

# **If Dreams Can Die**

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ONEMILLIONWORDS

**Assisted dying** is an umbrella term that can refer to assisted suicide and euthanasia, both of which involve intentionally ending a life in order to relieve a person's pain and suffering. Assisted dying laws vary from country to country and from state to state within the U.S.

*“The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.”*

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

## Prologue

The ambulance door slams, and a man in a dark blue uniform races toward the wreck.

Annette knows without seeing his nametag that he goes by Adrian Barnes, though his given name is actually Alfonso. And even if he doesn't remember *her* name, she knows this call on Sunday, June 24, 1979—their first and only face-to-face—will stick with him for many years to come.

Today is the young paramedic's first confrontation with fatalities.

His racing thoughts threaten to overwhelm her as he surveys the scene of The Accident. She pushes them away, along with a sudden surge of anxiety. She can't afford to be distracted. Every second inside his mind is precious.

Adrian slows and then stops before the overturned sedan, crumpled like an old pop can and belching a plume of black smoke into the cloudless sky.

*No rain...no storm...could the sun have been a factor?*

Seeing through Adrian's eyes, Annette can't help but stare at the mass of twisted metal that once carried her family on countless errands and trips. She had thought she was prepared for the awful sight, but her panic—compounded by Adrian's panic—threatens to drown her in wave after wave of dread.

She wants to look away, not only to steal a moment's reprieve, but also to scan the area for the other vehicles or skid

marks or something else that could explain how her family's apricot Chrysler Cordoba came to be upside-down in a ditch.

But Adrian is watching his partner, a middle-aged man who passed away years ago, as he rushes past and tries to yank open the nearest door.

"Get the cutters!" he shouts without turning around. He gives the door another try. It won't budge.

Annette wants to shake her head, but her lens remains motionless, paralyzed.

*Check the back seat first!*

Adrian opens his mouth, but no words come out—not his or hers. He and Annette watch, transfixed, as the older paramedic crouches down on his belly and peers through the shattered windows. She can't tell if the sick, sinking feeling belongs to her or Adrian.

"Two of them," the other man reports, "a woman and a man..."

*No, there are three of us. Look in the back!*

After a final attempt at the front door, the paramedic glances back and yells, "The cutters, Adrian! Help the lady. I'll see if I can get to the man."

*No no no...*

Adrian blinks twice, takes a deep breath, and sprints back to the ambulance. Annette tries to catch a glimpse at their surroundings. If she can find the face of even one onlooker, she might be able to access the memory from that person's perspective later—provided the rubbernecker is still alive.

Any clue could prove valuable. She is perceptive and persistent. After all, it took her more than a year to track down Adrian Barnes.

But the young paramedic isn't cooperating. Unintentionally depriving her of a look The Accident from a new angle, he moves with single-minded determination toward the ambulance, where he retrieves a pair of shears on steroids. As

he hurries back to the overturned car, Annette is unable to determine whether there are any bystanders on the scene because Adrian is now watching his partner pull a tall, thirty-eight-year-old man from the opposite side of the vehicle.

*Oh, Herbert.*

Once again, the urge to turn away grips her. Once again, Adrian's gaze lingers.

Annette tries to focus on his clothes instead of the blood and burns. A plaid polo shirt bearing a company logo. Gray slacks. One black penny loafer.

*It can't be morning. Herbert always wore a tie to church.*

The wail of distant sirens suggests help is on the way, but Annette knows they'll be too late to save her husband.

*Why did you veer off the road, Herb? Did someone hit us? Did you swerve to avoid a pedestrian?*

She feels the sweat dripping down Adrian's sides as he kneels beside the jammed door. His frenzied thoughts assail her while he cuts a path into the front seat, but she resists them. When he glances at the slack face of a woman on the other side of the door frame, anger hotter than the summer sun burns her whole being.

*Forget about me, you idiot! You have to help Deirdre!*

Adrian freezes. The peach paint of the car dulls to gray. The smell of smoke fades. With a little more effort, she can take control, can *force* Adrian to abandon his task and search the backseat for her daughter. She can create the happy ending history denied her.

But it won't be real.

Quashing every maternal instinct, Annette relaxes her hold on the memory. She must relive the nightmare as it actually happened. Otherwise, those long months of searching for Adrian Barnes will be all for nothing.

