

THE DREAMING

2018

The fruitless efforts of six long years echo around me. I've lived through hells that endured much longer than six years, but time in this realm, the world of dreams, passes differently.

I sit before a basin of water and swear I can hear the years echo, goading and mocking.

I extend my hand and, with a flick of my wrist, send droplets of water flinging onto the circular mirror above the basin. In the mirror, my disobedient reflection begs my attention, jerking her chin toward me. But I ignore the woman in the pane of glass and stare down into the basin instead.

Deep within the folds of dark water, a slant of light twinkles and beckons like a dying star. But I look into the unending, white expanse around me, a dreamscape named Pool, bare and empty aside from the mirror and basin of water. For two centuries, Pool has been my refuge of solitude, but after six years of fruitless searching—

The light flashes again from the water.

The Reflection taps her pointer finger against the mirror with a loud *click*, but I resist her gaze again. Instead, I incline my head and slide into the basin of frigid, navy water, swimming toward the light. Soon Pool is nothing more than a dim circle of light behind my kicking feet.

So it has gone for years.

The light I pursue doesn't grow nearer as I swim toward it; I learned long ago that I would never reach its source. All the same, I swim on.

Just like he knows I will.

I plunge through the endless ocean, pumping my arms and legs until the water blackens around me like a blot of ink. In the distance, the summoning twinkle blurs and flares and then burns out. An invisible hand grips my gut as I am transported out of my dream.

Into his.



WITH A *HUMPH*, I AM TORN FROM THE CHILLY WATER AND EJECTED ONTO A forest floor.

I stand in a daze, scraping myself clean of the dirt and leaves that pepper my waterlogged clothes. I stare around at the forest in recognition—I've been in this maze of thin birches and freckled lindens and rain-stained boulders. The day is bright despite the film of gray clouds; milky sunlight pierces the green canopy and illumines the forest.

In the distance, a child wails.

I take a deep breath and exhale away the frustration of six long years before beginning my pilgrimage toward the crying. Every dream is a new frustration, every meeting with him a confounding failure on my part.

But soon an eruption to my right interrupts my journey, and I halt as Marin hurtles just as gracelessly as I did into the dreamscape.

She hauls herself upward with a resilient smile and ambles toward me. "I guess I'll be joining you tonight, Dalia." Marin stops at my side, plucking leaves from her hair while I unwind a stem from her beaded headband.

I try to keep my voice light. "You're the second one he's pulled into his dream this week."

"I know. Noodin said he got pulled into a dream the other day." Marin scans the forest, cocking her head. "Is that him crying? What'd you do?"

"I just got here. I haven't even found him yet."

Marin's voice lowers, and she leans toward me. "I don't like the sound of crying in the Dreaming. I don't like it anywhere. The thing about crying is that you *always* go toward it. I'm getting drawn in right now." She shakes out her clothes one last time and looks at me. "You don't get suspicious about it?"

"I think you and I have different expectations of the Dreaming." I continue toward the wailing child with Marin at my side. The crying emanates from the canopy nearby, floating through the labyrinth of trees and reverberating off the limestone outcroppings. "You know it's him crying. Why is that scary?"

Marin elbows me. "I never said it was scary. It's just that the body's spirit walks differently than the mind's spirit. There isn't real gravity in this world. It's just your thoughts that have gravity. A *dream* that has gravity. It's confusing, not *scary*."

"Confusing?" I sigh. "I forget what it was like to learn to walk through dreams."

"Yeah, well, I've been learning for two hundred years with little to show for it. You know, I'd be much better at this if you actually tried to teach me. I wouldn't just show up in your dreams by accident all the time. I could make my own dreamscapes like you do." Marin's massive, brown eyes brighten to honey. "Oh! I could even have my own version of your snakes. I could find other immortals. You know you scare them, the new ones..."

She falls silent as we delineate Titus between the slender trees.

