

## Death Dreaming

The Nightmare floated through the Sea of Dreams, the soft white light of millions of dreamers rippling through the waveless sea like the whispered droning of bees on a summer day. The Nightmare didn't know the sound or shape of bees or the feel of summer, only the ideas of them, warped and varied by the myriad subliminal minds floating gently in the dream waters. Still, the image felt appropriate. But these dreams weren't for the Nightmare, not these gentle, idyllic things. There was no purchase for it to take hold in these soft illusions, nowhere for it to twist and spread, to shatter the contentment of the insecure, the frightened, or the wicked.

The Nightmare drifted, seeking out darker waters, pulled toward the shades of a mind into which it could fold itself, slipping like a disease into an open wound. Deeper into the Sea, it could feel a mind clawing at the surface, rippling and reaching. It had never felt such need from a dreamer; the force of its desire was irresistible, and the Nightmare moved through the Dreaming, seeking the mind that called to it.

It passed the little gods of peaceful dreams, Fantasies and Daydreams, those wisps of air and light that dreamers called Sandman or Morpheus, Tutu or Nott, beings who were supposed to devour nightmares like itself. Dreamers, the Nightmare knew, always tried to make order out of chaos, to find reason in even their most tenuous and fleeting thoughts. Their attempts to ward themselves from the fear and evil of their own minds was an amazing act of self-delusion, a skill they had honed to near perfection. Prayers and crystals, candles and talismans were nothing more than fetishes to protect themselves from themselves. If the Nightmare had understood what it meant to laugh, it would have.

It also noticed others like itself, abyssal-black masses of negative space, jagged absences of light. Epiales, Night Hag, Nephthys, Demon: all names dreamers had given its kind, though Nightmares took no joy in suffering. They could no more feel pleasure than they could feel fear or pain or any other emotion. Dreamers, the Nightmare knew, were their own demons. Now, though, it felt compelled to reach the mind that called out to it, even as its brothers seemed heedless of the longing that pulled it relentlessly across the Sea. Did they not feel the mind's fear, drawing them in the way only dark dreamers could? The Nightmare wondered briefly at the strangeness of this, but it was a servant of the Dreaming, and its purpose led it onward.

The Nightmare had been into many dreams, pulled into the shadows of disturbed and restless minds, some only fearful, others aberrant and brainsick, yet the Nightmare never brought anything into those dreams. It only wove together the existing threads of desire into a tapestry that the mind was already seeking. It had wondered once why some dreamers desired such darkness, but there were no answers, only the work to be done. What did it matter if the dreamers were happy or sad or angry or afraid? Understanding would change nothing. Nightmares would still be needed, as would Fantasies and Daydreams. Only Death stilled a human mind.

The Nightmare drifted on until it found the dreamer it had been seeking, their mind reaching out tendrils of want and pain and fear, sinking them into the heart of the Nightmare. The transition was immediate: the Sea and then the dream. There was no movement or shifting focus. There was simply one and then another, but this dream was wrong. The Nightmare felt light all around it, soft and warm, what dreamers liked to think of as angel light. It was the light of a peaceful dreamer, one for the smaller gods. The Nightmare tried to return to the Sea, but fibrils of pain and fear anchored it, laying out the threads it would use to create the tapestry of torment and horror the dreamer desired.

The Nightmare picked up the threads and began to weave; there was nothing else to be done until the dreamer woke or died. Death often came to the Dreaming, but the dreams of the dying were not the province of lesser gods or Nightmares. There were none who would trespass into Death's realm. Entwining the wraith-like strands of anxiety and dread, the soft light around the Nightmare began to shift, forming walls and floors, windowless halls and rooms with yawning, empty fireplaces. The warmth of the dream fell away, misting the air with the threat of bone-cold, bitter rain. Shadows pushed in from the corners, eating up the light. Somewhere, someone whistled sour notes into the air, the sound bruising a late-afternoon sky that swept overhead, stretching up into eternity. The Nightmare waited for the dreamer to arrive. It would be female. The Nightmare could feel the pulse of her. Soft edges around steel, although the core was delicate, fragile, broken somehow.

She appeared in the empty dreamhouse the same way the Nightmare had appeared, suddenly existing where before there had been only emptiness. She filled the space in the doorway that led to her nightmare, and as she moved through it, a hallway stretched out from its warped frame and twisted itself around her as she walked, her fingers trailing along ephemeral

walls. This was typical of dark dreamers, their struggle of attainment, whatever goal they had fixed in their subconscious mind taking shape as endless roads and winding halls, or else as some form of paralysis, feet stuck in mud, the body held by chains. The Nightmare crafted each to its dreamer. This one walked hours of her sleep in the twisted hallway, her feeling of lost desperation thickening the air, giving her gossamer form something to push against.

“Hello?” she called, her voice only an echo.