The acrid odor of the dying vehicle fills Adrian's nostrils again. She sees with striking clarity her own lifeless

body spill out of the car when he pries loose the dented door. So young—and so plump!—is the Annette Young of 1979 that she almost doesn't recognize herself. Add in the broken nose and a bold palette of bruises, and she could almost convince herself that this is a different car crash entirely.

Yet there's no mistaking the fancy owl brooch clinging tenaciously to the blood-speckled blouse of her younger self.

*We were definitely going to a function of some kind, but what? A wedding reception? A birthday party?*

Balancing precariously on his knees, Adrian tries to rise and almost falls. Annette's arm—her younger self's arm—flops out of the paramedic's grasp, but he doesn't drop her. Rather than try to lift her again, he regains his footing and drags her through the long grass. She tries to calculate how far the Cordoba landed from the road, but Adrian never looks up.

A few yards from the smoking wreck, he checks her vitals. His frantic search for a pulse, followed by a whispered swear, indicates she is already dead. She wonders how much time has passed since her last breath. Weeks later, the doctors will tell her she didn't suffer any brain damage, though not all injuries can be detected by a CT scan.

Annette experiences a moment of unexpected modesty when Adrian pulls open her blouse and pushes the defibrillator's paddles against her chest. She winces as her body jerks in response. Surreal doesn't even begin to describe the feeling of looking through Adrian's eyes as he presses his lips against hers and breaths into her mouth.

*What about the people in the other vehicle?*

*Are there any more victims?*

*Who was at fault?*

The answers elude her. Adrian's concentration extends no further than resurrecting the thirty-four-year-old woman before him. He is useless.

During his attempts to resuscitate her, he alternates between praying and cussing. In spite of how much he cares for her, a complete stranger, she begins to hate him. Her priest will tell her, in the months to come, that she should ask the Good Lord to bless the man who saved her life, but right now, all she can think of is how much pain lies ahead for the Annette Young of 1979—not only the physical trauma from The Accident, but also the melancholy and misery of being a sole survivor.

“He’s gone.” It’s the voice of Adrian’s partner beside her. “Is she...?”

Not looking up from his patient—from her—the younger paramedic says, “I don’t—”

Adrian mimics injured Annette’s gasp. Her doppelgänger’s eyes flit open, brow clenched in pain. Relief swells up from deep inside. However, it’s Adrian’s joy, not hers. He speaks reassuring words to the not-quite-coherent woman and then calls for his partner to bring a stretcher.

*No! Get Deirdre!*

Adrian jumps when his patient squeezes his arm.

“No,” the Annette of yesteryear croaks. “My daughter...my...Deir—”

The two men exchange a terrified look. The older one makes a break for the Cordoba. Because Adrian finally looks back at the car, she can see that the smoke is much thicker now. Orange flames dance atop the undercarriage. For the life of her, Annette can’t remember if the first responders will free Deirdre before the car erupts.

Either way, her daughter’s body will be too fire-ravaged for an open-casket funeral.

She watches—hopeful, fearful—as the older paramedic approaches the wreck. A part of her yearns for the chance to see her daughter again. Another part wonders how she will endure the agony of looking upon the limp, burned body of

her little girl.

Mercifully, Adrian looks down at his own patient. Her younger self has closed her eyes, but Adrian's fingers on her neck confirm the existence of a consistent, if weak, pulse. She focuses on the paramedic's peripheral vision, desperate for any clues to what caused The Accident. All her hopes are dashed when Adrian puts her on a stretcher, jumps up into the back of the ambulance, and closes the heavy doors behind him.

Her frustration finally boils over. She surrenders to it, *embraces* it. Everything around her—the interior of the ambulance, the woman on the stretcher, the foreign body she inhabits—melts beneath the searing red light of her rage.

It isn't enough, though. She yearns to destroy all traces of the memory, that myopic play-by-play that brought only pain, but knows succumbing to the temptation might damage her unwitting host in the process.

The inferno inside her grows. Every synapse silently screams.

At the last second, she relents, and the fiery wave propels her, phoenix-like, from the depths of Adrian's mind.

Annette exploded into Adrian's dream with a cry that rattled the windows of the unfamiliar house. It might have been Adrian's home, one of his friend's houses, or an artificial construct of his unconscious mind. She didn't care. At that moment, she wanted only to reduce the structure to rubble.

Disorientation caught up with her suddenly, and she steadied herself against a wood-paneled wall. The dizziness that always followed deep explorations into someone else's mind was short-lived, however. Such a minor discomfort couldn't hope to compete with her anger.

