Part 1

Their beginnings

# Drive Through

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Tonight the dream was on a lake. It looked endless, that lake, like it was the size of an ocean but it was still a lake because you knew that you could reach the other side easily. The surface was glassy, reflecting the clear blue sky. Well, actually now it was green. Now Purple.

The bright sound of children’s’ laughter split through the air of the small, grassy clearing beside the lake.

“Make it pink,” shouted Amanda, a ten year old girl with black hair and expressive light blue eyes. Excuse me, Ten and a half.

“No! Wed,” demanded Reven, a seven year old going on ten. He always had to have the last say with his sister, even at this young age. He also had black hair, but his eyes were an endless deep blue.

Nancy and Brad Erie sat near them. While Brad let out a jolly laugh, Nancy merely smiled in her quiet way and raised a hand to the sky. Suddenly swirls of red and pink twirled and twisted above their heads, never mixing but always moving. Both children squealed in delight.

“Pwetty,” was all Reven could say. He glanced at his parents to see them holding hands and smiling at the sky. He felt happy too.

“I wanna try!” Amanda stomped her foot, “How do I do it momma?”

“Now, Manda you know you can’t yet. They taught you that at school. I know they did; it’s why we send you all the way to Rome. Besides, you’re going to be like daddy, a Guardian. Someday you will protect someone just like he does mommy.”

When Amanda looked unconvinced she added, “You know how you remember these dreams? Mommy doesn’t. Isn’t that better? You’ll remember this beautiful sky and the beautiful reflective lake, all I remember are occasional flashes.”

“What about me?” inquired Reven, “What will I be?”

“Well Reven, do you like to draw?” supplied his father. Reven nodded. “Do you like to look at pictures?” Reven nodded again. “Do you like to get wasted and sing loudly?”

“Wasted?” Reven looked confused but nodded anyway.

“Brad! He’s only seven!” Nancy scolded, though you could hear the laughter in her voice.

“Sorry Nan, I couldn’t resist.” He turned his attention towards his son, “Sorry young man the all powerful has spoken. That subject will have to wait until you’re older, but in all seriousness, you’ll be an Artist like your mother.” Brad’s eyes sparkled.

“Don’t worry son when the time comes I’ll…” Suddenly pain flashed across his parent’s faces and they froze. Intense, blinding pain. They collapsed upon each other.

“Momma? Daddy? What’s wrong? Sis?” he turned to his sister only to find she was gone.

He looked back to his parents to see their eyes coming into focus.

“God!” was all that escaped his father’s lips at first.

“Manda too? Brad what happened?” his mom whispered.

His father shook his head, “We’re dead Nan, all three of us.”

“Reven,” he focused his attention on his son,” You didn’t feel anything did you? You’re ok?” Reven shook his head. “Thank God!”

“Reven, I need you to listen to me carefully sweetie. Your father, sister and I are about to leave. I’m so sorry. Please, be strong for us. Will you do that? Will you be strong?”

“Where are you going?”

“Far away. But we will always be with you. We love you so much.”

Reven watched in confusion as his parents began to fade. Was this some new trick? Was Manda hiding somewhere?

“It's ok. You’re going to be fine Reven,” and the last remnants of his family faded away, leaving him alone by a giant lake and alien sky.

“Momma? Daddy? Manda? Where did you go? Come back!” no one appeared.

Werethey playing hide and seek again? He ran around looking behind trees and started to cry. When he found no one he began sobbing and fell backwards to sit down, but the world disappeared around him.

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He opened his eyes to see wreckage everywhere. Smoke and dust filled the air. He couldn’t breathe.

He tried to move and suddenly realized he couldn’t. He couldn’t move at all.

He tried to scream, to cry for his dad, who would surely save him, and couldn’t.

All he could do was look around in terror at the disaster area that was his house. He focused on the wall where the door to his parent’s room used to be but, instead, saw only the front of a truck.

It wasn’t the strangeness of the semi-truck in his room that made him want to scream even louder, though; it was the horror inside it.

Because, partway through the windshield was a monster.

It was black with red gleaming eyes that looked up and straight at him. It’s fanged mouth quirked into a grin so full of malice that Reven couldn’t look at it anymore. He could only close his eyes and cry silently, waiting for it to hurt him.

The pain, however, never came, so he opened his eyes again and whipped away the tears that were blurring his vision. All that was in the cab now was a man with his torso half out of the windshield. He wasn’t moving. Red seeped from so many places he looked painted.

Reven sat up and found he could speak again as well.

