't able to make it. Miyuki was more pissed off about it than Astra. Honestly, Astra wasn't surprised. In a way, she was glad it was just the two of them.

She was sure she'd have fun once they actually got there. She'd been in this sort of situation before, with parties and the like, and it followed the same route every single time. Receive party invitation. Accept party invitation. Day of the party arrives. Suddenly, the antisocial goblin in the back of your head says, you know what? Maybe we shouldn't go. There'll be too many people you don't know, too much loud music and smoke and drunken breath, and some dude will inevitably get a bit handsy and you won't be nearly drunk enough to deal with that because there simply isn't enough alcohol in the world. And anyway, you don't feel well.

What? you say to the goblin. What are you talking about? I feel fine, I—

Then the goblin, that smarmy bastard, reaches down, through your throat, through your chest, into your abdomen, where he grabs a big fistful of your assorted internal organs and *pulls*.

In an abstract and yet very real way, it hurts.

Oh, you say. I guess I don't feel well. But you know what, Goblin? I already said I was gonna go, so I'm gonna go, and there's nothing you can do that will stop me.

If you say so, says the goblin, continuing to wind your internal organs into an uncomfortable knot.

But then you go to the party and you have fun and the goblin shuts his fat mouth and everything is fine. End of story.

Disneyland, Astra was certain, would be like that. For now, she was anxious, sitting on the train next to Miyuki, watching sunset-Tokyo rush by. She had good reason to feel anxious, given... everything. But maybe a couple of goes around Space Mountain would knock that goblin around so hard that it would shut up for a good long while.

Disneyland, in fact, might be exactly what she needed.

Unfortunately, it was raining.

Miyuki scowled at the sky as she opened her umbrella, brandishing it almost threateningly at the Eeyore-grey clouds.

"Should have checked the forecast," Astra noted, ducking as the umbrella frame brushed the top of her head. She was at least an inch taller than Miyuki, so she foresaw this being a recurring problem so long as Miyuki was holding the umbrella, and the cord was wrapped tightly around her wrist.

"It's okay," Miyuki sighed. "Most of the rides are indoors, I think. It's just the queues that will be annoying."

Astra looked around at the steady stream of people headed towards the big lit-up archway with its big lit-up sign confirming that this was, indeed, TOKYO DISNEYLAND. Everyone—*everyone*—was sporting either an umbrella or a plastic poncho.

"Well, if we all band together," she said, "we can create a sort of... portable portico. With the umbrellas. You know?"

Miyuki just gave her a look.

"I'm not wrong." Astra protested.

Officially, Easter was long over—but not at Disneyland! The main gate was surrounded by decorations of painted eggs and cute cartoon bunnies, and once they got inside they would be seeing the same sort of thing over and over ad nauseam. The main lawns, abloom in pink and white, formed nests for colourful, oversized Easter eggs, illuminated by carefully placed spotlights.

Once they actually got inside the park, they found themselves in the (thankfully undercover) World Bazaar. The shopfronts of the Grand Emporium, the Penny Arcade, and the various shops selling hideously overpriced merchandise were lit up in gold; shop windows kitted out with yet more Easter-themed paraphernalia. Even the snacks were Easter-themed. Snacks, in Japan, were *a/ways* seasonally themed. Seasons are but the ephemeral tides of time, and snacks will only tide you over until dinnertime.

They bought caps with bunny ears on them. They had to buy *something*. They were surprisingly sleek, black with metallic silver ear-inners.

Miyuki put hers on backwards. "Do I look cool?" she asked.

"Yes," said Astra. "Except that your ears are backwards."

"So that no one can sneak up on me."

“Touché.”

They escaped the Bazaar into the park proper, Disney Castle looming magnificently in the near distance, set upon by indigo floodlights. It was full dark by now. In the rain, which had calmed to a gentle mist, the light beams took on shapes of their own, as if they were something you could touch.

“Where first?” Miyuki questioned.

Astra thought about it for approximately half a second. “*It’s a Small World?*”

Miyuki stared. Then sighed. “Do we have to? It’s on the other side of the park.”

“Yes, Miyu, we have to. It’s like the Disneyland inauguration. The rite of passage. The hazing ritual. They shouldn’t even be letting people in until they’ve proven that they can survive the worst.”

Miyuki continued to stare sceptically.

“Also it’s my birthday so we have to do what I say.”

“Okay. Fine.”

They went to *It’s a Small World*.

Astra wasn’t sure what she was expecting. It was ten minutes of torture.