“Nothing! After all that work...so much time searching ...and what do I have to show for it?”

She drove her toes into the wall and watched it burst, thunderously, into a million pieces. Frowning at the destruction, she closed her eyes and concentrated on slowing her breathing. When she opened her eyes, she found she had floated up from the floor. She felt lighter inside too.

Annette was no stranger to setbacks. No, she had the patience of a saint.

*I'll just have to go back...maybe earlier in the memory when the call first came in over the radio...or later when he's doing paperwork. He must know more about The Accident!*

*Do I dare try again in the same night?*

A glance at the house's other occupant made her pause. The twenty-eight years following The Accident hadn't been kind to Adrian's hairline or waistline. Deep creases around his eyes and mouth made him look closer to sixty than fifty, as though a life of navigating tragedies had taken a physical toll.

Sitting in an oversized red recliner, Adrian gaped at her in unabashed horror.

“So sorry to frighten you, hon,” she said, not bothering to hide her Southern accent. “I usually try to be subtle when I return to a dream, but here I am, appearing out of nowhere...wearing a long white dress and levitating? No wonder you look like you've seen a ghost!”

She chuckled in spite of herself. There was no worry that the Adrian Barnes of 2007 would recognize her from decades ago. As the Lady of Peace, Annette reclaimed her slender, pre-marriage body, though she hadn't removed *all* of her wrinkles. Better to maintain an air of timelessness.

Because Annette Young died—*truly* died—in 2005. She was someone new now.

Her bare feet settled onto the beige carpet. “Anyway, I was just leaving.”

The living room—or did they call it a family room nowadays?—flickered around her. The color bled from the walls and ceiling, and soon the carpet itself was more gray than brown. The overhead light above Adrian flashed wildly. He seemed to vanish every time the room went dark.

*Yes...must've given him quite a start. Hopefully, this is one dream he won't remember.*

Instead of taking control of the dying dream, Annette let the environment dissolve around her. She floated swiftly up through the vanishing ceiling and shot into the collective unconscious—a field of endless gray spattered with countless other dreams. As the last traces of shape and shadow were swallowed by the void, she was swept up by an invisible current that threatened to push her into a neighboring dream.

Annette fought the chaotic pull with practiced ease, maintaining a mostly stationary position. She needed somewhere to compose herself and review what she had learned from Adrian's memory of The Accident—little though it was. One borrowed dream was as good as another, and yet she hesitated.

Something felt odd.

She considered the lively, colorful orb before her. It was difficult to discern anything about the nature of a dream until she entered it, and yet the flickering images inside and even the dominant colors thereof could sometimes provide hints as to whether the sleeper was engaged in a tranquil reverie or a full-blown nightmare.

There was nothing particularly compelling about this dream or any of the other nearby spheres. Puzzled, she turned around and was greeted by a pillar of golden light far off in the distance, which illuminated the dreamscape like a

spotlight.

Annette had dedicated the bulk of her life and most of her death to seeking out phenomena in the dreamscape, including other souls who had fought off the hungry pull of the *white* light. After dying of cancer last year, the collective unconscious had become her sole domain.

In all that time, she had never witnessed anything so vibrant in the space between dreams.

All thoughts of The Accident and her lost family evaporated as the Lady of Peace flew full speed toward the golden beacon.

## Chapter 1

Milton raised the remote and turned off the small television across the room. The distinguished woman on the screen disappeared midsentence. He dropped his atrophied arm back down to the bed, letting the remote fall where it may.

Over the past few days, he had welcomed the diversion TV offered. Why, he had watched an entire football game yesterday—a first for him—and even managed to puzzle out most of the rules. But not even a documentary detailing recent breakthroughs in neurobiology could hope to distract him now, not after last night.

Not after seeing William again.

With great effort, he pulled himself out of bed and with the aid of a metal walker, maneuvered himself to a nearby chair. He knew he ought to be grateful the coma hadn't taken more of a toll on his body or, worse, his mind. As he worked to catch his breath, however, gratitude eluded him.

Even while wandering the endless, wintry stretch of cityscape his comrades at Project Valhalla had dubbed the Twilight Realm, Milton hadn't felt as alone as he did in this rehabilitation center. Of course, back when he was trapped in his own dream, he had done his best to avoid other people, mistakenly believing the CIA was out to get him when Project Valhalla's dream drifters had actually been trying to free him from the delusion.