“Momma? Daddy? Manda? Where are you?”

Suddenly noise erupted all around him: sirens, voices, scraps and bangs. “Did you hear that? Oh God, there’s a child in there!” The noise of moving rubble intensified.

Reven’s voice slowly rose in volume until he was screaming for his parents and crying, “Momma! Daddy! Where you did go? Take me too!”

Suddenly a person in all yellow broke through the rubble next to the truck. A firefighter. He was soon followed by two others. The first one ran to him and lifted him up.

“Get him out to the paramedics. It’s a miracle he survived! That bunk bed must have saved him.”

“Wait, son, did someone sleep on top?” Reven nodded still sobbing.

“James, check the top bunk and damn it Ralf I said get that kid to the medics. NOW!”

The last things Reven heard as he lost consciousness again were the heavy foot falls of the man carrying him away and the muted, “Fuck! There’s a little girl. She’s dead,” that followed him out.

# Friendship

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Tonight he was at the park, except this park had endless slides, monkey bars that actually turned you into monkeys, a see-saw that catapulted you, and a swing set that flipped you upside down. All of that wasn’t real, of course, but it was still lots of fun.

Meris, a seven year old with crown of golden hair and brown eyes looked around wondering what he should try out first. Maybe he could swing, launch into the sky and land in the sandbox. That would be fun. In real life that would hurt, of course, but this was a dream, so he could do anything.

He got on the swing and got it spinning really fast. He waited for the right time, launched into the air…

… and suddenly he was in what looked like an old, empty town square. There wasn’t a sign of electronic stuff anywhere to be found. In fact it looked like the roofs were made of grass. How can you make a roof out of grass? Everything seemed to have an intrinsic glow, like light came from everywhere at once. Intrigued and confused, he glanced around only to find he wasn’t alone. Behind him stood another, equally confused boy. Or was it a girl?

It was hard to tell exactly tell what he (or she) looked like. He (or she) seemed to be fading in and out. One second he was there, all black hair and blue eyes, and the next second there was a girl with brown hair and dark green eyes. While the girl stood unmoving and staring at nothing, the boy looked at Meris curiously.

“Um who are you? It’s rude to dream peek,” demanded the strange child. The boy child, that is.

“But *I* was Dreaming. You interrupted *my* trick,” Meris sounded a little sullen. “Besides, mom said I should only be able to see family. You’re *not* my family.”

“I’m Reven. You can’ be my family. My family is dead. That’s what all the grown-ups said. They said I get a new family soon tough.”

“Who’s that girl?”

“What girl?”

“She’s right there with you.”

“I’m by myself.”

“But I see… wait, dead? That’s sad.”

“Yeah, they left me alone,” Reven started to sniffle.

“Hey, wait, don’t cry. I’ll play with you. Will you be my friend?” Meris put his hand on Reven’s shoulder, something he had seen his dad do to his partner.

“You will?”

“Yeah I’d love to. I…I…wait, I think I hear my mom calling me,” Meris said quietly while he started to fade. “I’m sorry I’ll have to play later.”

“I hear my name too.”

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“Meris. Meris honey. Can you wake up a bit? We have someone for you to meet,” Meris opened his eyes to see his mom bending over him. “Hi there. Don’t worry it’s not morning yet but your father just got back from the hospital with a little boy who is going to stay with us.” She moved aside to reveal his father standing in the doorway with his hand on the shoulder of a little boy with black hair….

…Reven.

Reven looked equally bleary and surprised. Both boys spoke at once.

“Reven?”

“You?”

A shocked silence followed while Ed and Diana Ersatz looked from one boy to the other.

“Have you two met somewhere?” Ed seemed truly perplexed. “Diana?”

“He was in my dream dad,” Meris provided brightly as if this was a perfectly normal thing to say about a stranger.

“Oh is that where? I just felt I knew you,” accepting the explanation without question.

Diana continued to look perplexed until Ed made a choking sound somewhere between a laugh and a gag then she just looked at her husband with concern.

“Ed…?”

“Oh, sorry Di, Sometimes I forget you’re not in the REM. Remember how I explained that Meris would be in and out of our dreams, but only ours? Yeah, well there is one exception… partners. Our first meeting outside our family is always with our partners and will happen once you are within a small range. It seems our little dreamer has already found his.” Ed led Reven into the room, sat down on Meris’s bed and patted it. Diana sat on one side of him and after a moment’s hesitation Reven took the other.

“So, Meris, did you see a strange glowing village?” Ed turned toward Meris, “You’re a bit young to understand it all, but I’m sure you noticed that at least.”