The Nightmare continued to weave, following the pattern of her desire as the dream shifted, and the woman stood in a kitchen. It was not her kitchen, but one she knew from childhood. A safe place. The light of the dream changed, falling away from the dark, bruised colors of the endless hallway into warm buttery hues, like cloud-filtered sunlight. Wallpaper covered in vague, delicate flowers rippled across the room, and somewhere not far off a child giggled, the sound blooming and fading like a game of hide-and-seek. The resonant clatter of cooking: the opening and closing of an oven door, a pot lid clanging against a counter, the chopping of vegetables on a cutting board. A discord of aromas: bacon, chocolate cake, beef stew, roasted pecans. The dreamer wrapped herself into these sensory expressions like a child into its favorite blanket, and the anchors that held the Nightmare in the dream loosened. For a moment it thought that the dreamer would let it go, but the Nightmare paused, curious. The abrupt shifting in a dreamer’s mind was common, but the sudden change from fear to comfort was not, so the Nightmare watched, the threads of its weaving left slack.

The dreamer thought of a kitchen table, and it filled in the empty space. Cheap wood, lacquered. Its surface scarred with cigarette burns, scratched, and nicked from years of use. Ghosts of people flickered in and out, sitting, standing, eating, laughing, the dreamer herself shifting in age with each change, always becoming younger. The Nightmare wondered how she

could do this without Fantasy to weave the threads, but the dream continued, and the Nightmare understood that these dreams were not wants or desires, nor were they wishes or hopes, but memories. The dreamer was visiting her past, and suddenly the Nightmare knew what kind of dream this was, and that it should not be here. It tried to return to the Dreaming Sea, but there was no transition. It was anchored firmly to this mind.

“Nana?” the dreamer called, standing up from the table. Her voice was solid this time, landing resolute on the kitchen floor. She turned as the kitchen filled with the aroma of peanut brittle, the air warmed and salted. Her face filled with light as she moved toward an oven, her hand wrapped in a towel. “The brittle is ready,” she said.

A flicker and an older woman appeared. Stout, thick-ankled, thin strands of wiry gray hair pulled into a messy bun. Her housedress shifted, first blue paisleys, then small pink rosebuds. She reached out for the dreamer, a kind smile pushing into jowled cheeks.

“Nana.” The name, whispered, drifted around the kitchen, fading into the angel light. The dreamer lifted her arms. She wrapped herself around her grandmother, inhaled deeply before the older woman faded. Then the dreamer’s arms were wrapped only around herself, and she shivered. She called her grandmother’s name again. This time four sour notes drifted through the half-open kitchen window in answer. The whistle from somewhere beyond the sheer white curtains floated into the dream like a corpse down a river, and the warm, yellow light turned sickly.

“Please,” the dreamer said, her voice wavering, and the Nightmare could feel the vibrations of fear within it. The woman put her hands to her ears and turned away from the window. The door leading from the kitchen slammed closed. The walls bulged inward, wallpaper peeling and curling like desiccated layers of old skin. The dreamer curled in on herself, sinking

to her knees on the scarred wooden floor, becoming a child. The whistling grew louder, and the weave of the dream became layered, the threads thicker, though the Nightmare had not picked up the fabric. The shadow of a man filled the screen door that appeared in one of the kitchen walls, pale light behind him obscuring everything but his outline. The dreamer screamed, the sound ripped from her throat, and the Nightmare moved forward, ready to wrap itself around her. It shifted and...

...the Nightmare was back in the Dreaming.

“That dream was not for you,” Death said. “Why were you there?”

Death, as always, appeared as a pair of ravens, their sleek, jet-black feathers, their cunning eyes, their sharp beaks and careful talons comforting, as Death should be.

“The dreamer chose me, Lord,” the Nightmare replied.

Death waited, the ravens turning their heads from side to side to better gauge the Nightmare. The Nightmare waited in turn.

“Why?” Death asked after an eternity of time.

“I do not know, Lord.”

One of the ravens hopped along the branch of a tree. The tree was also Death, and its branches shook as the other raven let out a deep, curdling croak. Death was not pleased.

“It may be, Lord, that the dreamer is one who, even in peaceful sleep, can only feel fear and pain and shame.”

“Is that what the dreamer felt?”

“Yes, sire.”

“And that is why you remained in a dream that was not for you?”

“No, Lord,” the Nightmare said, its night-black form diminishing before the ravens. “The dreamer would not release me, though I tried to leave. It was as if she wanted me. Needed me.”

“Needed? That is interesting, little nightmare,” the death ravens laughed. “And what would you have given this dreamer who needed you?”

The Nightmare thought back to its last moments before it had been returned to the Dreaming. It had moved toward the dreamer, its only thought to wrap itself around her like a shroud, granting her darkness so that she wouldn't have to face the thing that had broken her so completely.