And although most his conversations with DJ, his jailer, had been exasperating, he would have welcomed a reprise

on this all-too-quiet Monday afternoon.

Or was it Tuesday?

A glance at the newspaper on the table confirmed it was, in fact, Monday. Not that it made much of a difference either way. His days were all pretty much the same. Since he had been forbidden to dream drift—for his own safety, they said—his nights were rather ordinary too.

Except for last night.

Slouching in a stiff-backed chair, he didn't have a good vantage of what lay outside the solitary window. Mostly there was the grid of brickwork, thanks to the outcropping of architecture between his room and the next. Enough of the mid-November sky peeked through, however, for him to see a few wayward flurries falling—another echo of the time he had spent imprisoned in his own mind.

*What if I'm still dreaming?*

It wasn't the first time the question had come to him. Even if the familiar gray sky and its promise of snow were just a coincidence, he couldn't dismiss the lunacy of his encounter with William. Like most dreams, little of it made any damn sense. He could still hear the man's desperate words:

*"...she is too strong...much stronger than you or I alone..."*

He pushed the newspaper away. An insert slid out between pages. He tried to catch it before it fell from the table, but the sudden jerk was both awkward and painful. He nearly ended up on the floor himself. Pulling back with a wince, he cursed his feeble body as well as his overzealous physical therapist.

Milton felt closer to eighty-five than fifty-five. His doctor had prescribed patience and positivity, but both treatments were in short supply. Milton hated feeling sorry for himself—that had never been his style—and yet an extended

period of recovery in the real world, combined with a suspension from the dreamscape, meant he had nothing but time to reflect on his problems.

*It could always be worse. DJ died.*

*And Annette didn't...*

Again, William's words echoed in his mind:

*"We have to work together to put an end to her."*

Milton watched a few snowflakes spiral down from the sky. His thoughts drifted just as aimlessly, jumping from his first encounter with Annette Young at a Lucid Dreaming Society picnic to last night's unexpected meeting with William and so many points in between.

*"I have a plan."*

A knock at the door wrenched him back to the present.

"Come in!" he called, pulling his robe tighter across his chest.

As the door opened, he found himself hoping Earl or Alison would be on the other side, though he knew the latter was still transitioning from civilian life to that of an official CIA operative.

Milton hadn't had any contact with the Deputy Director since his escape from the Twilight Realm. He couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing.

A part of him half expected to see William Marlowe himself cross the threshold.

However, his guest turned out to be none of them. He didn't even recognize the woman at first, though her pretty, polite smile quickly kick-started his memory.

Gone was Brynhildr's long blond braid, not to mention the silver breastplate and white wings. Only her lipstick, a very light shade of pink, seemed to translate to the real world—well, that and a frosty disposition that rivaled the Norse underworld.

Milton's stomach sank.

“Hello, Milton. No, please don’t stand.”

Hannah Hamilton’s entrance was graceful yet purposeful. A short but not-too-short skirt showed off long, shapely legs. Her shiny white blouse accentuated ample curves. When she bent down to pick up the fallen advertisement, her hair, longer in front than in back, fanned out on either side of her face, revealing stubble at the nape of her neck. The extreme bob paradoxically made her look even more feminine.

He imagined most men found her incredibly alluring.

“What a pleasant surprise,” he said, gesturing at the vacant chair beside him. “I can’t remember the last time we spoke...in person, I mean.”

“It’s good to see you, Milton,” she said softly.

Even though he had never been attracted to women, there was something invigorating about being the recipient of the stunning woman’s rare smile. Yes, she could be quite charming when it suited her. It was almost enough to make him forget the many arguments they had waged against each other in the Great Hall—and the fact that they had been rivals more often than allies.

She leaned back and crossed her legs. “How are you feeling?”

For a second, he almost gave into the temptation to be truthful, but now wasn’t the time to unburden himself. Even if the location lent the conversation a certain level of intimacy, he had never seen the woman be anything less than professional—neither as Hannah nor as Brynhildr. The valkyrie commander most certainly knew his hopeful, if gradual, prognosis.

Anyway, this wasn’t a social call, so why not lean into it?

“Truth be told,” he said, “I’m still trying to process what happened with William last night.”