Meris nodded and sat up, “Why were there grass roofs?”

“Grass roofs? What is he talking about Ed?” Diana looked form one to the other and when all her husband did is chuckle she threw her hands up and stood. “Honestly, I don’t know why I try to understand this mess anyway. One day soon I’ll develop some super power and leave you all in the dark about it.” She directed her attention at the boys, “Meris, Reven is going to stay with us until you both go to school so be nice. He’s your brother now.”

“Why would I be mean? Reven is my friend?” Meris glanced at Reven who nodded in agreement. Both looked dead serious and then cracked up laughing.

Ed actually laughed at that causing his wife to look at him and roll her eyes. She turned and walked out with a, “I’ll leave you to your ‘special people’ talk.”

Still chuckling Ed watched his wife depart, “Oh dear, I seem to have upset your mother.” Suddenly realizing the consequences he grimaced with a crooked smile “Don’t snore too loud tonight cause I’ll be on the couch.”

Meris didn’t quite understand but he laughed at his father’s joke anyway.

“Anyway Just so it gets done, Reven, this is my son Meris Ersatz and Meris, this is Reven Erie, he will have the spare room next door. Oh and those grass roofs you saw were thatch. A long time ago all roofs were like that,” and suddenly he realized he no longer had the boy’s attention. They were making faces at each other and trying not to laugh… and failing.

“Well I’d better try and placate your mother. Oh and don’t forget to write that dream in your journal, Meris. Come on Reven lets find your journal and put you to bed.”

# Did you forget?

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Adam Pike’s brain was still operating at ninety miles an hour, even in his dreams. All he could do was sit and watch while images of the past few days were paraded before him. His brain was trying to cope…

Cheryl Pike wasn’t wearing a smile. She had one of those smiles that lit up her whole face. An attractive woman to begin with, a smile made her positively glow. But today, she wasn’t’ wearing one. Today she was angry with her husband.

“I mean, honestly Adam, I feel like I can’t tell you anything anymore. You’re so judgmental.”

His only response was to swat at a fly and roll down his window to get rid of it. Cheryl’s bright red hair flew everywhere and she glared at him every few seconds until he closed it again. Her driving always suffered when she was distracted.

“If my mother wants Lauren baptized, why not just do it? It’s not as if it changes or marks her. But it will placate my family.”

He just sat and gritted his teeth. He knew he was going to lose no matter what he said. There was no winning against his wife when she thought something was important. Churches were just organizations promoting mythical ideas to get people’s money, but his in-laws refused to accept this. His wife was also religious, but she never talked about it and never pushed it on him (the way it should be in his mind). Apparently today she was making an exception though; for their child, for her parents.

“DAMNIT ADAM! COULD YOU SAY SOMETHING FOR ONCE!” for a couple long seconds, drawn out because he was conscious she was not looking at the road, she glared at him, fuming. “It like talking to a brick wall that I know hates what I’m saying, but…”

A shrill scream split the air behind him only seconds before a defining explosion of noise engulfed him and his world spun out of control.

The scene disappeared…

… and suddenly he was sitting on the pavement cradling his unmoving child and staring at bleeding wife. There was movement all around him but he herd and saw none of it; his focus was centered on the only two things that mattered.

He felt hands take Lauren from him and lift him up. He was too numb to resist. They led him to an ambulance and sat him down in the back next to his daughter’s gurney. Though they may have spoken to him and treated him, he remembered nothing.

It disappeared again…

He was sitting next to his daughter’s hospital bed. She looked so tiny with all the equipment hooked to her; so fragile and delicate. Her eyes were closed as if she was just sleeping, but he knew better. She was in a coma and the Doctors didn’t know when she would wake up or if she was even still there. A week had already gone by. He wondered if he would ever see her eyes again.

Draped against the stark white sheets of her hospital bed, her hair almost looked red and that only brought thoughts about her mother. Cheryl was dead, and all because of his pride.

He grabbed Lauren’s hand and laid his head against it.

 Adam was not a religious man, but he was beyond and hope of help, beyond caring about his pride or spiritual independence, all he wanted now was a single movement: a flicker of an eyelid or a twitch of a finger, anything to indicate life.

And, for once, he prayed. He prayed to whatever God was out there. Not for his happiness, but for his wife’s life, and his daughter’s. He begged God, pleaded that his wife deserved none of this, to take it all back. He recalled a bible story his mother-in-law had spouted once, one where a mother had promised to give up her child to God if only he would give her one. As a last desperate measure he promised the same; God could have his child if only he would save her.

