

Paid to Dream

-PLAYING TONIGHT AT THE LOFT – FREE MOONSHINE!!! THIS IS NOT A DRILL.

9.00PM-

The metallic clang of the dying guitar chord rang out like an ever-decreasing assault on Rohan's pounding cerebellum. Rohan had mentally arranged a *tete-a-tete* with his bed, to last for the foreseeable future, until the last-minute buzz from his sister had dredged him from his pit, staying the hand of imminent oblivion for an evening. Tonight was supposed to be a temporary blank in a grim week which had built like a crescendo, pushing Rohan closer to the edge. Tonight was the part where he fell. Hitting the ground would come later.

In a world of darkness, Remy and the Acolytes owned the night. Rohan had seen his elder sister's Furycore band in excess of fifty times, he guessed; he'd even sold merch for them one slow winter, to pick up a few extra credits. He wasn't there to have his musical mind blown; the free moonshine had definitely swung it. What better way to begin an indefinite period of wallowing than by getting absolutely monged off his muffin.

Unsurprisingly it hadn't done his head any favours. Perched high on a stool towards the back of the dingy basement club, even the dim lighting forced his wide pupils closed and he squinted in discomfort. Rohan massaged his temples fretfully and cursed his lack of willpower. He could have been well and truly mired in self-pity by now, content as a pig in muck. Instead he'd watched a collection of pale adolescent boys throw themselves around to the incandescent assault. He cringed every time one of them made a hopeless attempt to grope Remy as she powered through their blistering setlist, smirking for each and every one she managed to swat away with the head of her guitar.

Throwing off her guitar, Remy hopped down from the stage and shared a joke with the barman, accepting the drink he'd already prepared for her. Rohan's throbbing eyes squinted at her

as she took her drink, housed in a metal caddy, and began to wind her way through the crowd, accepting words of adulation from the crowd and aiming snide comebacks at sexual advances as she came to join him.

‘Little brother,’ Remy’s cheeks popped inwards and her eyes widened cartoonishly as she vacuumed up half of the violent pink liquid in one. ‘You don’t look so hot. You sleeping OK? I haven’t seen you in the Veil all week.’

Luckily, for all the problems Rohan did have, lack of sleep was not one of them. The Veil, the shared dreamspace that all Nocturnes had access to, was where much of the business of living would occur during the long nights. Daytime was all but redundant, and was mostly spent in pursuit of leisure, for those

‘I’m sleeping just fine. I got laid off from work so I’ve been taking pills trying to avoid my boss.’

‘Oh Ro, I wish you wouldn’t,’ Remy frowned and stirred the dregs of her drink, eyes in her glass. ‘It’s not healthy.’

Nocturnes dreamed real, and the upshot of this was to avoid entering the Veil, they had to take sleeping pills.

‘Actually, one of the reasons I came by was to say goodbye, for now. I’m checking out for a while.’

Remy’s face crippled with regret. ‘No...’ was all she could say. Rohan had been through dark phases before, but there was little doubt as to the cause of this latest decision to give up on the day. Checking out was a last resort: setting up a timed drip and sleeping for weeks at a time. Waking life was hard enough without having to go through it all again at night.

‘I heard about Bryony. I’m sorry, bro.’

The news that Rohan’s ex-girlfriend Bryony Sylvan’s body had been found comatose in her home that morning had indeed precipitated Rohan’s latest descent into apathy. Scarlet-haired,

tall and fragile like a climbing wallflower, Bryony was erudite and driven in a way Rohan was not, nor ever could be. Yet despite appearing to be from different planets, they had dated for almost two years, and although they'd been apart for a spell, Rohan was as committed to her as her ever was when they were together.

Remy gripped Rohan's shoulder, rubbing it with her thumb. 'Not too long this time, OK?' It was to no avail. Rohan's vacant, bloodshot eyes glazed with moonshine, reflecting halos from the mist-clouded streetlights as Remy steered him in the direction of the night-trams. Sitting dormant until they were activated by someone in need of transport, night-trams hovered on tracks in the centre of the shadowy street, just a little too sentient to be trusted.