She nodded absently, a faraway look in her eye. “I’ve spent the morning thinking about the Lucid Dreaming

Society—”

*That makes two of us.*

“—and was hoping you could help me fill in some blanks.”

Milton scratched his head. He had expected her to want to explore more recent events. After all, the two of them had spoken in the Great Hall about the allegations William had made immediately after his surprise visit to Milton’s dream. Yet *her* impromptu visit couldn’t be unrelated.

“Of course,” he replied with a wan smile. “What else can I tell you about my ancient history that you don’t already know?”

What followed was a series of questions he answered with mostly facts but also a few opinions, when pressed. The interview focused primarily on Annette, but Hannah also sought details about William’s and Cormac’s roles in COPE, the secret organization that had supplanted the Lucid Dreaming Society two decades ago. It was a topic he knew very little about.

“But Levi Nathan was never a member of the Lucid Dreaming Society?” she asked.

Milton shook his head. “I’ve never met the man.”

Hannah jotted something down in the small notebook she had taken from her purse.

*I’m not telling her anything she doesn’t already know. We already went over this when she interrogated me in the dreamscape last week. Why isn’t she asking about William’s sudden reappearance?*

*“Find me in the waking world.”*

When she didn’t follow up with another question, Milton said, “The Lucid Dreaming Society started as something so innocent. Sometimes it amazes me how everything evolved.”

She looked up from her notes. “What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s us for starters.”

Hannah arched an elegant eyebrow.

“Project Valhalla, I mean. I’m a scientist. Discovery has always been my goal. I seek knowledge for the sake of gaining a better understanding of how the mind works. I never expected any of this. If it weren’t for my early research, the CIA wouldn’t be training operatives for combat in the dreamscape today.”

“Maybe not, but then again...”

Milton cocked his head to the side. He had always thought the woman would have made an excellent poker player. Whenever the two of them had debated in the Great Hall—often about the hazards and ethical considerations of engineering a drug to create artificial dream drifters—he had suspected she held a card in reserve.

He worried about the day she would play her ace.

“Are you implying the CIA had knowledge of the true nature of the collective unconscious prior to...how did Deputy Director Senecal put it?...‘reading between the lines of my dissertations’?”

Hannah set her pen on the table. “Of course. How else would we have known what to look for?”

“But...”

She shifted in her seat, and he caught the glint of a golden chain beneath her blouse. “Project Sleepwalker, Project Valhalla’s precursor, dates back to the early ’80s. We suspect the Russians had their own dream-based experiments back then too, perhaps even predating the Cold War.”

“Project Sleepwalker?”

Hannah waved the question away with a single word. “Classified.”

“Well, even if the CIA had dream drifting on its radar,” Milton said, sounding more annoyed than he would have liked, “no one in the Lucid Dreaming Society could have predicted that I would have ended up working for the agency

or that Annette Young would use the collective unconscious to cheat death...*if* William is to be believed.”

She studied him for a moment. “And do you believe him?”

Milton snorted.

*So we’re finally going to talk about this?*

He had told Brynhildr everything he had witnessed in William’s mind immediately after she and her valkyries had retrieved him. She had listened calmly, expression-lessly as he recounted how William had “reverse deep drifted,” pulling him into one of William’s memories—something Milton hadn’t even thought possible.

Milton hadn’t held anything back while sharing the memory William had selected: the night Annette had succumbed to cancer and then visited William shortly after her death.

“Well?” Hannah prompted.

Milton sighed. “I honestly don’t know what to believe.”

“But is it possible that a powerful natural might have been able to remain in the dreamscape if he or she died while dreaming?” Her tone was conversational, as though she were asking him about the likelihood of a late-autumn blizzard, not a fundamental question about life, death, and the hereafter.

He chuckled humorlessly. “Is it possible? I suppose, yes, theoretically. After what I saw COPE doing in the space between dreams earlier this year...interfering with a soul bound for what looked like, well, a white light...yes, the pieces all seem to fit together.

“It’s just...Annette and I were such close friends once. I went to her *funeral*. And all this time, she has been lurking in the dreamscape? And she’s supposedly some great threat to the collective unconscious? I don’t know...I just don’t know.”

Hannah tapped a fingernail against the notepad as she seemingly considered his answer. “Could William Marlowe have manufactured the memory or altered it in some strategic way?”

Milton thought for a moment before replying, “Possibly. But what I can’t figure out is why he would invent such a preposterous story. And then there was the fear...I could *feel* his fear. William can be quite the performer when he wants to be, but I don’t think even he could fake an emotion that strong.”