We shuffle through dried leaves and brittle twigs on the forest floor, but Titus doesn't register our approach—he only stares up into an ash tree with his hands on his waist.

Above him is the source of crying: a young boy trapped in the canopy of the ash tree. The boy's light hair is kinked and matted, his face swollen and red from crying. The child clammers from branch to branch, scraping free dried bark so that it falls like a flurry of snow.

Titus's dreams have always been tangled with memory.

He stands as a grown man beneath the tree, staring up at the little child he grew out of. And the little child remains caught in the ash tree, oblivious to Titus's presence beneath him, as well as my approach with Marin. Nothing more than a memory set on replay.

“Do you really think Titus has been asleep this whole time?” Marin’s eyes fix on the immortal that stares up into the tree.

“I’m not sure. Six years is a long time to survive asleep without food or water. Even for us.”

“I think Noodin’s right. It makes me so sad to think about it.”

My eyes slide to her. “And what does Noodin think?”

“Well, he got pulled into one of Titus’ dreams, like I was saying before. Noodin doesn’t remember exactly what they spoke about, but from what he remembers, he thinks that the Aion got Titus and they’ve been torturing him. That’s why Titus has been in the Dreaming for so long—he escaped here to protect himself from the pain of the physical world.”

“People can’t cut ties to the Waking to live only in the Dreaming. We must all return to our bodies eventually.”

“You also said people couldn’t withstand your extraction methods. But look how many years you’ve been chasing him. It never took you more than a year with the rest of us. And he could be in way more danger than any of us ever were.”

“If he’s with the Aion, then we’re no help in any world.”

“You don’t think—” Marin looses a sharp breath. “I mean, if he *isn’t* with the Aion, do you think he could start attracting them to his dreams? Like he did with us?”

The idea alone spurs my pace and I snap a twig with a single, heavy step. Marin freezes at my side as Titus turns away from the frantic child in the canopy and scans us both. He blinks a few times, drawing attention to the dark splotches beneath his eyes before he turns back wordlessly to the canopy.

Undeterred by his lack of greeting, Marin takes her place next to Titus and says, “Hello.” With a quick flick of her wrist, Marin tucks her flowing black hair behind her ears and straightens out her headband. Louder, she repeats, “Hello!”

Above us, the child’s bare feet continue to scrape against the bark and tear free ripe leaves, which float down to us and settle in our hair.

Still staring upward, Titus mumbles, “Hi.”

“Do you remember me?” Marin asks. “What about my friend over there?”

Titus shrugs, narrowing his eyes as more bark falls. “Sure.”

I step in front of Titus, staring at his cerulean eyes, fairer than his tawny skin and barely visible beneath his knit brow. His hair is a mess of brunette curls, the frayed ends lightened where they graze his shoulders.

“If you remember us, then what is my name?” I ask.

His response is clipped. “I’ll remember in a minute.”

I follow his gaze to the child, paused atop a stout branch to inspect a bloody knee. Tenderly, the boy presses a dirt-smeared finger against the scrape and begins to wail with renewed strength as he brings the bloody finger to his face for closer inspection.

“You come here often,” I muse. “I wonder why. What does the child’s pain matter?”

Titus shakes his head, still staring upward. “It’s *me*, as a child. I had climbed up so I could see the top of the canopy. I’d never seen it before. I was just curious. But I couldn’t get back down. My mother...”

Marin opens her mouth, but I cut her off with a quick wave. Chasing Titus through the Dreaming isn’t Marin’s responsibility. It’s been *my* responsibility since I found him six years ago.

My failure.

“Why not go up and see the canopy now?” I ask. “You know that you can. You remember what I told you.”

Titus blinks, finally drawing his eyes from the canopy to me. “What?”

I avoid the urge to rub my temples. “What did I tell you?”

But Marin and Titus both look away from me as the child’s panic mounts above. The wailing brings along a breeze that tangles our hair and shakes the leaves.

Rain begins to fall, drawing out the dewy scent of the forest, as the bright, silver sky simmers to cobalt.