It’s a small world after all... sang a little voice in her head as they finally escaped into the rain-misted air. *Sekai wa onaji...*

As if the song wasn’t annoying enough in just one language.

“I regret everything,” Astra said. “I am so sorry for making you go through that.”

Miyuki threw her a dirty look. “Good,” she said sharply. “Now we have to go to Space Mountain.”

“Deal.”

They went to Space Mountain. It was pretty rad. It’s a rollercoaster (though tame), so of course it was. After that, they wandered about the park, huddled under Miyuki’s umbrella, mostly content to just look. They had a go on the teacups, which was, as teacup rides always were, a terrible idea. Splash Mountain and Thunder Mountain were musts, as well, because of the word “mountain” in the name, and then they decided to make their way back towards Space Mountain. The Three Mountains of Disneyland. Space, Splash, and Thunder. The three cardinal elements of Disney.

After that, it was past nine, and the storm clouds had given a second wind to their deluge. They were making their way back towards the World Bazaar when a middle-aged woman in a plastic poncho stopped Miyuki to ask her something, in quickfire Japanese which Astra wouldn’t have been able to decipher even without the rain beating a discordant staccato on their umbrella.

While Miyuki was talking to the woman, helping her with directions or something, Astra looked over to the castle, tall and elegant in the centre of the park, shining bright despite the

shitty weather. There, to the left of the tallest turret, through a tiny, improbable gap in the cloud cover, was the moon. Just the barest sliver of a crescent, like a glorified nail clipping, peering through that improbable gap as if... as if it were watching her.

Heartrate elevated, breath tangled in her throat, Astra stepped out from under the umbrella, into the rain, staring the moon in the eye. The moon *was* the eye, shadowy eyelid flickering open and shut in elongated phases. The swinging of a lamp. The emptying of an hourglass.

The rain was coming down with all the oneness of a waterfall. The sky should have been nothing more than a smog of ornery precipitation, but there it was. The moon, crescent, edges softened; bleeding into the background as if someone had put it into photoshop and attacked it with the blur tool. Its light was timid and ghostly and hazy.

The rain hammered mercilessly down. She could smell the wet pavement, the ozone, her own shampoo from where her recently-washed hair was plastered to her face and neck. The rain was sharp on her skin. She could barely keep her eyes open against the onslaught, but she couldn't close them if she wanted to.

The rain seemed to pierce straight through her, soaking her in seconds, even with the pullover she was wearing—and with being soaked came its close friend, being freezing cold. She was shivering so hard it seemed as if she might splinter apart.

Good, she thought. Good. Let it be painful. Let it be uncomfortable. Because there was no way this much *sensation* could ever be anything less than *real*. There was no way she could be anything but awake right now. It wasn't possible—it *couldn't* be possible—to dream in this much tactile detail, no matter how accurately her brain recreated her memories. There was no way.

Astra jumped at the touch of a warm hand on her arm. The rain disappeared, replaced by the thunderous off-beat drumbeat once again. Miyuki was giving her a thoroughly concerned look, holding the umbrella low over their heads.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," Astra replied automatically, already feeling guilty for the obvious lie.

Miyuki's brow furrowed. "Let's go," she said. "We can talk on the train."

"Sure," Astra said, so softly that the weather stole the sound before it reached even her own ears.

She glanced back at the castle, but the patch of sky beside the blue-lit turret was dark and empty.

That was how Astra found herself soaking wet in a mostly-empty train car for the second time in as many days.

Her clothes under the pullover hadn't fared too badly, but her hair and jeans and even her brand-new bunny-ear cap were drenched, which was, as ever, an uncomfortable state of being. She and Miyuki sat facing each other across the aisle as the train rumbled along the line toward Tokyo Station. Perhaps it was because she was cold and miserable and anxious, but Astra was really craving a hot cup of coffee right about now. Probably not the best thing to be wanting at ten in the evening, but whatever. Surely there'd be somewhere open, espresso machines fired up, ready to take mercy. Surely.

Miyuki was staring at her.

"I guess I just..." Astra began, "had a moment."

"A moment?"

"A moment." She sighed. "I wondered if I was still dreaming, or something. Still not sure. How can I be?"

Miyuki frowned. She almost looked like she was about to cry.

"Is that what's been happening, lately?" she asked. Then, more quietly, "No one tells me anything."

Astra blinked. "I guess," she said. "Sorry. I mean, I didn't really know how to say it without sounding completely batshit."