He felt a hand rest on the back of his head and raised it to see a nurse. The only thing that set her apart from any of the others was the look of intense, boundless compassion she wore on her face. That look touched him so deeply that he didn’t object when she didn’t remove her hand and actually put her other on his daughter’s forehead.

As he watched she bowed her head.

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Adam lifted his head from the bedside feeling not at all well rested. He did feel like he was forgetting something important though. He looked up to see Lauren staring at him.

Then he remembered… hopefully.

“Lauren, did you ever get to thank the nurse?” Adam hoped she had because he hadn’t.

“What nurse?”

“The one who was here when you woke up. The one that stood with us for so long. I guess that means neither of us thanked her. That’s a shame. I’ll leave a note or card when we leave. I’m sure the nurses can handle it for us.”

“I don’t remember anyone daddy. You sound sleepy. You can go back to sleep now.”

He did.

# Angels of sleep

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The water was pitch black, but the boys could see clear as day. The water itself weighed nothing so both boys sped through the depths like they themselves had fins. The endless water and swimming creatures gave Reven the sensation that he was suspended in nothingness.

Currently they were fleeing a shark and laughing as they quickly outdistanced him.

“Sharky, sharky you can’t catch me!” Reven looped back around to taunt the beast. He turned around, shook his butt, and stuck his tongue out at the infuriated mass of teeth and fins. Meris just laughed.

With dizzying transition, suddenly it was no longer a shark but a dolphin. And this dolphin was as much a prankster as Reven.

“Eeeepee, Eeeepee click click click click” and it proceeded to mimic Reven’s movements, right down to the tongue. He so closely copied Reven's movements that both boys were paralyzed: Reven with shock and Meris with laughter. Reven glanced back at him to see what he thought of this change in events only to see his friend curled up in a slowly rotating ball and shaking with laughter. He would probably have been crying if he hadn’t already been surrounded by millions of gallons of salt water.

Quick as possible, before Reven could react, the dolphin swam over, stole his pants and swam away. What a dolphin could possibly want with a pair of pants did not seem important in either dreamer’s minds. For that matter, why did the boys need pants anyway?

Soon both were sprinting through the streets of their neighborhood in their undies and one sock each, shrieking with laughter.

“Meris, watch this!” Reven leapt on a branch and began climbing up a tree.

The tree, however, had other ideas and began to shake violently, limbs brushing against each other as if it felt a spider on it, or maybe just a young quasi-clothed boy.

Reven screamed in fear and surprise as one of the branches connected with his torso. As fate, or the twisted mind of a three year old child, would have it he flew into the air and down an open sewage pipe.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!!! EEEEEWWWWWWWWWW!” echoed on all sides of him while he fell.

The world dissolved just as he hit the water.

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His eyes snapped open. Otherwise… he couldn’t move.

It was just like many of the nights since the accident: Though he could still feel his paralyzed body, he also felt like he was floating away. His vision blurred as if he was traveling really fast. He shut his eyes as nausea and fear overwhelmed him. He knew what was coming next: another monster, another grin.

This time, however, he opened his eye to find, not a monster, but a figure that released almost blinding white light. It was standing over a sleeping child, but after a few seconds it turned towards him. Its eyes were glowing blue and its lips held a smile.

 When those eyes focused on him however, the smile slowly faded and was replaced with a look so full of sympathy and sadness that it was almost worse to behold than the evil grins he was used to. He shut his eyes again, knowing this was something he shouldn’t see… should never see … and curled up in a ball.

Suddenly he felt small hands rubbing his back, soon followed by larger ones and soothing voices.

“Reven, honey? Reven? It was just a dream. It wasn’t real.” Those larger hands gently turned him over to reveal Diana’s face (would she ever be mom?). “There you go. Dry those tears we’re here now. It’s all ok. Did you see another monster?”

Reven shook his head, “An angel. She didn’t like me.” He continued to sniffle.

“Oh honey! Why would any angel not like you? It wasn’t real. It was just your brain playing tricks on you.”

Ed (or was it dad?) walked in with a glass of warm milk and handed it to Reven.

“Was it the night paralysis again? I know the doctors said it isn’t dangerous but there has got to be something we can do,” he sat on the bed next to his wife.

Neither of them seemed to notice their own son quietly standing on the other side of the bed until he stated matter-of-factly, “I’ll sleep with him. Let me get my stuff.”

“Wha?”

“Meris?”

“Son?”

