

Chapter 1

Dreaming

“Close your eyes.”

“If you would like to understand the dream, you *must* see it as I do.”

“I've carried it with me since the moment of my birth. I've not grown into it. It has always been waiting for me. Every time I sleep, I return to this same place, and every time it begins the same way.”

“There is darkness.”

“Not the darkness of night beneath the forest canopy. Not the darkness behind closed eyelids. Those are gentle things, familiar things. Even the darkest cavern still has a distant memory of the sun.”

“This darkness remembers nothing.”

“It has no boundaries, no center. It extends infinitely, but it has no use for the idea of extension, for extension is not known in this place. It has no up, no down, no direction to choose. The darkness is not surrounding me. It is the very idea of being surrounded. It is complete. There is *nothing* hidden away in it. No faint spark waiting to be kindled. No distant glow that may promise someday the possibility of light.”

“In this place, light has never been. Not here. Not anywhere. In this place, the idea of it is unthinkable, a violation.”

“The darkness is not *quite* empty though.”

“That is the strange part. It is vast, but it is not empty. It presses upon what I am with a quiet intensity, like the pressure of deep water upon a swimmer who has swum too long beneath the surface. It does not move. It does not breathe. It simply is and always has been. And in this darkness, there is cold.”

“Not winter's cold. Not the cold that seeps into frozen rivers or clings to the limbs of sleeping trees.”

“Those are living colds. They are part of a world where warmth is still alive somewhere beyond the horizon.”

“But this cold... This is not *that* cold.”

"This cold has *no* opposite.”

“This is the cold that was here before fire. Before the sun above us. Even before the first spark that would eventually flame with the light of that sun.”

“This is the cold of a world that has never been born.”

“If an elf could walk upon a world *this* cold, the sap in every tree would forget how to rise into the springtime air. Rivers would forget that they were ever meant to flow. Even mountains would become brittle with it, as if stone itself wanted to shatter and lie still forever.”

“But the cold in my dream is not like that at all.”

“It is not a cold that bites or burns.”

“It is a *settling* cold.”

“It is a *filling* cold.”

“It fills everything that I am as frost fills the empty places in the earth when winter claims the land.”

“It hurts nothing. It changes nothing.”

“It simply is.”

“This is a cold that is older than pain.”

“Older than breathing.”

“Even older than time itself.”

“Lastly... there is the feeling of loneliness.”

“Not the loneliness of a traveler on a long road with no end in sight.”

"Not the loneliness of the last of a family line, who carries a name no one living will ever speak again."

“Those are the loneliest things in a world where other lives exist beyond the edge of vision.”

“But *this* is different.”

“This is the loneliness of a place where *nothing* has ever lived.”

“No wind has ever passed through this dark.”

“No rain has ever fallen.”

“No wings have disturbed its silence.”

“There are no trees, no stones, no sky.”

“There is no comfort of ground beneath my feet.”

“Not even the thought of a body is clear.”

“There is only me.”

“Or rather, something I *think* is me.”

“A single dreamer suspended in a place where even dreams should not live.”

“And the more I linger there, the more I know with certainty that this is something awful.”

“This darkness has been alone forever.”

“It expects to be alone forever.”

“And if nothing alters, I will forever be a part of this loneliness.”

“Not through dying.”

“Not through disappearing.”

“Through becoming a part of it.”

“As though I had not existed.”

“That, my friends, is where the dream begins and has normally ended.”

“But this time the dream did not end with the hopelessness in the darkness.”

“That is where I will awaken, shaken, with the lingering feeling of that lonely dark.”

“This time, however, something... changed.”

“This time, the dream continued.”

“At first it is so small that I doubt it. In a place where nothing moves, even the faintest difference is beyond imagining. But it is there. A gentle unease in the stillness. A feeling that the darkness is no longer perfectly at rest.”

“For a long time I am not sure what has changed.”

“The cold is the same.”

“The silence is the same.”

“The loneliness is the same.”

“But something inside the vast emptiness has changed.”

“Then... I understand.”

“I am *moving*.”

“At first it is a movement so slight that it can hardly be called movement at all. A drifting without direction or purpose. A turning without wind or ground to measure it against.”

“But I continue to move.”

“The darkness that had pressed so evenly against me now feels different from moment to moment. It stretches and slides as if I am moving through it.”

“There is no path.”

“There is no destination.”

“There is only the motion.”

“At first... it is slow.”

“*Almost* peaceful.”

“Like the slow water below the surface of deep water.”

“But it is not peaceful.”

“The motion is a drifting.”

“The drifting is a pull.”

“The pull is a speed.”

"The darkness is no longer still. It is beginning to stream around me. There is nothing in it that can be seen. I do not know if I am falling or flying or being drawn forward by some unseen force."

"The cold sharpens as the speed increases, such as when the cold tears at one's soul while riding a fast horse through the winter air."

"But this was more... much more."

"The silence closes in around me."

"Faster."

"What was once a drifting motion now feels like rushing wind, though there is no wind to speak of. The darkness sweeps past me in torrents of blackness. My mind strains to keep itself together against the growing power."

"Then... faster."

"The loneliness of the place starts to fracture under the impact of the motion. It seems as though something is about to happen. Something the darkness cannot contain."

"Even faster now."

"The speed becomes unbearable."

"I feel like the very idea of me, the very concept of my presence within the dream, is being pulled asunder. As if whatever I am within the dream cannot withstand the strain of this movement much longer. The cold begins to seep through me like a fracture. The silence booms with a power that has never known release."

"For an instant, I know with a sickening certainty that I am about to come... undone and forever disappear into the endless darkness."

"And then the dream ends."

"I wake."

"My breathing comes hard and fast, like I have been running through the darkest forest. My heart beats against my ribs with the same terrible rhythm it always does when the dream ends."

"For an instant, I simply lie there, waiting for the world to resume its proper shape."

"The cold of the dream disappears."

"The silence disappears."

"The loneliness disappears."

"But the motion remains."

"That, I think, is the strange part about my dream. It never ends without leaving its mark on the waking world."

"I have known this since I was very young."

"When the dream is over, I am never quite where I was before it started. Sometimes I wake up on the other side of the forest. Sometimes on the banks of rivers that I had not intended to visit. Once, I woke up high up among the roots of a mountain where no foot of man or elf had ever been. Every time, I had been moved."

"Not by walking."

"Not by riding."

"I simply... moved."

"This time is different."

"I know it before I even open my eyes."

"The air has the wrong smell. The wind has a taste that is unfamiliar to me. I slowly rise. The ground beneath me is coarse, covered with pale sand. Waves crash against the shore, leaving long white lines behind. The sea stretches out before me, endless, until it meets the sky."

"For a long time, I simply stare."

"Beyond the waves, beyond the endless expanse of the ocean, there is a land that I have never seen, though I have heard of it spoken of among the quiet conversations of the forest. This is a land so far away that I cannot begin to understand how I arrived here because of a dream."

"The land of... men... a world so far from my own?"

"Between my home, my forest, my mountains, and this distant land, there is an ocean that very few elves have crossed in all the years that anyone can remember."

“And the dream has carried me across the water... across the world... as the waves crash upon the shore, I begin to understand that the dream that has been my constant companion since birth has, for the first time, truly awakened.”