Hannah crossed her arms. “We need more information.”

“Agreed,” Milton said, “but after you and that other valkyrie, well, barged into his mind to rescue me, I doubt he’ll reach out to me again. He’ll go back into hiding, I think.”

*“You have to find me.”*

Hannah didn’t reply.

“You might have an easier time finding Annette...if she’s really out there,” he added.

The valkyrie commander’s steely gaze didn’t waver.

Milton ran a hand through his thinning hair. “I’m just saying that if the CIA hasn’t been able to locate William over the past seven months, back when we all believed he, not Annette, was responsible for my coma, I don’t know how much luck you’ll have now.”

*“Only you can find me, Milton.”*

“Milton,” Hannah pressed.

*No...*

“I was there, Milton. When Sigdrifa and I deep drifted into Marlowe’s mind and finally located you, we *heard* him speaking to you.”

*Please don’t say it.*

““Only you can find the *real* me.””

Milton looked away. “I...I’m not sure what he meant by that.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He winced.

“I can’t decide if you’re trying to protect him or protect yourself,” she said flatly. “Either way, it’s a misguided effort. You weren’t completely honest with us in the past, and if you recall, it landed you...landed *all of us* in a lot of trouble. If you had told us about William Marlowe, we might have been able to protect you and prevent your coma. Now Baldr is dead, and we almost lost Syn too. We can’t afford to be reactive anymore. We have to know what we’re up against!”

She put her hand on his and said, more quietly, “I need to figure out what the hell is going on out there, and I need *your* help to do it.”

Milton rubbed his temples.

*Why should I protect William? Whatever mess he’s in, it’s his own fault. I’m in no position to play hero. He knows I work for the CIA, so why not let Brynhildr and her winged warriors handle it?*

Hannah cleared her throat.

“Hayashi Toru,” Milton said before he could stop himself. “His birth name is Hayashi Toru. That has to be what he meant by ‘the real me.’ Only a handful people know anything about his troubled childhood. I don’t think even Annette knows he legally changed his name at eighteen to sever all ties with his father.”

“Understood.” Their conversation apparently at an end, Hannah deposited the pen and pad back into her purse. Standing, she said, “Thank you, Milton.”

He couldn’t bring himself to return her polished smile. “Yes, OK, just...please be careful.”

Whether he was lobbying for leniency on William’s behalf or giving the valkyrie commander a warning, Milton couldn’t say. Neither did he know if he had just betrayed an

old friend or aided a man he had considered an enemy for years.

*William sounded so sincere last night, but how can I trust him? How can any of us trust him?*

Hannah's heels clicked against the tiles as she marched to the door. Her expression softened slightly when she turned back to him. "Feel better, Dr. Baerwald."

Staring out the window, where the snowflakes had increased in size and sum, Milton feared he wouldn't be able to follow that particular order anytime soon.

## Chapter 2

Annette moved through the garden, admiring her handiwork. Flowers of every hue imaginable framed her path—lush, vibrant petals that rivaled any living plant. The subtle breeze caressed her skin and carried a heavenly perfume to her nose. Pleasantly warm rays streamed down through the canopy, warming patches of grass beneath her bare feet.

She ran a finger over a bulbous tulip blossom, and it danced merrily in her wake. Art had always eluded her in life, both the talent to produce it and the perspective to appreciate it. Gardening was the closest thing she had ever had to a creative pursuit—that and baking, she supposed.

Even her most successful backyard beds couldn't hope to compare to the Harmony Garden.

Of course, there were no rabbits to nibble her daisies in this dream. Some might consider crafting a garden that didn't require watering or weeding out of pure imagination to be cheating. She didn't care. So what if the afterlife had given her the green thumb life denied her? Wasn't paradise meant to be beautiful?

*If I can't make it perfect yet, I may as well make it pretty.*

Annette ran a finger over the rough furrows of hickory bark. A thin vine sprouted from the glowing trail she left. By the time she moved onto the next tree, bright red grapes were already bursting forth. None of her guests had ever sampled the fruit she made, but she liked to give them the

option to snack. She was their hostess, after all.

Her creative spirit waned gradually. After her fourth trip past a grand, golden-leafed oak, her stroll started to feel a lot like pacing. Impatience was just one of immortality's possible side-effects. How long had it been since she took control of some unsuspecting sleeper's fading dream and started transforming it into the Harmony Garden?

