

In An Alternate Universe

Today, I saw an old woman on her deathbed. The dream centered around her last moment, a former beauty with paper-white hair and skin like dry leaves. The worst part was that she lay alone the entire time. I pitied her, but I couldn't run away as her nurse, staring at monitors with green lines and buttons in a foreign language. The hospital room is empty, white, and barren, but the warmth from the woman bids hot chocolate on a cold day.

I didn't deserve to be near her.

"Nurse Marianne, thank you for the water. Oh, come. Sit beside me, will you? It'll be all the better if you do." Her voice was fluid, reminding me of home. From what I saw in the movies, the monitors seemed okay, but she was still dying.

"Of course, Mrs. Hikari," I replied. *Is this what a nurse would say?* Dreams leave you to improvise.

The windows were drawn to reveal a dreary sky, trees left bare and a strong wind buffeting the branches. Autumn, in its miserable finest, cast pale light from the day. The chair beside her was decent, but it was meant for stiff and brief conversation. I would stay until Mrs. Hikari passed, because dreamhunters like me come with a purpose. If I don't pawn enough valuable items I steal from dreams, it's a waste of time and effort. But with this woman, I wouldn't dare to move away.

"Do you think it'll be sunny tomorrow?" Her voice was twinged with final hopes and yearning.

I blinked at her with a professional smile. "The weather forecast says it's gonna rain, Mrs. Hikari."

She looked at me with a child's eyes when they watched you kick a dog. The life monitors sounded frantically, the jagged lines pulsating, before they stilled to a long *beep*.

Mrs. Hikari died with horror on her face. It was all my fault.

As I turned back to her, she disappeared. In her stead was Absolutely Nothing, a dark void deeper than black. The mass was growing, seemingly out of the woman herself, and soon covered the original hospital bed, and would take the path with it. I opened the door in a frenzy, and rushed out to a crystalline path which replaced the hallway, and a giant void of space with stars looming instead of ceilings.

My logical brain told me if I could turn on the jetpack, follow the path, and pray to outrun Absolutely Nothing, I'd live to see another day. But as I slammed the ignition button over and over again, I remembered that this morning, I'd forgotten to replace the fuel canisters.

Let's just say this was only the one of many times I got screwed over.

I ran like the wind. Absolutely Nothing obscured the portal from view, devoured it for all I knew. Any speculations or doubts as to what would meet me at the end of the path was nowhere on my mind's menu, so I ran and ran until my lungs burned and my legs were lead. All of time and space were watching me on this rainbow road that never seemed to end. Was judgement day upon me? Did the Fates decide I would die a horrible, painful death, and never be heard from again?

One misstep and I collapsed, rolling my right ankle down onto the unbreakable glass. The hunter, darkness, waited behind me, and a glowing speck of light up front shone. My only saving grace reached me as I cried from the pain - *a portal!*

I jumped through it, and landed on the cold hard floor of my room: From one nightmare to the next.

One thing that I've learned about people's dreams is that dreamers fight for sense in each and every one, even if they're dying. Isn't that kind of sad, being identical to reality? Dreams are supposed to be a time to kick back and enjoy a beautiful mess. Lucky them, getting to experience lovely universes that know no limits, with sights from every walk of imagination.

But us? We are the parasites of the Mainworld's scraps: technology, knowledge, entertainment, and at times, even things as clothes and food. By the time we reach three years old, we stop wondering about living as an independent dimension, without being tethered through portals and other people's dreams. Our world makes nothing of its own.

I have never dreamed in my life, neither has anyone in this dimension. If I could dream, would I be an artist or singer, in this same, comfortable house?

Maybe it's the fault of people like me, making a ruin of lovely old ladies' last words. But I wouldn't know.

The same day, I end up getting some treatment for my ankle, which sends a pulse of pain every other breath. Thank God I can afford this with the ubiquitous hazard pay my job provides, and I have the time to rest comfortably before I'm off to another dream through the portal in my

room. Lots of hours are spent idly, shopping through the excess of my paycheck - new shoes, new pants...It's all the same.

A few weeks ago, I stole a pendant necklace of pure gold. Unblemished, the inside of the pendant encased a heart-shaped cutout of a boy with curly brown hair and a lopsided smile. All this feeling, created from someone else's imagination, was unknowingly snatched away by me.

But this locket has no sentimental value to me, and I would rather pay bills by pawning it off to the corp I work for. They'll take the item, and I'll keep the sixty percent value rate I get: that is what I call a spectacular day. Spectacular days are best spent at a local cafe, ordering a fine drink and pastry just to indulge a little. Today, it's a small cup of jasmine tea paired alongside a lotus pastry.