Pitching forward and backwards like a marionette whose puppeteer was on a cigarette break, Rohan pushed away from Remy. He sensed her hang back, heard her spark up a cigarette and exchange a crude joke with her bass player. Rohan made his exit towards an alley in pursuit of some ghost of an idea. The bewitching allure of long, dark nights softened by nameless comforts eked into the main street with neon promise. Rohan felt hollow, despite the sloshing in his guts, emptied out of feeling. Perhaps he could seek refreshment in one of the brittle, shining palaces of whispered touches, secret pleasures... Nausea overtook him in a wave and he paused to lean forward, bracing himself on his knees.

Stuck to the floor like a fly trapped in amber, the free corner of a flyer fluttered in the stale breeze like a helpless wing, catching Rohan's bleary eye. He sunk to his haunches to read the block red words.

TIME ON YOUR HANDS?

CHECKING OUT FOR A WHILE?

SHARE YOUR DREAMS WITH THOSE WHO NEED THEM!

REWARDS AVAILABLE

Rohan squinted, re-reading the address, and looked up. He was standing right outside.

‘Right this way, sir.’ The identikit DreamLabs employee drifted droid-like down the rows of SlumbaPods and gestured to the first empty one. ‘Payment will be made upon collection of any complete, untampered dreams, at a rate of 6 credits per dream.’

It sure beat racking up credits in the FitLabs. Rohan had never been fond of physical exertion, but his rich imagination warranted some restitution. Whilst it was not the same as holing up in his pit, at least he could earn while he checked out. He’d wake up in a few weeks, maybe months, with enough to see him by until he found another job. Remy would be proud of him, he decided.

He settled into the booth, head pounding, gratefully drank the crystal clear green extraction serum as though it was a precious elixir designed for early onset hangovers, and settled down to sleep. He wondered idly if his dreams were even worthy of credit. After the day he’d had, he wouldn’t be surprised if his long night was punctuated with grim horrors instead of the quixotic fancies he presumed they were seeking. After all, the recipients didn’t need any more misery.

Bryony thought. Of all the people to succumb to the sleep mutation that afflicted an increasing number of the population, she was the most unlikely candidate. Vivacious and vital, she shone brighter than those around her, as if her life force just had more to do with its days. At least, that’s how she’d appeared to him.

Too much sleep had taken its toll on Terra Nocturna and now, people were falling asleep and never waking up. They would be tended to by their families, checked into luxury sleep homes, or – for those less fortunate – into one of the free community-run storage containers. And they eventually

just ceased to live. It couldn't even be called dying. To die suggested some remaining element of agency; an action being carried out. The Sleepers just, stopped. Like wind-up clocks who just one day ticked down and couldn't be re-wound. Sometimes it took weeks, sometimes years. The first Sleeper diagnosed with the mutation was sleeping still after almost eight years.

Rohan gazed at the lid of the SlumbaPod, just a few inches from his face, stoic resignation the only thing keeping him from surrendering to the rising panic. Confined spaces were most definitely not his jam. *Here lies Rohan*, he thought, *in his very own self-designed rock bottom*. In a land where misery was like a prevailing wind, still Rohan had managed to carve out a niche of wretchedness so pathetic he may as well have been a Sleeper himself.

Yet somehow, selling his dreams for credits wrought an even deeper wound on his soul. Selling dreams was risky business. The risk? Eternal emptiness. A soul that didn't warrant the name; a dried out husk of a life. Was it worth it? He'd spin the wheel, take his chance. Why not. Might ease the blank void of a Sleeper's existence for a time. The worst part of their affliction was the psychic disconnection. The Sleepers didn't appear in the Veil anymore. It was as though their ability to dream-share had been expunged from their ailing consciousnesses. Scientists had pioneered a method for harvesting dreams from normal Nocturnes which could then be gifted to Sleepers, to make their Cessation more pleasant and enjoyable. Reports varied as to the efficacy of the procedure but over time, it had been refined and now, they were signs that here and there, Sleepers were responding. There were even claims that some of them had been seen in the Veil again, albeit briefly. It certainly seemed to extend their lifespans.