No one seemed to know what to think and if Reven had been paying attention to the adults, he would have laughed at the stunned looks on their faces. They were given no chance to recover either…

While what left the room had been a tiny scurrying boy, what returned was a mass of pillows, blankets, and stuffed animals with legs. It was a wonder it didn’t trip because there were no eyes anywhere to be found. Perhaps it would not have mattered; it would have rolled in the room anyway.

The mass quickly collided with the edge of the bed and burst to reveal a laughing Meris tumbling head first onto the bed. While his parents managed to avoid his flailing, poor Reven wasn’t so lucky and ended up with an elbow in his gut.

“Heeey! I’ll get you for that!”

And before either parent knew what was happening the two boys were wrestling, screeching, and laughing, somehow on all areas of the bed at once. Pillows, animals, blankets and parents all went flying.

“BOYS! Boys,” admonished Ed dusting himself off and helping his wife to her feet. “Settle down. It’s three in the morning. You’re supposed to be children not raccoons.”

Both boys froze and, in the next instant, flung themselves to their appropriate positions on the bed. They were the very image of sleeping angles only it was somewhat ruined by the fact that they no longer had blankets or pillows. Ed couldn’t hold it in anymore and doubled over laughing. The faces of both boys split into identical grins.

“Eeeeeed!” his wife slapped his shoulder and pointed to the door. He barely managed to stagger out.

“Boys, if you fight like that someone is going to get hurt.” She picked up their pillows and blankets and made their bed around them.

As she finished and left the room she added, “Now I don’t want to hear any more noise from your room tonight. Understood?”

Her severity was somewhat diminished when the boys heard snorting and then outright laughter from the other side of their closed door, soon joined by another round of braking laughter from their father.

Relief makes people very silly, but once they settled down, both boys fell asleep quickly.

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This time the boys were climbing a giant mountain. Already they had an unobstructed view for miles in every direction, even right through the mountain (dream logic). Pine forest spread as far as the eye could see and all of it was dusted with snow. In fact, there were perfectly clear, snow-filled clouds moving in at that very moment to drop more on their heads. And they didn’t drop flakes; they dropped piles and occasionally fast moving snow balls.

Meris found himself with a face full of snow and began sputtering. It wasn’t cold, but he could hear Reven laughing at him. At least, until he received his own pile of snow right on the top of his head. It was soon followed by a fast moving snowball that actually knocked him off his feet.

It was Meris’s turn to laugh as he watched is friend flailing and sliding down the mountain. He looked like a bird flapping around. Especially when he fell off a cliff…

But before either child had the chance to panic and realize what was happening, Meris yelled,” FLY REVEN! FLY!”

And he did. He flew and disappeared from view.

Meris felt very satisfied with himself as he walked further up the mountain. He was sure Reven would be back at any moment to throw more snow at him.

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He woke up with a jerk, banging heads with the small figure that had just pounced on him. Both boys grabbed their heads laughing shrilly.

Light was shining through their window, so when Meris’s parents appeared at the door all they did was smile and usher the boys out the door so they could move the second bed in. From now on the boys would share a room. And from now on Reven would sleep normally… well relatively at least.

# Can you hear me?

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Lauren found herself very confused. She was in a room full of rowdy, smoking adults, many of whom were acting like kids. All of them had drinks. At first she thought it might be a restaurant, but then she realized none of the tables had food. Looking around she noted people singing on a stage, playing a game with sticks on a table with balls, and throwing darts at a target. She had never been anywhere like this place. In fact, it scared her; she didn’t understand these adults at all. And she had no idea how she got there. She kept scanning the faces of the adults around her to find someone who looked normal and friendly.

That’s when she spotted her dad. It was strange though, her dad didn’t quite look the same as he normally did, maybe it was just that he was smiling and talking to someone she couldn’t quite see. She hadn’t seen him smile in a long time so at the sight of it she lost all apprehension of her surroundings and began to run toward him.

That’s when she received her second shock, because the person he was talking to was her mom. Lauren stopped dead in shock. How could this be?

“Mom?” she quietly walked forward to stand behind her. “Momma is that you?”

Her mother didn’t respond. In fact, she didn’t react in any way at all. Lauren got closer and once again realized something was weird about her mother; she somehow felt like less. She felt like an imitation or imposter, a shadow of the loving woman that was her mother. Looking around Lauren realized everyone felt like this, everyone except her dad, he still felt real.

“Daddy, what’s going on? Where are we?” He said nothing, just continued to smile at her mother who was telling a lively story.