My manager, an icy woman named Steira, requested to have a chat with me as colleagues do. As her best asset and most experienced dreamhunter, who else is there better for me to talk to? Conversation with her stays stiff, and I pick only the ripest words, because Steira can talk and talk about job performance and total earnings and divisional revenue and hazard gear maintenance for hours.

Across from our table are two girls: teenagers, the unfortunate asses. They're talking animatedly like they're on a gossip scene of a teledrama, with invisible cameras focused on them. I catch bits and pieces of their conversation, wondering what it's like to be one of them, young and naive and without a care in the world, other than drama and homework.

They laugh so loud, it's getting hard not to ignore it - I purse my lips and take a long sip of my tea. But there's beauty in friendship, a simple mutual connection that allows flowers to grow from seeds, and spread beauty as heralds of spring. Springtime is when crops grow - nature's creation, life's dependency. My life must be a barren wasteland, loneliness freezing over to an unforgiving winter. I don't make anything of my own: what an empty life to live.

All this useless thinking made my tea grow cold, and my pastry lost its fresh aroma. My manager looks at me with judgemental eyes in my silence. Maybe in another life, the boy in the locket will come to the cafe with me instead.

But the third Wednesday of every month is inventory day, and I can worry about friends later.

MY BEDROOM

1. Stylish neon leopard-print blanket, although a little worn, draped off the bunk bed
2. Empty chip wrappers decorating the floor

3. A clunky camera labeled “Kodak”, with a little roll of “film”

None of these things belong to me. I have to remind myself every month to take inventory, a little ritual for myself thinking of all the items I care about, that all of these were stolen from the Mainworld. Ironic that we share the same planet, but not the same resources and space, or even the same view of the world - I mean that literally. Mainworlders don't know we exist, but we leech off them because our lives depend on it.

Essential workers, which is what dreamhunters and other unfortunate jobs are called, are people who bring home good money, and additional in-job bonuses as long as we don't die in the process. Many of us would prefer a quick death, not one by a thousand cuts to the spirit, mind, and well-being.

4. Fat, lazy cat named Stewart on my pillow
5. Books of maps (three, total, sitting on a DIY vinyl shelf, to places called *Iceland*, *Suriname*, and *Yellowstone National Park*)
6. A neon green jumpsuit which fits just right

It always feels better when I take inventory of the things I kept, because at least I know that the corp can't take them away from me, like the nightmare that stole away my right eye.

“No errors with your portal, Miss Paz? It's the only ticket in and out.” The tech maintenance lady quirks an eyebrow.

I give her a nod. “None, none at all. Checked myself, and the monitors look good.”

The lady's face is almost grim without a trace of a smile. “Do you know what a promotion entails?”

I was twenty-two, only a month into the job. In a random dream the portal led me to, there sat an untamed monster, locked in the room with me. A mutilated jackal's head, elephant's tusks, and a bony walrus's body were locked in an infinite spread of steel, madness itself filling the gaps of the cracked cement floor. Its chains dragged on the floor, the slow clink of rusted metal links covered with a dried blood. It was the only sound besides my breathing.

It happened so quickly, the monster lunging forward, scraping out my right eye with its long, obsidian-black claws, and leaving a bleeding, gaping, raw mess in its place. After I found the portal, I lay there for an eternity, bleeding out in my room.

That was the day I learned promotions directly translated to more risk, but I *wanted*. Living a normal, fulfilling life didn't matter anymore, not when material goods brought a new, empty happiness.

I won't go back to my parents, since I'm tired of being their favorite disappointment. Little eleven year old me had no idea she would make a living by putting her life on the line, nor could fifteen year old me, who dreamed of being a famous teleshow writer, imagine the monotony I lived.

My college degree in music fails to serve up a decent living when we live off the Mainworld. It rips me apart from the inside out knowing art cannot be valued like money, when creation speaks volumes more than the numerical values of bills. But we have another world as a source for music, games, and art. There's no purpose for our own.

Once my coworkers had paid off their student debts, they ran off to the future they'd promised themselves through education, practical passions. For me, there's none. The money pays well, I am fed and comfortable, and I have all I need. It's not like I know anything besides how to steal, to kill, if necessary, and not to get caught. Dreamhunting must sound nice, but it's more like a heinous crime where I'm the reluctant criminal. I've grown used to it where I can sleep at night by now, and the bad dreams fade off my fingers like dust as I wash my hands.

Oh, but Sylvia.

