Dreamstate
Written by Noah Hensley

The young black-haired woman was grinning as she stood in the courtyard - she was surrounded by bricked buildings and tall, swaying orange trees.
"It's amazing, right?" came a voice to her right. She turned to the black-haired young man, looking at the buildings.
"It's incredible," she said, walking quickly over to him and taking his hand as she leaned against his side, staring at the buildings. "I wouldn't think I was in a dream."
"A dreamstate," he corrected.
"Uhhuh."
"There's a big difference between -"
"Yes, yeah, you've told me five times," she chuckled, still leaning against his side.
"You've been counting."
She kept grinning. "Your brain is amazing."
"I...."
She chuckled as she stood up straight and removed her hand, and she took a few steps towards the buildings twenty meters away. "So what'll happen next?"
"Well, your mind is in free flow right now," came his voice behind her as she stepped forward another meter - she stared upwards into the static dim blue sky. "So the dreamstate will conform to however your mind thinks. Right now, it's in a predefined static state, but as the permeability of the dreamstate increases over time, so will the dreamstate's ability to reflect the processes of your mind."
She stood for a few seconds; her eyes were looking at the bricked buildings, then at the dim blue sky. "Where's the sun?"
"I thought it might be annoying."
"It's creepy without a sun," she said.
"I'll make sure to include a sun next time, then," he said. She turned, and he was smiling. "I'll leave you to it then."
"Well," she said, looking around briefly before looking at him, "You're not staying?"
"We're collecting data for one mind," he said, walking towards her with a warm smile. "Remember?"
"Yeah, yeah," she said, grinning at him. "Get outta here."
"Yes, ma'am," he said, his eyes lighting up. "And if you wanna get out at any time -"
"The key words," she said.
"Mhm. See you in a few minutes." He looked up at the sky. "Take me out." And he vanished.

She cleared her throat and looked around the courtyard. There were no sounds, except for the wind gently blowing at her. There were no other living creatures.

She started walking towards a two-storied brick building twenty meters away when a wave of chattering rose around the perimeter of the courtyard. Her eyes widened and she stopped - a few people, then dozens of young people, all clothed in heavy black clothing, starting walking out from behind the buildings into the courtyard. Most of them were gathered in groups, talking subduedly or laughing. A bell started resounding from somewhere to the south, which lasted for around half a minute.

Her eyes caught a black-clothed man ten meters away walking by himself, his eyes set forward as he walked through the courtyard.

She speedwalked over to him with a smile. "You must be a projection of my mind."

He stopped, not turning his head towards her, and grit his teeth. "What?"
"A projection of my subconscious," she said, grinning.
His eyes widened. "Aren't you scared?"
"There's no reason to be scared," she said, smiling.
"Yeah," he said, staring up at the sky. "If you say so."
"I say so," she said, with her lingering smile.
"You need to narrow the focus," he said. Then he turned his neck to the left - and it kept turning. His neck disappeared -

"OH!" She shut her eyes as she heard two hard thumps on the cement in front of her. She opened her eyes and looked above the body - these hundreds of black-clothed people had halted, and were now staring at her.

She maintained a neutral face. "What can I do for you?" she said loudly.
"MYRA! Sweetie!"

She gasped and swung around - an older woman in pink with disheveled blonde hair was rushing up at her.

Myra's face twisted. "Mom!"

The older woman was about to run into her with open arms when Myra held up her hand - the older woman stopped, panting and looking at her.
Myra's mouth gaped as she stared at her mother. "What are you doing here?" she said.

Her panting slowed, and she straightened herself up. "I thought you might be missing me."

Myra's eyes squinted, and she smiled. "No, I haven't been."

The sky darkened, drooping the whole courtyard in darkness - Myra's eyes widened.

"Sweetie," her mom pleaded - her face could barely be seen.

Myra gasped and took a few steps back, and she stared intensely at her mother's silhouette. The sky lightened - her mom's disheartened and derelict face was staring at the ground. The dozens of black-clothed people still surrounded the courtyard, staring at them.

"Why do you hate me?" her mom whispered.

Myra's face hardened. "You're not welcome here."

"But I'm here," she said, looking up at Myra and talking quietly with a smile.

"I always have a home here."

"Must be a pretty bad home, because you're not welcome here," said Myra, staring at her mother.

"Aren't you worried about them?" said her mother, looking around at the perimeter of black-clothed people surrounding them.

"Nope," said Myra, still staring at her mother. "I have full control over my mind."

"If that was the case, why's he missing his head?" Her mother bent to the side and pointed at the body a few meters behind Myra.

Myra shook her head.

"And I wouldn't be here, would I?" said the mother.

Myra's face hardened. Then she lifted her head. "Take me o -"

All breath ceased from her mouth and her lips sealed - she started breathing heavily through her nose. Her eyes widened as she reached her fingers to her lips - there were none. There was no mouth.

Her eyes crazed and her nose breathing accelerated as she felt the smooth skin where her mouth should be. She stared at her mom in fright, who was grinning.

"There we go," she said, taking a few steps towards Myra. "Now ask yourself. Why isn't your fiancé ending the dreamstate?"