“Daddy, Please! I don’t understand. Who is this? I thought mommy was dead?” she even pulled on his sleeve and still nothing. All her fear and apprehension returned at once. Her eyes began to tear up.

“I wanna go home! I don’t want to be here anymore. I want my real mommy!” she practically shouted the last to no avail. She didn’t understand why he was ignoring her. How could he not see her? Had she done something wrong? Alone and confused she began to cry in earnest. She covered her face with her hands and began to stumble away, only to trip and fall.

Except she fell *through* the floor into nothingness.

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She opened her eyes to find herself still crying. She could remember everything. Maybe it had just been a dream, but her father had been real. Why didn’t he listen to her?

Worried that it had somehow all been real she jumped out of bed and ran, crying and apologizing for whatever she had done, into her father’s room. He woke up immediately and hurried to comfort her. It was a while before she could finally tell him what was wrong.

“Oh, Lauren, it was just a dream. It wasn’t real. Why would I ever ignore you?”

“But you were real. I know you were. I could feel it.”

“Come on, you know I would never do that to you. You woke up didn’t you? And you saw your mom? That right there is proof that it was all just a bad dream. Besides, how could *I* have been in *your* dream? That’s just crazy talk.”

“You were real!”

“Now Lauren, that’s enough. Listen to me. What you are saying is silly. People don’t show up in other people’s dreams, that supernatural bull-crap and I won’t have you spouting it to people.”

Lauren shrunk away from her dad, “But...”

“ENOUGH! Fine… Fine, I believe you believe it. Is that enough? Just…Just tell me if it happens again okay? If it does, maybe we can get some help.”

Lauren just nodded.

# Sympathy

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At 9, the boy’s dreams had only increased in strangeness and tonight’s was no exception. The boys sat were on a stone wall that belonged to a castle, in the sky, on a cloud, over a lava pit.

While Meris stared down at the lava, Reven walked back and forth on the very edge of the wall. Getting bored he started goofing off; hopping about and pretending he was going to fall. That was funny until he fell and almost forgot it was a dream. As had become his habit, Meris always reminded him to fly.

“Let’s go do something else.” He landed with exaggerated grace looking, for all the world, like the swan princess turned, well, boyish.

“Like what?”

“I donno. What do normal people do in their dreams?”

“I don’t know… dad said we aren’t supposed to peek at other people’s dreams.”

“Ok, let’s do that!”

“Do what? Peek? But dad said…”

“I know, but we don’t have to *tell* him. Besides, I just wanna have a look.”

“Ok, but only if we just look. Do you know how?”

“No, but how hard could it be?” he jumped off to begin flying again. Meris jumped off himself and pondered the situation for a second.

“Race you this direction!” he shouted suddenly and took off like a jet. Reven laughed and was only just behind him. Before too long both felt a weird tingling sensation and stopped. Stretched before them was something that somewhat resembled space; millions of different dream worlds with millions of different people. The weird thing was that the ones you looked at became clear and easily reachable regardless of how far away they were.

Meris looked nervous, “We’re going to get in trouble. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Reven, however, looked ready to burst with excitement, “Scardy-cat, come on, I dare you to pick one.”

“Ok but only one. If you try to go to another I’ll tell dad.”

“If you tell, we both get in trouble. Pick one!”

“Fine! That one over there with the girl feeding a horse.” As he said it the orb (or dream world) got closer and closer (or were they the ones moving?) and with a tingling sensation the crossed into it.

The girl below them was a stranger with glowing red hair. Meris generally avoided contact with girls so he really had no idea why he chose this one.

She seemed to be talking her horse and feeding him apples…

“Would you like some water Ginger? Or maybe a brush?”

“Oh I’m fine right now dear, but a sugar cube and a ride would be nice.”

…and the horse seemed to be answering back.

“You are the best dream companion ever Ginger.”

“Oh it’s nothing dear. Come on now, hop on.”

Apparently Reven couldn’t contain it anymore because he snorted loudly, “Girls dreams suck.”

Next thing Meris knew, he was dropped unceremoniously to the ground with big blue eyes staring down at him out of a face that was almost too pretty to be true. Well, to be exact they were focused to a point a little to his left (most likely on Reven) but their gaze was transfixing none the less.

“Who are you and what are you doing in my dream kingdom?”

Reven let out a helpful, “Wha?” before looking at Meris for a response.

“Um, my name is Meris. He’s Reven. We’re sorry. We didn’t think you would see us so we came to look at your dream.” Her eyes focused on him and she frowned.

“So you’re real like Daddy? How do I make him see me like you do?”