She had gray after-storm eyes, a baby face, and was eighteen years old. Her eyes were crappily done in shimmery black eyeshadow, lips overlined with a tawny beige - expensive makeup, wasted to paint a child's soft visage. It didn't matter what she looked like, or all the other dreamers I met; all I knew was that she lived a life I wanted. Friends, a family that loved and supported her through every walk of life, and an existence to be proud of. A talented prima ballerina, taking center stage in a performance that I viewed from the backseats.

I'd robbed the admissions desk's money just ten minutes prior. She herself would've been paid from the show to support her large family, but the idea of someone as young as her working at all caused my jaw to clench. Black eyeshadow and overdone mascara stared back at me as my brain went into panic, the infinite possibilities of what the dream could shift into running through my mind.

How difficult it was to stay steady on two feet, when every part of me simmered with jealousy.

“How are you? Name’s Sylvia.” With that, the setting disappeared to become a beach, a Tahitian paradise under a glowing sunset.

“I’m sorry?” I didn’t catch what she said.

“You *are* a sorry thing, and I’m sad you are,” the girl sighed. The waves crashed and rolled on behind us, the last of the birds passed by in the sky to roost for the night, and the sun dipped lower in the ocean of golden red. “There are better things to do than pity yourself. I see you...Ingrid Paz, right?”

The money in my backpack started to get an awful lot lighter. “Yes, that’s me.”

Sylvia straightened the tulle of her skirt. “You ever feel like you’re stuck?”

I wanted to laugh and laugh until tears rolled down my face. “*Always*. Always and forever. I’m stuck here, with you.”

“Well, not every time you walk around, you end up on a nice beach. I know it’s hard, but take a breath, and try to enjoy it for a bit.”

The sea waved its hello - I was tempted to smile back. “Of course the world’s *hard*. I don’t think I’ve walked on many nice roads at all, let alone a beach.”

She glided closer, her eyes growing soft. The wind fluttered the ends of her baby hairs. “You look a lot older than you are, and I know you want to be free from here.”

More than I could ever imagine. “We’re worlds apart. I’ve never met you, and you’re not my friend, and, I’ll...never talk with you again.”

The last of the sun’s rays gave me enough light to see her face - young, accomplished, and beautiful. She had a life ahead of her, and I spent my energy hoping she’d receive it.

Strong arms wrapped around me as the bright Sylvia held my dull body tight. “Ingrid, don’t worry. I know I’ll see you on my end of the neighborhood, and we’ll walk at the beach again.”

I wanted her to hold me forever, to keep the light in my life a little longer.

“Wait, *don't go!*” The embrace faded away, leaving behind only blankness and the breeze. Sylvia's chin tucked on my shoulder, and her motherly, kind smile, became stories of the past. She vanished with everything I wanted. Every part of me unreplaced.

So I cope by food.

Leftover steak's now spinning in the microwave, and I smell its goodness from the dinner table. The legs still have the initials where my friends and I got crazy drunk, crashed at my place, and drew little hearts and shit on the wood. It's been a long while since friends have stopped by my city apartment, where they used to call home.

I can't dare to call dreamers companions, but they're the closest I have. Both of us were unknowing - me in the past, and that girl, Sylvia. She doesn't need leopard-print blankets or a lazy fat cat to find peace: can she find bigger, better things? Mom told me never to let other people affect how you think, but our society says strange things about former dreamhunters. They're filled with trauma or ludicrous interpretations of reality. Always lost, without set footing in their lives, steps drunkenly swaying until they stumble on something better. Our society is just a parasite on the Mainworld, and we keep it alive.

My job performance has declined lately even with a recovered ankle, so I received jargon-filled messages full of niceties. “*Take care of yourself*”? They could replace me in a split second, and I would have no right to complain. I'm tired of risking my life, not when other people are living without the fear of constant death, waking up every day and wondering if it's going to be your last.

I yearn for nothing more than to be a part of the Mainworld, and maybe if I looked hard enough, I could see my reflection in Sylvia's eyes. Me in her place.

I close my eyes to sleep in my little fairytale. There is a woman, a tired bun in her hair, but vigor in her step. She shares my name, Ingrid, and does what she wants. In whatever world she lives in, on one end of the portal to another, her home is a refuge and the scars on her body have long healed to little flashes on skin. On weekends, she goes to view films in the cinema, laughs with a girl named Sylvia and a cat named Stewart, and thinks about what she will publish next.

With this life, I know I won't see many riches or luxuries, but it's better than the lies my Corp fed me. I sent a message to them saying I quit my job. What I didn't say was that I'll be in my own world where you don't have to steal to live, but rather, create something to keep and share.

One day, I'll see someone being born again. My vision revolves around a young woman, with hair a deep brown, and skin marked up like a book. Yet the best part is that her words will comfort her, and she will never be alone again.