

THE
DREAMER
AND
THE
MARKED

AIRIC FENN

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To my parents and brother, for supporting this obsession of mine for the better part of 10 years. Yes, Mama, I've officially "finished the damn thing so you can read it."

This book contains depictions of physical and emotional abuse, suicidal ideation, alcoholism, and general violence.

the wastes



Adonis



Dalmos

Talmeya

Erothel

Erothel

Drad Clans

Adonis

The Realm of Arai



Erothel





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THIS WASN'T THE FIRST NIGHT Krystal found herself wandering through the tenebrous halls of the manor that so frequently plagued her dreams. At least, she assumed she was dreaming as she could never remember how she got there.

The first time she woke up in the manor, she had been terrified. The only thing that kept her from completely panicking was the idea of alerting someone to her presence. Something about the manor felt very wrong to her, a heaviness in the air that seeped into her core. Anyone who lived in such a foreboding place could only mean bad news. Krystal had decided it would be best to try to find her way out on her own, rather than attempt to explain to the owner how she got inside. Besides, who would have believed the absurd story that she just woke up in the middle of his home?

It took her an hour to find the entrance that first night, but when she tried to open the grand doors, she fell right through their hard wood and into a night so dark that the sky blazed with

a galaxy of stars. She rose back to her feet, her breath caught in her throat. The land stretched out into the darkness, flat and seemingly infinite. A breeze brushed past Krystal's cheeks, carrying with it the smell of salt and humidity, but it didn't affect her ginger hair, as though she wasn't there at all. As she gazed upon her surroundings, her fear melted into wonder. She could just make out the faint outline of a cobbled road that led from the manor to a single glistening light far in the distance. But when she stepped to follow it, she awoke, back in her bedroom in her small apartment.

She was never one to keep a dream journal, but the vividness of the dream had compelled her to rush its details onto a scrap of notebook paper before they could fade away. She certainly didn't expect to find herself in the same dream a second night, and then a third. Unlike in her first dream, she'd retained her lucidity, but they weren't like any lucid dreams she'd ever heard of before. She was aware she was dreaming, yes, only she couldn't control what happened as she expected from lucid dreams. With every step she took across the dark granite floors of the manor, she anticipated an echoing *tap, tap, tap*. Instead, her footsteps were ghostly silent no matter how she moved.

Despite the eeriness of her own silence, she quickly discovered she wasn't alone in these recurring dreams. Humanoid but alien people roamed the manor's halls. Her first encounter had come as a shock when a short, bearded man with bat-like ears wearing a wide-brimmed hat on the back of his head appeared from the shadows at the entrance to greet an equally odd guest—a dragonfly-winged man covered from head to toe in mottled gray feathers.

Krystal had ducked to hide around the corner, but the bat-eared man paid her no mind and escorted his strange visitor away. The feathery man wasn't the only arrival, either. Over the following nights, others would occasionally come and go, each as fantastical as the last. A woman whose torso grew from the lower body of a horse. A man with webbed fingers and fleshy tendrils in place of hair. Another feathered man.

Krystal didn't dare to approach any, instead opting to trail behind them out of sight, still nervous to be caught in a place she didn't belong. That is until one night when she followed the bat-eared man—whom she decided must have been a butler—to the kitchens. He joined in hushed conversation with a young woman with curled horns and the lower half of a deer, or maybe a goat, while she kneaded some dough. Their words were always foreign-sounding, but somehow Krystal could still understand their meanings; she attributed this as a quality of the dream and nothing more. The bat-eared man and the deer woman spoke of a man who must have been the lord of the manor, and who sounded to be upset. Why, Krystal couldn't tell, but when she peeked her head from the hall to the kitchen to hear better, the door creaked open. The pair in the kitchen turned her way and she froze, her heart picking up wildly in her chest. The bat-eared man grumbled as he approached the door. Krystal scrambled back. The man stared directly at her. And then he simply shut the door and returned to his conversation with the deer woman.

After her shock subsided, Krystal nervously phased her head through the door, curious about why he'd ignored her. Neither he nor the woman acknowledged her, not even when she stepped all

the way into the room and announced herself with an awkward, “hello.” They remained steadfast in their gossip, not like they couldn’t see her, but as though they were doing their best to pretend she wasn’t there. She didn’t bother to sneak around after that, quickly discovering that everyone ignored her, no matter how much she tried to talk to them. Some even seemed to purposely walk right through her.

This made eavesdropping quite easy. Over the two months now that she’d been dreaming of this place, she learned that the people she encountered were either servants in the manor or people of importance, like councilmen and governors. The lord of the manor, too, was a governor of a place called Erothel, although Krystal hadn’t met him yet. She wasn’t sure she wanted to. The servants rarely had good things to say about their master.

Although she retained a level of caution, Krystal took advantage of her free reign of the manor. Most nights, like tonight, she took to exploring until she woke up. No one ever stopped her, not even when she went into rooms that appeared to be off-limits, as she could just phase through their locked doors.