But at what cost? Those sacrificing their precious nocturnal hours had yet to report any long-term damage but their faces displayed a void where expression had once been. What did it matter, thought Rohan. The void had already found his soul; it would reach his face eventually. Why not precipitate it, earn enough to feed himself in the process. Rohan closed his eyes and accepted the encroaching coma, falling into the arms of sleep a willing victim.

The Vale... Rohan knew it from the stories. Tall, dark trees clustered in gangs, random assortments of bushes, bracken and grasses filling out the landscape either side of the river that cut its way through the gorge, purposefully forging a hopeful path to some distant coast. The rushing water and swaying branches shaking their leaves out gave the place a busy feel, though it was deserted. Its inhabitants had their own agendas, obscuring Rohan's view and blocking his path at every step as he picked his way through the forest. When he reached the water's edge he crouched low, scooping a few handfuls of the cool water to his mouth to quench his thirst.

A sound from further down the bank caught his ear. Sitting with her knees bent up, arms wrapped around them, her chin propped on top, was a girl. She hadn't noticed him; the noise of the river commanded full attention at this close range and as he crept towards her he feared that his sudden presence would shock her, so he leaned into the flow of the water, trying to intercept her line of sight. She didn't move or even seem to notice him. He knelt down next to her to speak but his voice was inaudible; he wondered if the dream had rendered him mute, the way they did sometimes in rem-sleep.

She was beautiful. Glowing almost yellow. Not the colour of a Nocturne, pallid and white, but otherworldly, from that mythical place with its long, glorious days of sunshine. He crept around the bright-skinned beauty, who still made no sign of acknowledging his presence, as though examining a sleeping lion, stealing glimpses of her in careful snapshots – one side of her face, the other, her back. Crouching down on the ground in front of her and gazing across the timid contours of her slight figure.

Without warning her head snapped up and she locked eyes with him. Her eyes were blue – bright, cerulean, otherworldly. Transfixed, Rohan studied the micro vacillations at the edges of her pupils as they invited him in. She smiled then, a wide, warm smile that penetrated his soul

with comfort, longing, and a complex nostalgia for a home he didn't think he'd ever inhabited, yet he knew was the place in the world carved out just for him.

They exchanged no words. Language seemed an unnecessary distraction from the looking. Looking, so intricate and laden with meaning. Reading one another like exquisite works of literature, absorbing both the exterior features that constructed one another's narratives, then probing deeper, reading between the lines, searching for visual clues as to the subtle nuances that had layered them like paintings across their lives.

Then fingers reaching, intertwining like vines creeping around vines, creating an inextricable rope of digits that could surely never be broken. They bound together like roots in the soil, slipping against each other's surfaces serene as lilies on a pond. Organically combining, the only two ingredients in a recipe for divine fate. They were meant for one another. This was no chance encounter. Their destinies were as inextricably linked as adjacent branches on the same tree. Two parts of a whole that could now, finally, grow as one. They inclined towards each other like swans, bending around one another with a symmetry so achingly perfect the forest swayed in appreciation. When their lips met, a fusion of sorts took place. It was done.

Rohan's breath scraped along his windpipe to his lungs as he reached for it desperately, gasping and scrambling to a sitting position in the SlumbaPod. There was no indication of what time of day it was, but he could see from the digital clock on his Pod that he'd been asleep for almost a week. The dream meter which measured his completed dreams was reading 38, 33 of which had already been harvested by the central pod. The number ticked up. 34...

The fog of sleep lay so heavy upon him it was almost tangible. There was a pulling sensation in the back of his mind, as something reached out to him, but fuzzy logic crowded it out as he tried to comprehend why he had awoken. Groggy, he rolled onto his side and pressed his

face into the thin downy pillow beneath him. He leaned in closer and inhaled. A whisper of a scent, lavender and apricots, almost sent him off the bed in shock.

The memory hit him square in the jaw like an upper cut. *Her*. The taste of her fizzed on his tongue, so real, fresh and juicy as a ripe apple. He savoured it, his skin coated in her touch, like bandages over raw wounds.