Miyuki shrugged. "If it helps... I did some digging. You know the software I use to record your brain while you dream? Nebula has an archive of recordings from other people's dreams. I used Tenjin's passcode to take a look at them." She lapsed into thoughtful silence.

"And?" Astra prompted.

"I'm trying to think how to explain," Miyuki said. "Your dreams were always... sharp. Static. In the image conversion, especially. But they've been becoming fuzzier, and more... like they move around more, and more quickly. I didn't know until I looked, but most people's dreams are like that. I don't really understand it."

Astra fiddled with the damp bunny-ear cap in her hands. "So, you think my dreams are becoming more normal."

"I guess. And that's good, right?"

"Sure. I guess."

"You won't have to worry about not being able to tell the difference."

"Yeah."

Astra tried on a smile, just a timid upward curve. Too much effort. Too unnatural. Like straightening a paperclip. It was a little easier once Miyuki smiled back.

Then they were silent for a while, tired in their own ways. Astra twisted the bunny ear around her hand, then released it. Twist, and release.

"My parents are splitting up," she said suddenly.

When she looked up, Miyuki was wearing that face again, like *she* was the one about to cry.

“I’m sorry,” Miyuki said.

“It’s okay. I was expecting it. He’s not even my actual father, but... yeah, I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to think about it,” Miyuki said quickly. “You’re here, in Japan. Far away. It doesn’t matter.”

Astra made a face. “I have to go home sometime, Miyuki.”

“Do you *want* to?”

She got the impression that Miyuki, at least, didn’t want her to go. Which was so insanely touching, Astra wouldn’t ever be able to put it into words. But this was never supposed to be anything but a temporary arrangement—she hadn’t expected to be here as long as she had.

It seemed silly to worry about telling the difference between dreaming and waking, now that she knew this: reality had finally caught up.

“I think so,” she finally said.

Miyuki frowned, but nodded.

“Gabby gave me her business card,” Astra continued. “Said she’d be able to help me get out of the contract with Tenjin.”

“Really?” Miyuki asked, incredulous. “Just tell him you want to leave. I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

“Yeah,” said Astra, smiling, a little more easily this time. “I was thinking the same thing. To be honest, I think Tenjin’s run out of steam.”

Miyuki laughed. “About time.”



moon-dappled cloud haze
misty silver midnight daze
the sun stays away

It was only that the pieces had lined up perfectly for a single, remarkable moment. Like the sun, the moon, and the earth during an eclipse. It was the umbral glow of a phenomenon that allowed for spectacular occurrences.

The pull of orbital currents is too great for any celestial body or speck of dust to resist. Eclipses end. Eclipsed by time. The sun, the moon, the earth, the planets, the stars all return to business as usual. Return to disarray, a mess of lights and shapes and colours across a cold, empty sky. Salt on asphalt. Glitter on satin.

Another eclipse will always come. Another new moon. Another meteor shower. These things will come and go, but the pieces will never line up in exactly the same way again. For sanity's sake, that's probably for the best. Being able to tell the difference between dream and reality is a valuable commodity, after all. No one's truly as good at it as they might like to believe.

Opinions or facts.

A believable lie or an inconceivable truth.

One angle or another, the same sphere from different sides, in different lights.

Fiction or nonfiction.

Normally, that might be where I'd raise an eyebrow, but words on a page don't have eyebrows. Or even eyes, for that matter.

Just words. Just scenes. Just fragments. Arranged just so, like pieces of a puzzle.

The only problem with puzzles is that the finished image is latticed with seams.

But the finished image was never really the point, was it?



9

After everything, after all this time, there was something implacably weird about being home. Sitting at the same old dinner table in the same old dining room with the same old family. The six o'clock news droned on in the background.



It had been a while, Astra supposed, and she supposed she'd changed a lot over the past months. It was normal enough, expected even, that being back would feel so strange. Her sense of equilibrium had been so thoroughly unsettled, there was no way it could ever return to exactly what it had been. It was to be expected.

Still, it felt too *easy* an explanation. She wasn't sure why she felt that way, just that she did.

There was no one thing in particular that struck her as particularly off. Things were normal. Almost too normal. Mum had made cottage pie for dinner, Ezra was his sullen, smartass self, and Marshall sat at the head of the table reading the weekly paper, even while the television informed them of tomorrow's weather (a little sunshine and a little rain). As if nothing was wrong in the entire world. Business as usual.