The sun remained directly overhead, eternal noon.

Dipping her toes in the cool waters of a lazy brook, she remembered something William had said about how time in the dreamscape matched up perfectly with time in the real world. A one-to-one ratio, he had said.

Or had Milton told her that? She couldn't recall. However, she did remember hearing that most dreams—*normal* dreams—took shortcuts, allowing many adventures to play out in a single night. Transitions were sparse. Distances became irrelevant. The subconscious was not a slave to linear thinking.

But lucid dreamers imposed their logic on the dreamscape. Or at least tried to. No one had ever figured out how to create a reliable clock here. And what was time anyway but a manmade convention, an unnatural contrivance?

The measurement of change.

Yes, she had come across that explanation somewhere. Maybe Milton or William but more likely from a book that tackled such abstract topics. The definition appealed to her even now. Or at least it explained her lack of an internal clock. If she stayed in the Harmony Garden, alone and altered nothing, time would simply cease to exist. Only when an outside force acted on her dream—the arrival of her guests, for instance—would time have any meaning for her.

The thought was as thrilling as it was terrifying.

*Maybe someday I'll forget about time entirely...once I'm surrounded by others like me.*

After another lap around the garden, just when she thought isolation's shadow could grow no stronger, something stirred. Her sigh of relief was echoed by a gust that shook more than a few petals free from their stems. She beckoned them to her and converted the colorful petals into a rainbow of butterflies, which followed her into the clearing.

The sight of her friends waiting for her filled her with a warmth that rivaled the everlasting summer day. She chuckled inwardly as Janet watched the cascade of colorful butterflies through wide eyes. A part of Annette still thought of all this pageantry as sad parlor tricks, but the wonder on her friend's face reminded her that pomp served a purpose.

Everyone else was smiling too—Keith, Juan, Nancy, Isaiah—though she detected something strained in Nasira's expression.

"Welcome, brothers and sisters," Annette said. "It is good to see you all again."

They gave their hellos in reply. As she walked among them, Janet, Keith, Isaiah, and Juan gave her hugs. Nancy, ever one for formalities, curtsied, stretching out the hem of a gown as white as Annette's. Nasira nodded at her but hung back.

Annette gestured at the alabaster benches at the center of the clearing, and her flock took their seats. Standing before them, she folded her hands and frowned.

"I know I have been neglecting you all lately," she said softly. "It has been too long since we gathered in the Harmony Garden."

Janet smiled weakly. Nasira looked away.

"For that, I am very sorry," Annette continued. "But a lot has been happening and keeping me busy."

Nasira opened her mouth to say something but must have thought better of it because she studied the clover at her feet

instead.

“Nasira?” Annette prompted.

The Middle Eastern woman flinched. “I...”

Annette walked over to her. “Please, Nasira. Speak your mind.”

Nasira tugged at her lavender headscarf. “I was going to say, my Lady, that in addition to *you* being very busy, Brother Levi has been kept from us too...in the dreamscape and the waking world.”

Annette glanced at the conspicuously empty bench at the front of the clearing. She had notified Levi Nathan about tonight’s meeting. Something must have come up. She didn’t want to think of what that could be.

“I know Brother Levi’s absence has impacted you these past few months. Many of you—” She turned back to Nasira. “—have had to work harder to compensate.”

Nasira sighed. “Not as hard as we would like, my Lady.”

“Oh?”

“What Sister Nasira is trying to say, my Lady, is that things have been slow at the Sanctuary,” Juan said. “I think we all are feeling...impatient.”

*It must be catching.*

The Lady of Peace smiled at Juan and then patted Nasira’s arm. “We all yearn for progress. There’s no shame in that. And I have some good news about Brother Levi. His pilgrimage will soon be over.”

She expected Nasira to look relieved, but the expression that crossed her face was a distant relative at best. The woman mumbled something.

“Pardon?” Annette asked.

“We saw him on the news,” Nasira said a little louder, but she kept her coffee-colored eyes downcast.

*Crap.*

Annette didn't let her smile falter. "Ah, you must be referring to what happened in Milwaukee."

Absolute silence engulfed the glade. She didn't know what the media was reporting—*couldn't* know—but she could surely guess. They wouldn't have all the details, but when a man tries to kill his comatose brother and is stopped by a mysterious nurse, questions will arise.