The number on the dream meter had jumped to 37 as he had been paralysed with remembering. There was a creeping sense of dread as he considered the possibility of his dream being taken from him.

‘Hey!’ In his scramble to exit the Pod Rohan’s foot caught on the inner wall, and he twisted and flailed impotently to try and free himself. Woozy from whatever concoction was circulating in his blood he fumbled. Finally free, he pitched forward, his knees meeting the marble floor with a sickening crack. He reflexively cried out in pain which caught the attention of the orderly, who began to amble back in his direction, picking up the pace when he saw Rohan sprawled on the floor. Rohan’s drip had ripped out in the scramble and his mind began to clear. His words came out in a jumble of panic as he tried to explain.

‘I just had this dream and I can’t let it go, I need it back, it’s just woken me up, there was this girl –’ he paused for breath as the orderly frowned up at the dream meter. He flicked it speculatively with the back of his fingernail in the way a doctor flicks a syringe to dislodge a wayward air bubble. Whether effected by the mechanics of the tap or purely by coincidence, the dream meter ticked over to 38.

‘Hmm.’ The orderly looked at Rohan, satisfied. He had clearly misunderstood, either that or he was really, really mean. Rohan grimaced both from the pain searing into his kneecaps and the frustration.

‘That dream that just went, there.’ He waved the hand of the layman at the thing he doesn’t understand towards the large receptacle in the centre of the room, complete with glutinous solution, collecting dreams seemingly via diffusion. ‘I need it back.’

The orderly looked at him oddly, clearly unused to such requests. ‘I need it back.’ Rohan repeated dumbly. ‘Put it back into me. However you do it with them, the Sleepers. Just put it back, it’s mine. I’ll give back the credits, I don’t care, I need it.’

The orderly’s face filled Rohan with dread and his hands were on his head, raking through his hair in anguish before the anticipated reply came. ‘It doesn’t work like that I’m afraid sir. Once extracted, a dream can’t be replaced. It would be like trying to put a drop of water back into a tap... I’m sorry.’

He did seem genuinely sorry. ‘I’ll report that you’re awake. It’s highly irregular. It’s best you wait here, you’ll be disoriented for some time. I’ll have someone bring you some food. Rest.’

Whilst meant kindly, it was a command rather than a suggestion. Rohan gave about as much heed as he did to making sure his shoelaces were tied before sloping off. Remy had always been the rebellious one, but he too had been disdainful of authority, albeit more a listless aversion to being told what to do. Time to be more like Remy. As he unhooked himself from the remaining drips, wincing, Rohan remembered a time when he’d been about ten, so Remy 13, leaving their learning encampment one day, Remy had peeled off the regulation green vests the children wore to identify them and pulled on a bright pink dress. Before she was even out of sight of the Learning Priest’s office. The sheer audacity of her. The memory made him smile for a moment, until reality reasserted itself. Sadness suffocated him like quicksand as he accepted the inevitability of the loss. His dream was to be someone else’s. He tried to imagine seeing it through their eyes; would they be a bystander, looking on, or would they experience it as though they were playing one of the two roles? He guessed the latter, and as it was his dream, he assumed it

would be him. The thought of someone else feeling as though she was theirs seized at his throat and strangled his muttered curse into a sob.

Clear of his Pod now, Rohan chased the orderly down the rows, the logical side of his brain throwing questions at him like a tennis ball machine placed far too close to the recipient. Rohan didn't even have a racket to return the ball-questions, so they continued firing him in the face as he struggled to comprehend enough to ask the right one. *How do the dreams stay separate? How do you distinguish one dream from the other? How do you administer a dream to a Sleeper? Is it random or are dreams matched to individuals? Can I go with my dream? Ooh, that one, pick that one!*

'Can I go with my dream?'

'Imsorrywhat?' The orderly had moved to the central collection pod and was grappling inexpertly with a convoluted contraption, all tubes and miniature conical flasks. Harvesting. Rohan saw the number on the dream meter jump up by five as the contraption compartmentalised five fresh dreams to be distributed to the needy. The orderly was siphoning off the glutinous solution now into the conical flasks. It sectioned off neatly in globules that collected like frogspawn in the conical flask container - each an individual dream.