I brush away bark from my shoulders and raise my voice. “What did I tell you, Titus?”

Titus lowers his chin to look at me, and with a small tilt of head, he says, “You told me I was asleep. That I was dreaming—that we all were. We met at the beach. You thought it was sunset. You were wrong—it was dawn.”

The raindrops condense to painful, icy nails, but I don't dare look away from Titus.

He is finally lucid—he remembers what I have repeated endlessly over the past six years.

“Yes, Titus.” I urge him on, leaning closer to him as hail falls around us, pattering off the leaves above. “And remember when Marin also explained this world? There is the soul that keeps the body alive, and then there is the spirit that comes to this world when we sleep. You remember, Titus. Now—what is my name?”

But the fever pitch in the canopy again distracts Titus. The child kneels, splaying his hands for balance, and begins to rotate himself toward the ground on a thick branch, but he's not strong enough to manage the maneuver and too weak to return to safety.

Marin's brow knits, her thick eyebrows nearly touching as the boy hovers above us with a precarious grip.

The Dreaming has a way of distracting; the same way we're apt to forget our dreams upon waking up, we're also apt to forget reality while dreaming.

I switch my eyes back to Titus. “Look at me. What is my name?”

Titus doesn't obey, and a tremendous clap of thunder announces a storm and snaps Marin from her reverie. Her stare begs me for action as the sound of crying gnaws at our ears and the rain slants ferociously.

I know that I've lost.

Again.

A platoon of snakes, an extension of my mind in the Dreaming, appears from my feet before fanning out and slithering into the forest. Marin jumps at their sight, but Titus notices nothing.

I try to stir him anyway.

“Wake up, Titus!” I shout. “None of this is real!”

Marin takes another step backward, glancing between Titus, the child in the canopy, and my clenched fists.

“What's that feeling?” she asks.

“I'm filling in the dreamscape,” I explain. “He's getting ready to move on to a new one.”

Titus ignores me studiously, his eyes flicking back and forth as he watches the tedious, inescapable demise of the child above. I snap my

fingers two inches from his nose, but he remains caught in a memory, caught in a dream.

I look at Marin. “He’s going to push us back to the Waking and go on to another dream.” I snap my fingers in front of his face again. “We want to help you, Titus. You can’t survive like this—you’ve been asleep, trapped here for years. You need to *wake up*. You need to *eat*. You need to *exercise*. Tell us where you’re living—we’ll come help you.”

Marin inches forward and wraps her fingers around his arm with a patient, binding grip. He ignores the hand on his bicep like he ignores the flecks of rain falling across his face and pooling between his closed lips.

Marin’s voice breaks as it raises, “Titus, if you’re attracting all of *us* to your dreams, then it’s only a matter of time before the bad immortals start showing up. The really bad ones.”

With a quirk of his eyebrow, Titus looks down to the hand gripping him, to Marin’s frozen expression, then to me. He scans my face and I return his look of discontent.

“Worse than Dalia?” Titus asks in a clear voice.

He remembers me, then.

Marin smiles wide as though to display each of her straight teeth, while my hands clench again at my side. But Titus’s lucidity and good humor immediately dissipate as I hear a familiar sound—one that has signed the end of this dream countless times.

The scrape of the child’s skin against bark.

The boy falls between where the three of us stand, arms outstretched toward the wet earth, laden with leaves and insects and snakes. Marin gasps, and so do I as the child’s descent becomes our own.

The world around me fades to a blotch of black ink and my gut pinches as the forest floor unfolds like a stage door. Marin and I free-fall through darkness and dreams as Titus stands above, ready to advance to another dream without us. His image disappears through a film of shadow and swirling wind, and it also consumes the fallen child, now evaporated to memory at the dream’s conclusion.

Marin and I are deposited into a star-spattered night sky that reels by our flailing hands. She struggles to right herself as we plunge toward

the earth, bellowing something indiscernible in the rushing wind as I tussle beside her.