Death cawed, hopping back and forth along the tree branches. “Comfort? Do you know what it is to comfort, dark one? Or to protect? For truly that is what you intended in the end.”

“I do not know, Lord,” the Nightmare said. “Only that in that last moment, the dreamer had to be protected, her fear relieved. Was it wrong to do so?”

The ravens calmed, and Death said, “For a Nightmare? Yes. But for you, small demon, it seems not. Tell me, why didn't you leave the dream? There was a moment when you could have, but you lingered. Why?”

“I was curious.” The Nightmare's answer was true, but it poked at the word *curious*. It turned it over and around, unsure what it was made of. To be curious, it thought, was not a thing of Nightmares, or even of Daydreams or Fantasies. And it realized as it poked and prodded this idea, that it was now curious about its own curiosity, and it noticed the death ravens' heads bobbing and turning, black, beady eyes unblinking as they also poked and prodded the Nightmare's mind.

“Where is this dreamer then?” Death asked, talons digging into tree bark.

The Nightmare obediently reached out into the Dreaming Sea, feeling each mind as it grasped and pulled and pushed, jostling for space among all the other minds. It could feel each dream and each dreamer. Light and dark. Gentle and fierce. But none were the one it sought. Where her mind should have been was empty space, and even as it felt the void, the emptiness filled again with another mind, another dream.

“She is no longer in the Dreaming.”

“She is not,” Death said.

The Nightmare had known the dreamer was dying, and that it, of all creatures, should not have been inside the dream, but it *had* been curious. It had wanted to at least bear witness to the dreamer’s last memories, to the things that had so strongly tethered her to life. And at the end, before its master had pulled it back into the Dreaming Sea, it had wanted to protect her, something it had never felt before in its millennia of service. Because Nightmares did not feel.

“It was not you she reached for,” one of the death ravens said.

“Yet it was you she found,” cawed the other.

“Why, Lord?”

The ravens hopped back and forth along the tree branch, short, shrill cries dropping like pebbles into the waters of the Dreaming. The Nightmare could feel anger and fear vibrating off those sounds. It had trespassed into Death’s realm and though unwilling as it had been, the Nightmare did not know contrition or remorse, did not feel as humans did, as it seemed Death did, but in obeisance it diminished itself before the ravens. It remained so even as the cries stilled and the silence settled, clotting the air around it. Even as it heard Death whisper, “I am not ready.”

The Nightmare remained in its lessened state, waiting for the Lord of Death to acknowledge it again, but the heavy silence only continued. The Nightmare did not know how long it waited. Time was irrelevant, an eternal measure that had no place here, even for dreamers.

It could sense the minds humming in the Dreaming Sea. The warm light of the peaceful, pushing against it like a gentle wind; the cold dark of the antagonistic, tugging at it like nagging children. It could even feel the small gods flitting by, pulled in and out of dreams, weaving pleasantries. Other Nightmares threading hurt and fear. It even felt the dreamers, minds suspended in the Dreaming: the happy, the sad, the delighted, the wicked, the restful, the contentious. It felt them all. It felt everything. And the Nightmare could have screamed and cried and laughed and sang with the ecstasy and the agony of each new sensation.

“I do not want this,” it said to the void around it, to the dreamers and the small gods, to the Dreaming Sea itself.

“And yet,” said a voice, a whisper of every light and shadow that ever touched the world, “you will have it.”

“Why?” asked the Nightmare. “Why must I?”

“Because I can have it no longer. Because you are to become Death, and because I have earned my rest.”

The Nightmare, now Death, looked up with the eyes of ravens.

“I cannot,” it said. “I don’t know how.”

“You will,” said the spirit of Death. “And you will begin with me.”

The Nightmare looked at its former master, no longer sleek, ebony-winged ravens, now nothing more than the softest breath of wind, and felt its anxiety. It was not ready to pass beyond the Dreaming, into lands not even it had been able to see, and the Nightmare felt Death’s spirit

reaching out, felt the hooks of fear sink in, and had to push aside the urge to weave that fear into a tapestry. This time, the Nightmare felt suffused with calm, with the certainty that there was nothing to fear at the end of this existence. It pushed that feeling outward, smoothing the sharp edges of anxiety away, wrapping itself around the spirit of Death, heavy and warm and smelling of milk tea and spiced honey. It felt the aroma sink into Death's spirit, felt it remember and settle, and then it felt the spirit let go, felt the tether unravel as all Death's fear fell away.

“Thank you,” said the spirit that was once Death, once a Daydream, and who before even that was once the soul of a man who had lived a good life.

“Go now,” sang the ravens of Death to this tired little spirit. “Rest and dream no more.”

And the spirit faded, thinning into wisps and then nothing, leaving behind only the scent of milk tea and warm honey.

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