'Where do you send this stuff next? To the sleep sheds?.'

The orderly was looking at Rohan as though he smelt of excrement, apparently immune to his emotional turmoil. 'We don't care for the term "sleep sheds", he said, revealing the source of the facial expression, 'they're known as "palliative care homes for the nocturnally disaffected", he corrected.

'Forget it.' Rohan stared down the collection of dreams, searing it in to his memory. The flask containing his dream had a little bobble on the neck, an imperfection. It was one of five flasks connected by a central pentagonal tube.

He crept along the rows of SlumbaPods silently and reached the wide shutter door, hanging on to the shadows until the last second, then darting across to the back of the van that the orderly had loaded with tray upon tray of miniature conical flasks.

Not an agile man, with the additional hindrance of the drugs in his system Rohan found it a superhuman feat to climb into the back of the van without disturbing anything or drawing attention to himself. The flatbed was blanketed with trays of dream flasks, and, once inside, he realised he had absolutely nowhere to conceal himself, and with the doors still half open, he could only rely on pure providence to deliver him from discovery.

Luck won the day. The orderly was reading off a clipboard, head down, as he swung the doors shut, and Rohan exhaled before the next problem presented itself. He had no way of bracing himself in position and avoiding smashing the precious cargo the second the driver made too much of a tricky bend. He wondered if providence would do him a second solid and gift him with a cautious driver. It turned out to be an unwarranted concern. The van drove in a straight line for less than a mile before pulling to a gentle halt. It was one of the out of town ‘sleep sheds’ that Rohan had denigrated to the orderly. His interest piqued. He had balked at the idea of a pampered rich boy being bequeathed his masterpiece of night-spun perfection. This, though, was the kind of place he would end up, if his sleep ever mutated. *Not that anyone would notice I was missing*, he thought, before giving himself a talking to. Yes he’d lost friends, lovers, in recent times, but he was doing Remy a disservice. She was as devoted to him as he was to her.

Still, as he prepared to disembark, his eyes on the flask that he knew contained his dream, he knew it wasn’t a far cry to imagine himself being shipped here – he’d been about to check out after all, willingly give in to the long dark night, and of the little known about the mutation, one thing was certain – the more you slept, the more chance you had of contracting it.

He shed the final vestiges of DreamLabs, his lanyard and wrist tag, and followed the driver as he offloaded the trays of delicately tinkling flasks. Rohan made as though he’d just

chanced upon the driver on his way into the sleep sheds, perhaps on the hunt for a missing loved one. The driver was more than happy to accept Rohan's offer of help and Rohan made sure to keep track of his dream all the way.

Once inside, he latched onto the busy looking administrator with the clipboard.

'Hey, I'm just here on an observation visit from Sector 6.' He said lightly, running his hand along the edge of the crate of dreams and avoiding her eye. 'I'm hoping to observe the recipients of this batch.' He leaned in conspiratorially. 'Heard there are some crackers in here.' With this he waggled his eyebrows suggestively and chanced an elbow in the ribs of the administrator.

Rohan was an excellent judge of character and he'd read the clucky middle-aged woman to perfection. Pleased with the flirtatious attention from a younger man, she grinned warmly and ushered Rohan to walk alongside her, and bring the tray of dreams with him.

'Ooh I'll bet there are,' she said. 'I've heard all sorts rock up in those DreamLabs, goodness knows what saucy treats there are in here. Sure to brighten their day a bit.' She indicated the cavernous warehouse that unfolded into the darkness ahead of them for what seemed like acres upon deserted acres.

'So, do you match the dream to the sleeper, or...?'

Rohan let the question hang in the air, a vacant space for the eager *Fynnula* (he tilted his head 45 degrees to read her nametag which had been applied in a hurry and sat askew just above her heart) to answer.