We spit our hair from our mouths, and Marin takes my forearm to keep us joined together. I struggle to concentrate during the free-fall, clenching my stomach as we slip through a bank of smoky clouds until I manage to slow us down to a comfortable speed.

Free of the rainclouds, I ask, "What did you say?"

"I said," she shouts, "that I understand why Titus is starting to piss you off."

I smile despite myself. If even Marin's patience has run thin, then Titus truly is running out of options.

The dreams shared with him have begun to end in nightmares in which I am expelled, or dropped, or shuffled out of his dreams. And just as Titus has begun attracting more members of my clan into his dreams, he has also begun to banish them.

Slowly, the other members of our family are drawn into Marin's and my descent.

Fara and Noodin arrive first, tucked into each other's arms as though still caught in a private reverie. Their eyes are closed in unconscious grace, and Noodin's braid, twice as long as it is in the Waking, wraps around them both.

As we near the canopy, Emiel also arrives with his wife. But his partner is cast in opaque light, and the features of her face are blurred. Long dead, this is how she lives now, as an extension of Emiel's remembrance. Emiel smiles, the slight gap between his front teeth visible as he stares into her empty face.

Behind him falls Arturas, with his hands tensed to fists and his legs bent as though he's running. In the wind, his long beard flaps like a useless bird.

We descend toward our bodies, toward the unending expanse of canopy and swamp, a sea of brown and yellow and green, freckled with reflections of moonlight on the water.

Nonagon. Home.

But there are two missing bodies amongst us, and I call out to Marin, "Lyvia and Didier?"

She looks toward the city lights in the distance, fading out of view as we fall. "Out being amorous, I'm sure."

She winks, and I gently unwind her grip from my arm. We drift apart, each of us drawn to our own sleeping body before the canopy consumes us and we are cast through lofty water tupelos and bald cypress trees and gnarled ogeechees. Through mangled branches and shadows distended by moonlight.

Through a filament of subconscious thought, we land back into our bodies.

And although I live in the privacy of my treehouse far from the rest of the family, I feel every one of us gasp awake in my own eager lungs.

THE WAKING

I wake tangled in white sheets, sweat on my brow and my hands balled into fists.

But I don't rise with the sun. Instead, I beat my pillow into a pleasing shape and watch dried leaves cartwheel across the skylight above me.

Six years.

I wonder what Marin remembers of the dream last night.

If she pities my efforts or keeps faith in me.

Soon I hear steps in the distance, announced by the groaning of branches, and I am forced out of bed. I drag myself up to wash my face, and by the time I have pinned back my hair, I've assigned a name to the footsteps approaching my treehouse: the cadence of the steps hinting at gait, the protest of the branches indicating weight.

I yank open the screen door in anticipation. "Emiel!"

He startles on my makeshift porch, the jump goading a low-pitched creak from the largest branch of my water tupelo.

"I heard you coming," I explain.

His eyebrows raise, and I follow his gaze around the tepid, motionless bayou. The morning light is heavy, illumining every floating particle and turning the empty air into a constellation of tiny specks. Ripples

and quaint splashes break the still waters beneath us, and the shadows and circles of flitting insects splice the canopy above.

“I always forget how quiet it is out here,” he murmurs, stepping past me into the studio. “And your place—it may be getting a bit... threadbare.”

His gaze drifts around my studio just as it did the bayou. He looks at the mattress on the floor in one corner, the balding couch in the center, a stereo and CD collection atop the rickety desk. My charlatan’s kitchen consists of two burners, a propane tank, and a PVC pipe arrangement that conducts water from the rainwater barrel on the back porch.

I tug on a seam of the beige couch. “I suppose I haven’t done much with the studio since I built it.”

“I hate to remind you, but that was over sixty years ago, Dalia.” He shifts on his feet, clasping his hands.

Emiel often strives to appear small despite being the largest in our family—hunching his shoulders inward or standing with his feet close together as though he may trip and batter down a wall.