Which was precisely why Levi Nathan hadn't given two weeks' notice before fleeing St. Mary's Hospital.

Annette made her way to the empty bench and sat down. "I imagine you all have many questions. When I first announced that Brother Levi would leave you for a time, I asked you to have faith and, yes, *patience*."

Janet laughed uncertainly. Seated beside her, Keith fidgeted with the collar of his flannel shirt.

"I've asked a lot of you from the start...since the early days of PEACE and in the year after my rebirth. We've had many setbacks along the way, no arguing about that. But Brother Levi's pilgrimage is *not* one of them. In fact, he has helped us score a great victory."

Six pairs of eyes watched her, waiting.

"Brother Levi and I have discovered a way to make *all* of our members into dream drifters," Annette announced, her arms uplifted.

Isaiah and Nasira exchanged an astonished look. Janet gasped. Annette wasn't surprised. Out of everyone in her inner circle, Janet and her husband would have found the news most exciting. Janet and Keith had been involved with both PEACE and COPE from the start as well as the Lucid Dreaming Society before that, despite the fact that neither of them were dream drifters. They had always depended on other members to pull them from one dream to another.

Janet's big eyes glistened with unspent tears. Keith grinned.

Everyone started talking at once. Annette let them go on, basking in their excitement, feeding on their energy. Finally, she raised a hand, and her flock quieted down. Keith squeezed Janet's leg while she dabbed at her eyes.

"It will take a little time for us to reproduce the elixir, but once we have perfected the formula, it will go a long way toward helping us realize our goals...both our short-term *and* long-term objectives."

Juan applauded, and the others joined in—all except Nasira, whose dark, bushy eyebrows bunched together.

"And Brother Levi found this...elixir at the hospital in Milwaukee?"

"No," said a deep voice behind her.

Annette had felt a faint fluttering in the garden an instant before Levi Nathan appeared. Even if he hadn't spoken, she would have known it was him. The man always made an unmistakable impression—like a faint footprint or subtle cologne.

She turned, and he greeted her with the sparsest of smiles. No hug from Levi. The thirty-something-year-old had never been the touchy-feely type, not physically or emotionally. Where some might call Levi cold, Annette saw a man whose heart matched his great stature. They just didn't know him like she did.

He was her rock, her disciple, her friend.

And if he chose to keep most of his thoughts and feelings private, well, everyone had their foibles.

"I don't understand," Nasira said.

"My pilgrimage to the Midwest had nothing to do with the serum," Levi replied curtly.

Isaiah shifted in his seat. "Did you...were you trying to save that man's life?"

Levi considered the question and shrugged.

"The situation was complicated," Annette said. "Rest as-

sured, Levi has done only what I asked of him. Leaving Milwaukee before the police could question him was an act of discretion...a move that might seem suspicious to outsiders but one that keeps attention away from PEACE.”

Rising from the bench to stand once more before her followers, she added, “Only *we* can appreciate Levi’s heroics for what they are.”

Nasira had a few more questions, which Annette handled on Levi’s behalf. She understood Nasira’s curiosity, her cravings for details, but Annette was not prepared to get into the specifics. Now that Levi was there, she was eager to dismiss everyone else and engage in a private conversation with the only other person who was privy to the big picture.

“Levi will return to the Sanctuary as soon as he is able,” Annette told her flock. “We will provide more information at that time. Meanwhile, we should celebrate this win and prepare ourselves for the next vigil...mentally and spiritually.”

“Yes, my Lady,” they murmured.

She folded her hands before her, the gossamer fabric falling down to her fingertips. One by one, her congregation rose and said farewell. Nasira looked reassured, though no one was as jubilant as Janet.

“I can’t even imagine it...being a dream drifter myself,” she told Annette as she wrapped her in an even bigger hug than before. “Thank you for all you have done for us, my Lady!”

Annette patted her back. “You have put your trust in me. Far be it from me to disappoint.”

Janet joined Keith at the edge of the clearing, where Isai-ah and Juan waited. The two drifters took the couple’s hands and then slowly rose into the air. Nasira and Nancy followed, the latter wrapping the bulk of her dress around her legs modestly. The six of them disappeared above the tallest

branches, but it wasn't until she felt their departure—a rippling of the leaves that had nothing to do with wind—that she turned to Levi.

“That nonsense at the hospital made the national news? Crap on a cracker!”