'Oh no, that would be far too much effort!' She exclaimed with a warm guffaw of refutation. 'It's completely random of course. Doesn't make much odds really, does it.' It was a statement, not a question. These people, indefinitely comatose in rows, maintained by the bare minimum of life systems, did not warrant the luxury of a selection of dreams. Rohan hung back with bated breath as she began to siphon off one dream at a time with a bulbous syringe, injecting

it into one of the drip bags hooked up next to the sleeper they had pulled up next to. How would he know which was his dream? It was a one in five chance, when she reached the flask he was maintaining eye contact with.

The effects, if not instantaneous, were noticeable in around half of the sleepers Rohan observed. Eyelids fluttered as visions of someone else's life enlivened them. Mouths twitched with the whispered incantations of strangers. Occasionally fingers juddered with imperceptible activity, carrying out phantom commands dreamt up by some other Nocturne's frontal cortex. It was all so futile, and yet Rohan carried the warmth of his dream inside him still, like a ball of white hot life. It had awoken something within him as well as literally waking him, inexplicably, from a supposedly indefinite coma. Instinct told him he would see a reaction, when it was finally detonated in a lucky recipient's psyche.

Finally the flask. The one containing his and four other dreams. He didn't know how he would know, but he could not look away. The first man they came across had lank dark hair plastered to his skull in twisted clumps. His cheeks were sunken as divots in xyz, *Not him...* Rohan watched the dream take hold and knew in an instant his was still nestled safely within the container. Nothing of the man's face indicated anything of interest was occurring behind the eyes. It couldn't be his.

The second was a woman, old as time, white hair luminous in the half-light, lips shrivelled with dehydration and glued together with mucous. Rohan was ashamed to feel revulsion, but he couldn't begrudge this woman his dream, and yet he knew once again, it wasn't the one. Her face remained impassive.

The third and fourth were the same. Impassive. He almost didn't want to see them, as hope ebbed from him, and he grasped and fixated upon the only possible outcome: that his was the fifth and final dream in the flask, and that this next sleeper would be the recipient.

As Fynnula uploaded the dream into the drip bag Rohan hummed to himself, eyes half-closed as he peeked at the bed's inhabitant.

'This one's a new one,' Fynnula was confiding. 'Just came in today. Such a young one. And a beauty too. Such a shame.'

Rohan's breath trapped in his throat and solidified, sending him into a choking fit as he tried to dislodge it, and as the shock forced blood to plummet to his feet he pitched forward, coming face to face with Bryony Sylvan.

Why here? Rohan's mind boggled. She was from good stock, her parents were still around. She should be in one of those up-market care places. And yet here she was. Rohan silently thanked providence, for doing him that second solid after all.

Bryony's face was as flawless as the day they had met, porcelain skin taut across angular cheekbones, eyes set wide, yet sleep lay upon her features like a death mask. Her hair was arrayed around her head like serpents, her lips still red from last night's rouge parted and she breathed in the air that Rohan himself was struggling for.

The dream took hold and Rohan held his breath as Bryony's face animated with the warmth of his first sighting of the girl and Rohan felt his heart repairing itself, like a film of shattering glass rewound in slow motion. He lay his face against Bryony's, grateful of Fynnula's diplomatic retreat, and shivered as his vitality met the pallor of cold sleep. It ebbed as the dream coursed through her bloodstream, circulating its lifegiving power through her body. He lifted his eyes just enough to see the cool pale of her cheek flush golden. He reared back in his chair, hyperventilating, and saw her whole face was aglow, as if the dream shone out from within her. Her body shuddered, stiffened, and the monitors connected to her were aroused with the sudden invigoration of her soul. The rhythmic beeping that began rang out like a victory bell in the silent warehouse. Fynnula stopped in her tracks and spun, face wrought with shock. Rohan and Bryony fell together as she awoke, understanding dawning on her like a sunrise.

As they took their first steps out into the half-light of late morning, they didn't speak of the miracle that brought them back together, the girl with the sunshine skin who brought two lovers back to life that day, banishing sleep despite the darkness. The time for that would come. They walked back up the road to their lives, leaving the dark summons of the night far behind them.