Reven’s almost nonexistent pride was apparently feeling wounded by a girl because he responded, “You’re a *girl* we won’t tell you anything.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you fall. You *scared* me. Please tell me! I just want daddy to believe me.” Her eyes started to tear up.

“I don’t know. We haven’t gone to REM school yet. I’m sure they will tell you there when you go.” Meris felt sorry for her. *His* dad played with him in the dream state whenever he asked. It didn’t happen often anymore, since Reven came, but he still would occasionally.

Suddenly he remembered where he was and what he was doing. What if his father checked on them? What if he found them here? He stood up quickly, ready to be gone, but not wanting to be rude.

“What is REM school?” she asked while Meris started pulling on Reven’s sleeve to make him stand up.

Reven, however, chose to be oblivious, “Ha, you don’t know what REM school is? What are you? A normal? It’s only the school all of us go to learn how to use our powers. One day I’m going to be the greatest dream Artist anybody ever saw and Meris will be my guard.”

The girl merely looked confused.

“Don’t worry, when you’re eleven, your parents send you to school just like us. You’ll see. Now Reven and I aren’t really supposed to be here so we need to leave.” He finally succeeded in pulling Reven up so hard they both flew in the air, and stuck there.

“Oh, you have to go already? Thank you for talking to me then. Will you come back and visit sometime?”

“Oh, all the time,” Reven lied.

“You will?! Oh thank you! I get lonely here sometimes.” Her beaming smile was almost enough to make Meris want to come back, but he knew he couldn’t.

“Bye, see you at school someday,” was all he said. He waved and flew off after Reven who was already racing back towards the wall.

He was in such a hurry to get back that the trip went by in a flash and he actually crashed into the lava lake which was apparently still there.

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He woke up with a mess of blankets and guilty feelings in his stomach. He sat up and looked over at Reven who was merely blinking groggily at the ceiling. Maybe he didn’t remember, but Meris did and he was *not* going to tell dad.

# What is real?

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Lauren was brushing Ginger in gentile, easy strokes. It was one of her favorite things to do whenever she saw her favorite dream companion, even if she was fake. She really hoped the boys would keep her word. Maybe if they did come back she could take them to her father. Maybe he would be able to see them. It had been two years since she had first started encountering her dreaming father. It didn’t always happen, but when it did she never said anything. However, if you could arrange a real life meeting with these boys then he would have to believe her wouldn’t he?

“Sorry Ginger, I need to go talk to my dad. See you later.”

“Ok dear. Bring me some sugar cubes next time”

“I will”

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For once, Lauren let herself wake up slowly. She wanted to know exactly what she was going to say to her father. And later, armed with this knowledge, she approached her father. Unfortunately none of it went the way she wanted it to.

“Daddy, remember that dream I had about you and you told me to tell you if it happened again? Well I…”

“Don’t tell me you had another one. Have you been having them this *entire* time?”

“Well, yes but…”

“Lauren! I told you to tell me so we could get help. You have to understand the difference between dreams and reality. I’m finding you a therapist.”

“But I can prove it! There were these other boys…”

“Now you’re seeing *other people*? They are *dreams*!”

“But dad, …”

“No! That’s enough young lady. Go find something to do. I have to make some phone calls.”

Part 2

The stirrings of powers

# Off to see the wizard

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The boys were on a plane. their destination? School. They seemed to have the entire passenger area to themselves. In fact, they were sitting face to face in the only two chairs present. The service was great though, a flight attendant (who looked strangely like The Black Widow) always seemed to appear just as they decided they wanted something.

Regardless, it was almost time for them to learn about the REM and boy was Reven nervous. Meris, on the other hand, seemed strangely amused.

“We aren’t going to get to see our parents for a whole year! That’s such a long time. What if they, find some neighborhood boys they like and replace us?”

“Reven, mom and dad would sooner adopt a baby raccoon than another little boy. Don’t you remember what she said that before we left? She said we were like were like two little ferrets; everywhere and in everything at once. No matter what the mess was, you’d be in it laughing and I would be right next to you confessing.”

“That’s right, she never knew who to punish so we both got it,” he laughed a little to himself and then looked strangely sober for once.

“But what if they don’t like me at the school? What if they think I’m possessed or too much trouble? I know dad was always just joking when he threatened us with the dream block, but in Rome they can actually do it! I want to be an Artist Meris! I don’t want them to take my abilities away.”

“Reven, trust me, you are going to be trouble no matter what, but they would never block you for that. Besides, you haven’t been paralyzed in ages. Do you even know you still have that problem?”