Myra's eyes would've exploded if they stretched any further. Myra pointed to her mouth.
"'You have control over your mind'," she grinned. "So give yourself a mouth."

Myra's breathing through her nose became faster and faster as she stared at her mom.

"You'd think there'd be a failsafe," said the mom, looking upwards. She chuckled. "I mean, there are all sorts of situations you'd wanna get out of where you can't speak. If you're drowning, for example."

Myra shoved her hands up in the air towards the sky, pointed at herself, and started signing the letters, T-A-K-E M-E O-U-T.

"That's not going to do you any good," grinned her mother. "Finally. We have some time to ourselves, after all these years."

Myra's face was trembling, but now her breathing was stabilizing. She stood still, staring at her mother.

"That's my girl," said her mother. "I'm very proud of you."

Myra shook her head rigorously.

"So," said her mother, folding her hands behind her back. "This is the realm of your subconscious. Is that right?"

Myra stood still.

"I know it is," she said. "I'm going to restore your mouth, and you're going to tell me why you left me."

Before Myra could react, huge gulps of cold air came through her mouth. She felt below her nose - her mouth was back.

After a few seconds of breathing, Myra looked at her mother. "There's just something so off about you."

"What's off?" said her mom, cocking her head.

"It's just off," said Myra, staring into her face. "My whole life, I've had that feeling. And I trust that feeling wholeheartedly, since it's instinct."

"You have to go off of facts and not emotion," said her mom, looking at Myra. "Instinct isn't enough."

"It is," said Myra, gritting her teeth at her.

"What happens when you start developing those feelings for your friends? Or your fiancé?"

"It won't happen," said Myra, her mouth gaping open a little.

"You think about the possibility."

"It won't."

"Do you trust me?" her mom asked.
"Of course not!"
"Do you trust your fiancée?"
"With my life!"

Her mom lifted her finger upwards. "Then why isn't he ending the dreamstate?"

Myra looked up to the dark blue sky. "Maybe the manual override's not working."

"Look at you trying to convince yourself."

Myra's eyes flashed as they darted to her mom. "I hate you."

Her mom smiled. "Perhaps I did something to you in your childhood that you can't recollect, and that's why you hate me?"

"No, it's something behavioral about you," she said, looking at the ground. "But wouldn't you like to know for sure?"

Myra took a deep breath. "There's nothing you can give me."

"Your subconscious has memories that are impossible to access normally," said her mom. "I can access them for you."

"I'll access them another time," said Myra. "I think you're not going to have another time," said her mom. Myra stared at her.

"What's one of your fiancée's worst characteristics?"

"Things he struggles with," said Myra, looking at her mom with furrowed eyebrows. "Curiosity leading into obsession."

"And what have you withheld from him?"

Myra's face froze - her eyes tightened as she stared harshly at her mother. "I know where you're going with this."

"Where you're going with this," grinned her mother. "Remember, sweetie, I'm a projection of your subconscious."

Myra shook her head - her facial expression was screwed tight. "I'm not letting you win."

"You've always told him that it's a touchy subject, why you broke away from me. You've never told him."

"Mom! Please!" Her face became warped with desperation.

"And you've never told him because there is no truth," she said, grinning as Myra's breathing grew shakily again. "Because it's all a feeling. It's intuition."

"MOM!" cried Myra.

"So he's obsessive over his curiosity for why you forced me out of your life," grinned her mom as Myra's back hunched and her breathing quickened.
"Otherwise," she pointed to the sky, "he would rescue his fiance, who is suffering so much right now."

"MOM! QUIT IT!"

"He must be learning so much right now," grinned her mom.

"MOTHER!"

"And you'll have a big fight," grinned her mom, "and you won't be able to use his machines. And since he's the only person to have dreamstate technology at the moment, this is your only option to see your subconscious."

"GOD!!" Myra clenched her hands against her face and her knees buckled - she was kneeling on the ground, her face in her hands.

The sky darkened, and it was pitch black. The cement floor below her started sinking.

Then she was looking up at the face of a radiantly happy blonde-haired young woman with blue eyes - the sides of Myra's vision were filled with the walls of a crib. Golden light filled the world.

"It's okay," said the woman, smiling warmly as she caressed her forehead. "Mommy's here for you. Mommy will always be here for you."

The ground sank again, and the floor ripped. Myra fell through it and landed on a wooden bridge.

Myra lay on the bridge, shivering. It was cold - the sound of a soft creek could be heard under the wooden bridge, and a waterfall some thirty meters away. The songs of birds could be heard overhead.

Footsteps approached her. Myra, still lying on the ground, shifted her head to look upwards at her mother standing above her.

"Come on, sweetie, get up." Her mother crouched down and grabbed Myra by the shoulders - Myra supported herself as she stood up, and now they were standing face-to-face.

"Before I show you the childhood memory," smiled her mom as Myra slowly looked at her, "I want you to say that you need my help."

Myra shook her head violently.

"Myra, sweetie. Please."

Myra kept shaking her head. Her mom extended the palm of her hand and placed it on Myra's cheek.