She made her way to the courtyard. It was surrounded on three sides by arch-lined hallways and a shallow pond with steppingstones partly frozen in the middle. In the weeks previous before the weather cooled, she’d been able to see a perfectly crisp reflection of her freckled face and hazel eyes wavering between the lily pads floating on the surface.

She laid on one of the benches organized around the courtyard and looked up. She liked to stargaze there often despite the dream’s stars and constellations being foreign to her. Tonight, though, gray

clouds swirled across the sky. Krystal sat up, about to go off to find some other spot to spend her time, when an angry voice boomed, ringing through the corridors and across the courtyard.

“How dare you let him go?!”

The shouting came from behind an ornate wooden door. The library. Krystal approached quietly, forgetting in the moment that her feet could make no sound anyway. The next thing she heard was a grunt of pain. She hovered her ear near the door, not daring to peek inside.

Someone, a man it sounded like, was breathing heavily.

“I didn’t. . . he escaped—” He cut himself off, his pain sounding much more agonized this time around.

“Do not lie to me. I saw you. You know exactly what you did.” This must have been the master. After a pause, he said, *“I would like to remind you that disloyalty can and will lead to dire consequences.”*

The momentary silence was broken by the shuffling of feet.

“I understand. It won’t happen again.”

“It had better not. Get out.”

At the sound of footsteps coming nearer to the door, Krystal backed away. The door opened before she could make her escape and the man who exited walked right through her. His shoulders jumped and he stopped in his tracks. He looked around, turning to face Krystal. The man must have been new to the manor because she didn’t recognize him. He looked like he might have been quite a few years older than Krystal, and a large mark spread across his face, but the dark made it too difficult to decipher.

The man stared at Krystal. His brow creased, and he turned away, muttering, *“ . . . didn’t know there were ghosts here, now.”*

Krystal raised an eyebrow. Did he mean her? No one in this place even went so far as to acknowledge Krystal with a nod. She followed after the man as he stiffly limped away. He collapsed on a bench in front of the pond and groaned, swearing under his breath.

Krystal leaned over the back of the bench to look at him. When he noticed her, he started and shot to his feet. Krystal smirked.

“So you *can* see me!”

“*What do you want?*” the man asked.

“Every time I try to talk to anyone here I just get ignored,” Krystal said, then paused as she took in the defensive way the man held himself. He favored his right side. Krystal frowned and nodded back towards the library. “Are you okay?”

The man’s eyes slowly went wide. He looked around. “*You. . . speak English,*” he said, stepping around the bench. To Krystal’s surprise, he started speaking it, too. “Where did you learn that?” His accent was beautiful; light, and he trilled his r’s.

“I’ve always known it,” Krystal said.

The man’s shoulders remained tense, and he tiptoed closer, regarding her in the way a cat would with something new and potentially dangerous.

“Then you’re. . . from Taevalear?”

Krystal cocked her head. “What’s Taevalear?”

The man’s brow raised. “It’s—well—it’s the Other Realm. You know, where the humans are from?” The man frowned. “Are you human?”

“Of course I am,” Krystal said as the man leaned in close to her head.

His lips twitched up into a faint smile. “No. . . you’re not.

You're part fae," he said.

Krystal laughed a bit and couldn't help but crack a smile, too. This was new. The man stepped back, his tension falling away. He leaned against the bench and his face twisted briefly.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

Krystal shrugged and hopped up to sit on the back of the bench beside him.

"You don't know?" he prodded.

"Whenever I go to bed, I find myself here. Where is here, anyway?"

The man stared at her with calculating eyes. After a moment, he said, "You're in the home of Governor Sius Mavell Evi. In Arai."

Krystal echoed him under her breath. Arai. This was certainly no place she had ever heard of before.

"Was Sius who you were talking with?" she asked, eyeing the man's leg.

"Not Sius. Sius Mavell Evi," the man corrected. He paused. "And yes. I work for him."

Krystal glanced at the library door and stood. The last thing she wanted was to be the next object of the Governor's anger. "Why don't we get out of here before he comes out and finds us?"

She instinctively reached for the man's hand to pull him along, but she only phased through him. Still, he followed her from the courtyard then took the lead and brought her to a bedroom upstairs. He locked the door. Krystal knew the people here had their own form of electricity, so she wasn't surprised when the man flicked on the lamps by the bed. His unshaven face now illuminated, his light brown skin shimmered like it had been

dusted with flecks of bronze glitter. His eyes were an unnaturally vivid, electrifying blue.

Krystal's breath of awe turned into a quiet gasp as he turned to face her fully. The left side of his face was marred, the tight, sinewy skin scarred almost beyond recognition. His ear was deformed, and half his eyebrow missing, along with most of the hair on that side of his head. It was a miracle his eye was even intact. The scar extended down his neck, disappearing beneath his black turtleneck sweater.

The man pursed his lips, and Krystal realized she was staring. She immediately turned to explore the room. It seemed she'd missed this one in previous dreams.

"This is the first time I've talked to a ghost before. Most of you are incoherent," he said.

"Oh, but I'm not a ghost," Krystal said. Although perhaps being a ghost would explain quite a bit of what she'd experienced so far.