Perhaps it was just the seeming suddenness of it all. I mean, it felt like only moments ago that Astra was... what, at Disneyland? On the train with Miyuki, talking about going home? And now, here she was. Home. Nothing odd about that, was there? Why should there be? She remembered everything in between. All the... stuff. Narita airport. Saying goodbye. Promising to meet again someday. Getting on the plane, and taking off into the sky for eleven long hours.

She was probably just tired and jetlagged. Sure, all that felt like only moments ago, but at the same time, the entire six months leading up to this moment had already started to feel far away. To take on a distance that had nothing to do with physical space. Japan, and all her time spent there, had already started to feel more like a dream than a memory.

Which is a perfectly acceptable thing to feel because, in a way, that was exactly the case.

"Got any plans for tomorrow, Astra?" Marshall asked, folding the newspaper and putting it aside.

"What? Oh, uh... no? Not really. Sleep, I guess. Why?"

He shrugged. "Just asking. Ezra?"

Ezra shrugged.

"Alright, then." He glanced at Mum, who rolled her eyes but said nothing.

Astra smiled to herself. Yes. This was normal. Very normal.

So why did it feel so *wrong*?

It was an early dinner, so by the time Astra was free to return to her room the sun had just set and the sky was clinging to the last grey trails of light. It was that awkward time of evening where it's technically light enough to see, just maybe not in any detail. The sky was still barely blue, faded like decades-old denim, but all the houses and trees were reduced to dark silhouettes against the pale, starless sky.

Astra's room was exactly as it always was. Exactly as she had left it. Slightly messy, bed unmade—disorganised, certainly, but not a total wreck like Ezra's room. Proof of maturity, as she liked to think of it.

Visible from the window was the darker side of the sky; the side opposite the sunset. The side of sunrises and moonrises.

It was an odd sight, the full moon in the still-blue sky. She stood by the window, gripping the curtains, ready to close out the outside, close out the day, but something about the incongruity of *full moon* and *blue sky* set a strange anxiousness whirring in her chest. This was that feeling of wrongness. It was the feeling that she was forgetting something.

On a compulsive whim, she turned to her right. For a moment, she thought she'd heard a voice... she thought she'd heard her name. But now that the moment was gone she couldn't say for sure whether she'd really heard anything or if she'd only imagined it, because, in a way, she expected it.

Of course, there was nothing there. Of *course* there was nothing there. Just her own reflection in the mirror. Dark hair, pale skin, grey eyes. She was the same Astra that she had always been, and would always be.

She closed the curtains, shutting out the now dull-grey sky, leaving the slightest of seams to invite in the moonlight.

*The wind in the pines
Swirls about the eaves
And autumn comes to an **end**.*

松風や
軒くをめぐって
秋暮れぬ

Notes—

“On a journey, fallen ill” (autumn 1694); “A cloud of blossoms” (spring 1687); “The moon sets” (autumn 1693); “The wind in the pines” (autumn 1694): haiku by Matsuo Bashō, translations my own.

空の空の空想・くうのくうのくうそう・*kū no kū no kū sō* — *Daydreams of Empty Skies*. “Sky” and “emptiness” share the same kanji (空), which also comprises half of “daydream.”

Chapter 1: 序破急・じょはきゅう・*jo-ha-kyū* — concept in Japanese aesthetics: beginning, break, rapid. Describes the traditional pattern of momentum in arts such as music, film, and theatre. To begin slowly, build intensity, and end swiftly.

Chapter 2: 秘密・ひみつ・*himitsu* — secret; mystery.

Chapter 3: 無常観・むじょうかん・*mujōkan* — sense of the vanity and evanescence of life; the impermanence of worldly things.

Chapter 4: 神隠し・かみかくし・*kamikakushi* — mysterious disappearance; spirited away.

Chapter 5: 幽玄・ゆうげん・*yūgen* — concept in Japanese aesthetics: a profound awareness of the beauty and sadness of the universe, far beyond what words can describe.

Chapter 6: 忘れ物・わすれもの・*wasuremono* — something lost; something forgotten.

Chapter 7: 侘寂・わびさび・*wabi-sabi* — concept in Japanese aesthetics: an acceptance of imperfection and impermanence, and an emphasis on the beauty of such.

Chapter 8: 金継ぎ・きんつぎ・*kintsugi* — lit. golden seams; the art of repairing broken pottery and ceramics with lacquer mixed with powdered gold. Acknowledges breakage and repair as part of an object’s history. Highlights the beauty of imperfection, as per *wabi-sabi*.

Chapter 9: 夢・ゆめ・*yume* — dream; vision; illusion.