As immortals, we’re endowed with considerable physical strength, but his preclusion has always struck me as peculiar because we’re also endowed with heightened senses of balance, speed—even an ability to heal.

But I suppose the sort of clumsiness Emiel fears most is the social variety.

So, to spare him the discomfort, I start, “About the nightmares—I know it’s been unpleasant for everyone. But Titus is just... he’s been lost in the Dreaming for so long that there’s no tie to his body. If I could just figure out where he sleeps, I could *guide* his spirit back. Still... it’s taking more time than I thought.”

I flick on the electric generator that sits on the ground beside the haphazard kitchen. “Tea?”

Emiel takes a tender seat on the couch and turns back to me. “Yes. Black, if you have it. And I’m not here about the dreams, though I am very sorry to hear that Titus is still giving you so much trouble. Come to think of it—he and I shared a dream recently. We were... there was a beach. A beach with a beautiful sunrise.”

Emiel stares dreamily out my dirty window as I fill a jug with rain-

water and pour it into my electric kettle.

“I think he’ll fit in well once he gets here,” he muses over the rumble of the generator and electric kettle. “I don’t remember what we spoke about, but he’s good-humored.”

Emiel pauses when I arrive with the tea, his hands trailing mine as I set the mug down.

“Who knows if he’ll get here, Emiel. We need to find him before the Aion does.”

He pauses with the mug raised halfway to his lips. “Why would they be looking for him? He’s one of us.”

I stare at the rising tendrils of steam as he takes a noisy sip. “I fear that they’d see him as a source of power to be either exterminated or manipulated. And with the Chasers still roaming around—who knows? It’s better to be prepared than surprised.”

Emiel clears his throat. “Speaking of security... well, Arturas—you know how he gets—maybe he was caught up in a nightmare with you and Titus and it made him nervous—he asked me to check the security recordings. When I did, I saw that two of the CCTV cameras near your place weren’t working. Can you point me toward them? You’d remember best where we hid them.”

I crane my neck to look out the back window. “How long have the cameras been out?”

“Less than a week. I’m sure nothing has happened—do you suppose it was—I mean, I know it sounds—”

“The matriarch. Yes.”

“You mean the owl, right? The old one?”

I rise from the couch with a huff, leaving my tea, and open the back door. “Come look.”

Above the stark blue rainwater collector, in the junction of three branches sits a giant, twisted nest built of twigs and compounded debris. Near the bottom, a pale, curled talon pokes out from a sluice.

“They’ve just gone to sleep,” I say.

Emiel stares up, shielding his eyes from the blaring sunlight. “They don’t bother you?”

“No, not really. It’s quiet out here like you said. I don’t mind the company. But the matriarch has a vendetta against electronics. She

always gets at the porch light." I nod to the mangled apparatus near the door, its cracks pasted together with thick bands of silver duct tape. "I'm sure she got the cameras as well."

"Oh. Right. How many owls are there?"

"Three. The middle one just hatched a baby."

"I see." He pulls his gaze away. "And the cameras?"

I look northward, where the swamp goes on and consumes itself in gnarled roots and branches, in amphibian reverberations and bird songs. I leap onto a thin branch that leads from my water tupelo to a lane of bald cypress trees. Emiel follows after with a *humph*.

"There is one more thing," he calls from behind me. "I only ask because there *are* two broken cameras, and we don't get a lot of movement down here—we haven't even seen a fishing boat this season. I wonder if you've been continuing your watch while you aren't tracking Titus. In case the cameras—"

"Of course, Emiel." I turn back, holding aside a branch for him to pass. "I always watch over us in the Dreaming."

He smiles ruefully as we find the first camera, torn from its protected nook in a dead mangrove and dangling precariously above the water. He inches his way down the trunk, dangling from a slanted branch to reach it.

With garbled wires in his hand, Emiel glances up at me. "And in the Waking, right?"