She made her way to the dresser and put her hand on a drawer to open it. The man cleared his throat. She smiled sheepishly and leaned against it instead.

"I mean, I think I'd remember dying if I was a ghost. Are you human?" she asked.

The man shook his head. "Half. You said you've come here before?"

"Yeah, almost every night for the past two months now, I think."

The man silently observed Krystal once again. His brow furrowed. "It sounds like you're soul-traveling," he said.

"Like I'm what?"

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The man paused thoughtfully. “You know, soul-travel. It’s . . . I don’t know how to describe it. Your soul isn’t in your body, and you’re using it to be someplace else. But I didn’t know it was possible to travel between our realms.” He frowned suddenly and shifted his gaze to the door.

“What’s wrong?” Krystal asked.

“Nothing is wrong, but soul-travel can be very dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing. If something happened to your body while you were away from it . . .”

Krystal pinched her eyebrows. “Oh . . .”

The man’s concern melted back into the serious lines of his face. “You’ll probably be fine though if nothing has happened so far.”

He gingerly lowered himself to the bed and groaned. He kicked off his boots, then threw off his black coat. His thick socks and gloves stayed on. Krystal noticed that the first two fingers of his left glove were cut away. The man pressed a hand to his back and grimaced again. He eyed Krystal uncomfortably.

“I take it you don’t know how to wake on your own.”

Krystal shook her head.

The man closed his eyes. “You can stay here until then I guess.”

Krystal hesitantly sat at the corner of the bed and smiled at him.

“I’m Krystal,” she said. She almost offered her hand again before remembering that she couldn’t touch him. The man considered her, and she gasped, “Wait—that was bad, wasn’t it? I wasn’t supposed to tell you my name.”

The man’s lips quirked up into a little smile. “That’s not quite

how it works. I'm Draqa."

The name sent a shiver down Krystal's spine. "Oh. It's nice to meet you. I don't think I've ever seen you before," she said.

"I'm out most days," Draqa replied.

"But you're a servant here?"

"Something like that."

Krystal leaned to see Draqa's back. "Are you sure you're okay? That seems painful."

Draqa shrugged. "It was my own fault. I went against orders." He moved on before Krystal could persist. "Do you know when you started soul-traveling like this?"

"When I started coming here," Krystal said. Of course, she wasn't dreaming of the place every night. Many nights, her dreams were normal, or they started off that way.

"Were you taught?" Draqa asked.

"No. I don't think anyone I know knows how to do this. Hey, how do you know English so well? None of the others here seem like they know it."

Draqa stood. "They don't," he said. He limped to the curtains and peeked out of them. "The sun doesn't rise for many hours."

"Oh, did you want to sleep? I can leave. It's not like I don't know this place."

Draqa sat back down. "Stay. Tell me about Taevalear."

Krystal was surprised. She wasn't sure there was anything interesting to tell. "It's a lot different than it is here. We don't have any fae or—"

"No, I already know all about that," Draqa interrupted. "Tell me about your history. Or. . . tell me about the imp who could

create gold, or one of the trickster gods.”

Fairytales, Krystal realized. Luckily, she knew plenty of those. She had grown up on them, after all. So, she told some. Draqa leaned back against the headboard with his hands clasped around his upright knee. He watched her with keen interest. Occasionally, he would scoff at Krystal’s words, like he didn’t quite believe them. But Krystal continued to tell the tales well into the night, and Draqa barely seemed to tire at all.

Krystal was just getting into her favorite story—one by the Grimm Brothers—when Draqa sat up.

Krystal paused. “What?”

“You’re fading,” he said.

He was right. Krystal hadn’t noticed until now. Her hands were fully translucent, a sign she was waking up. She sighed dejectedly. Just when she was finally enjoying herself.

“Maybe I can see you again,” she said.

Draqa shook his head. “You should try not to. Luck doesn’t last forever.” He hesitated. “But maybe I could visit *you*.”

Krystal’s eyes widened. “You can do that?”

“There’s no guarantee, but I could try if I’m ever in Taevalear. Where do you live?”

A sound grew loud in Krystal’s ears. She could feel herself slipping away now, the world around her becoming intangible, overlapping with the back of her eyelids.

“I live in—”

She opened her eyes. Her alarm was blaring its little chime next to her head. She grumbled. Already the dream began to blur around its edges. She tried to remember the man’s name, but in

the seconds that it took to snooze her alarm and sit up, it was gone. But his face was still there; for a moment she saw a shadow of him sitting next to her on the bed. She turned on the light to make sure. No one.

She got out of bed. With work at Dahlia's today, she didn't have much time, but she quickly took out her journal and jotted down what she could remember from the dream. Writing in the journal had become a part of her daily routine since she began dreaming of the manor, the pages now fat from use. It had only a few blank ones left—she'd have to buy another while at the shop. Dahlia's always had something nice, as they often stocked handcrafted leather notebooks from local artists.

Yawning, Krystal stretched and made her way to the kitchen. She helped herself to a bowl of oatmeal and moved on with her day, but for some reason, she couldn't shake the feeling in the back of her mind that her dream last night was somehow different from the others.