"Say it."

Myra froze, and slowly looked into her mother's blue eyes.

Myra's face collapsed. "Mommy!" she cried, flinging herself on to her mom.

"Mommy! I need help! Please!"
Darkness enveloped the space, and she opened her eyes. She was lying down, staring at a blank white ceiling. Indistinct chatter surrounded her.

"Time?"
"Yeah, four minutes."
"Hey, sweetie. I'm gonna take the headset off. Don't move your head, okay?"

She was lying on a bed. She was frozen. A pair of hands removed a metal headset that encompassed her skull as the indistinct conversations continued around her.

"That was a really good run."
"Is Simon here?"
"Tell me what we need to log again."
"No, he left an hour ago."
"Do you have any chips?"
"Are you all right, sweetie?" The black-haired man named Daniel leaned against the bed on which she was lying, looking down at her concernedly.

Myra held her head and started sitting up - Daniel outstretched his hands and helped her up.

She inhaled. "Was the manual retrieval option broken?"
He shook his head as she sat upright. "No."
"You would take me out if I said the key words," she said, glaring at him with her eyes pursed.
"But you never did say it."
She pursed her mouth. "My mouth was closed, and I signed it. I might as well have cried it out."
"It's a procedure to retrieve only when the phrase is orally said. I'm sorry, I'll change -"

She gritted her teeth. "You had no right seeing that."
He nodded. "I know, that was...."
"And the whole team saw that?" she said, her voice rising.
"Well, yeah."
"I was in pain," she said with almost a wail, spinning her head to Daniel - his eyes widened. "I was in pain, and you did nothing."
"Baby, look, I'm so sorry," he said. "Do you want me to get you your water?"
"I was in pain, Dan," she said, her body trembling. "Dan, why -"
"It was procedure. I'm really sorry."
"You wanted it to go on," she said, her face collapsing. "You - I - what did you to my mind?"

"Nothing! I swear, baby," he said, still looking at her concernedly. "Here, I'll go get your water."

"No." Her body was still trembling as tears fell from her eyes. "Daniel, you have a -" she sniffed and wiped her nose, "- you have an obsessive curiosity. Did you let it continue when you would have otherwise stopped it?"

"Oh, God, Myra, I'm so sorry," said Daniel, fully sitting on the bed next to Myra - he tried wrapping his arm around her, but she grabbed it and gently pushed it away.

"No, that wasn't my thinking," he said as she kept trembling. "And... I have to be truthful. We're getting married in two months. Even if that was my thinking, don't you think we have a right to know everything about each other?"

"I don't know," she said as her breathing kept shaking and tears kept coming out - her voice was botched. "If you really cared about me like a normal human being, you would have pulled me out." Her head spun to him. "I SIGNED IN THE AIR, DAMN IT! I SIGNED IN THE AIR! HOW FUCKING DESPERATE DO YOU THINK I WAS?! I HAD NO FUCKING MOUTH!!"

The whole room was silent as everyone stared at her.

"AND YOU!" She leapt out of the bed, her eyes swinging around at the ten people in the room. "YOU'RE ALL LOOKING DEEP INTO MY MIND, NOT EVEN THINGS I'VE TOUCHED IN YEARS, AND YOU'RE BLOWING IT OFF LIKE IT'S NOTHING!"

"Sweetie, please, let's go outside," said Daniel, approaching her.

"Yeah," she said, nodding her head as tears kept streaking from her eyes. "I'll be outside while you probe into more people's minds."

"Well," said Daniel, "you're our only subject today -"

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" screamed Myra. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" She covered her mouth with her hand, and she speedwalked out of the room.

Ten minutes later in the university, on a table next to a fountain, a young man named David was eating lunch alone at a table. He spotted a young woman with black hair walking towards him in his peripheral vision. He kept staring at his food while eating until she was sitting directly opposite him.

He looked up at her - she was staring at the ground.

"Hi," he said, looking at her incredulously.
She gave a little weak smile and looked at him. "Hey. Are you a psychology or psychiatry student?"
"Uhh," he said, putting down his sandwich. "No, I'm biology. Why?"
She stared downwards. "Would you say we have full control over our minds?"
"What?"
The woman paused for a second, still looking at the ground. "Would you say we have full control over our minds?"
David paused, looking at her. "I think…" he looked at the flowing fountain to his left. "We… oh, this is a hard question."
"I'd like your answer," she said, still looking downwards.
"Well, maybe it's best to ask a psychology professor or counselor or something -"
Myra looked up at him.
David's eyes widened. "I…" he looked downwards. "Well, there are people with schizophrenia and dementia who don't have control over their minds." He sighed. "And babies, and people with brain damage or chemical dependencies. So, hmmm."
They both sat there in silence for five seconds - the only sound was the fountain's water flowing to his left and of distant chatterings.
"I would say no," he said, "but you can train your mind to see things super clearly, like a monk or something. And that'll help a lot. You know, give you peace." He looked up at her - she was staring sideways. "But I don't know anything about this stuff!"
She took a breath through her nose, and nodded. "Okay. Thanks." She might have smiled a little.