I stare at the mess in his hand. The camera's glass lens is cracked inside its plastic encasement and smeared with mud.

Centuries ago, the Aion loosed roving, cutthroat Chasers upon the world to locate the Angel of Death. An ancient and powerful caste, the Aion has made this search their priority since their prized mercenary disappeared in the eighteenth century.

This chase has distracted them from the presence of their enemy immortal clan: the Others.

But our clan, Nonagon, is like most of the Others. We've skated by on the fringes of the human world, content to be forgotten by the Aion.

And while the Others may loathe the Aion after centuries of persecution and unforgettable slaughter, they pose more dire threats than that of death.

The Aion have consistently hunted and killed the Others... unless it was more useful to keep them alive and extract answers through other means.

And it is only the hunt for the Angel of Death that has brought the Aion and their Chasers out of palaces and air-conditioned boardrooms alike, into the desolate reaches of the human world where the Others have lingered.

I began my guard in the Dreaming long before we arrived in the distant swamps of Louisiana in the 1950s. So it also went with the training regime that I designed to keep us physically conditioned. That way, in case of a run-in with the Aion or their Chasers, we'd stand a fighting chance.

Along with the CCTV, we've become placated by our sense of safety. Nonagon even likes to make bets on when the Angel of Death will be found and returned to the Aion.

I'm more preoccupied with *how* she may be found.

I wonder if the Aion use technology in the Waking to determine her location? Or do they mine the Dreaming, hoping to find her ensnared in a dream of her own lingering memories of them?

In my nightmares, they use both.

"Dalia?" Emiel asks.

I clear my throat and stare down into his dark eyes. "Of course, Emiel. I'm always watching over. In all worlds."

He nods, inspecting the twisted metal in his hand and murmuring to himself before tucking the remains into a satchel slung over his shoulder.

I nod northward again, and he trails me to the second camera.

We find it in the same condition as the first, and Emiel stows away the mangled apparatus atop the other. He and Arturas handle our concealment —from documents of identification to property rights to private servers to CCTV.

Our last run-in with the Aion cost us a life and we've been hellbent on preventing any surprises since then, when a rogue Chaser stole life from Lupe, one of our own, and we lowered her cold body into the frozen earth at our last hideout.

The Others considered it a chance run-in with a Chaser at a remote

outpost.

But Chasers only pursue the Angel of Death.

Only pursue *me*.

And at this Chaser's hip, there wasn't a sword or a rapier or a bow or a lance or even a bolt-action firearm that could have killed the immortal she sought.

Instead, the Chaser carried a harpoon; smooth and silver and gilded with sunlight.

I wondered relentlessly how she had found me.

But soon the weapon she carried, slung across her back in a metal tube, replaced those questions. That harpoon wasn't designed to kill, nor was it designed to punish.

It was made to return me to the Aion.

Emiel and I meander back to the studio in silence, trees bending beneath our feet and flies buzzing in our ears as the sun beats through the canopy, leaving the air damp and heavy. I open the back door to find Marin lounging across my couch, finishing off my cooled tea from the coffee table with a loud gulp.

"Hi, Emiel." She turns to me and raises a brow. "It was us, right? Me and you and Titus in the Dreaming last night—we were in the forest again. Someone was crying. We got close, didn't we?"

I nod, sitting on the arm of the couch.

Marin falls back onto the cushions and assesses her nails. "At least he's handsome. You'll see, Emiel. A real looker."

After Lupe's death, I kept my head down and sought to avenge her by being useful.

I returned to my post in the Dreaming and remained at Pool to collect lone, despondent immortals as I have for two centuries with the Others.

But the Dreaming was silent, and no more came, and I thought the dust had settled from the day of Lupe's death in 1934. I thought there would be no more Others to join our clan; that it meant there would be no more ventures exposing us to the Aion or their Chasers.

Exposing us to death, or torture.

Through the lenses of CCTV cameras, we would live in safety.

Then came Titus.