“Well not since your stupid face moved in my room, but I can still feel something weird when I wake up. I donno. Meris, what if they split us up? Those demons I saw, that angel, they were all *real* and someday they will come for me. Mom and dad don’t believe me but you do right?”

“Of course I believe you Reven, that’s why I’ll always be here to protect you. And don’t worry mom and dad spoke to the school about the sleeping arrangements; we are going to get beds next to each other.”

“How do you know? They didn’t tell me.”

“I just do.”

Reven couldn’t doubt his friend and he began to feel more like himself, “Well if that’s the case, Mr. Know-it-all, then I’d better put that great stuck-up brain of yours to the test next time we dream.”

“We are dreaming,” Meris grinned wickedly.

“What?...Wait, we’ve been dreaming this WHOLE TIME and you never told me!? Come here, you ass-hat, so I can really put you to sleep. And when we wake up, I’m going to pin you to the ground again and sit on you,” he stood up and took a few steps towards Meris who shot out of his chair and towards the plane door.

“You better not,” he shouted back while struggling to get the door open, “We’re at school and you’re going to get in trou…”

The door flew open and both he and Reven were sucked out, laughing the entire time. Partway through the fall the world faded…

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Reven opened his eyes and looked around. He was lying in bed and on all sides of him were other similar beds, with other sleeping boys. The room looked more like a long wide hall than anything else and had a row of beds down each of the long walls. At each of the short walls there was a larger bed and each held a sleeping grown-up.

He and Meris had arrived that morning and the adults had wasted no time in describing the accommodations. This was to be the boy's dormitory until they started showing signs of dream interactions. Girls shared a long wall with the room so boy girl partnerships could be established and nurtured when needed. The two grown-up were not only there to monitor the boys when they were awake; they were the ones who detected developing powers. He wondered if they had felt any dream waves that night. Probably not, they would have made a big deal most likely.

He wondered what it was like, using those powers. It was probably exhilarating. His jerk of a friend Meris would probably think it was frightening.

For a moment he wondered why he was irritated with Meris. An image of Meris’s laughing and gloating face flying out a plan door flashed in his brain. Realizing his friend had probably played a prank on him in his dream, he acted on instinct. Before he knew it a pillow flew out of his hand and hit his friend in the face.

Meris sat up quickly but fell backwards again laughing loudly.

“Meris! Reven! Stop the racket and get back to bed. You are waking up the other boys.”

As per the norm, both boys froze and pretended to sleep and also as per the norm, Meris was minus a pillow.

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That day they experienced their first round of classes. Most classes were normal classes like you would get at any other school: math, science, English, and other languages. There was even music and art classes. However, for an hour and a half each day they were taught about the REM and their powers. It was the best class that Reven had ever taken. He was a natural at art and languages, but all the other classes put him to sleep, but this class interested him like none of the others.

“Who can tell me what REM stands for? …Come on now, don’t be shy. I know your parents at least told you something.” Their teacher was a kind faced but strict woman who identified herself as a Provider.

Meris raised his hand, “Reverie Ectype Management.”

“Yes indeed. That is one version. Can anyone tell me the other?...Anyone? The original meaning is Rapid Eye Movement. It is the stage in out sleep where we are most likely to dream and the only stage in which those of us with powers can use those powers. In this class you are going to learn the history of our organization and powers. The first thing we’ll cover is partnership. Let me see a show of hands, who all has had the dream in the ancient village?”

A little over half of the class raised their hands Reven and Meris included.

“That looks about right. No worries to the rest of you. Your partners will arrive within the next year or so. It always works out that way. Without Artist and Guardian co-operation, doing our jobs would be impossible, so we always some in pairs. In fact, the nature of the partnership is one of the most mystical aspects of the REM. Let’s thing for a second, how many un-partnered members do you know?”

No one said anything.

“One tops right? And how long have they been alone? Not very long I’m guessing. You see when one partner dies within a relatively short time another will come along. Tough it usually means another member will die, we are never left alone for long. And that dream you experienced with your first partner, it will always happen again for your second or, God forbid, your third partner. Each time it will be only you and your partner in an ancient, empty village.”

Reven glanced at Meris and smiled, simply glad he had such an awesome partner, even if he was a stick in the mud sometimes. Meris, however, never saw because he was staring intently at the teacher and frowning.

# Who am I?

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Tonight Lauren was simply relaxing besides a small lake. A beautiful pine forest surrounded her on all side. This was only accented into further beauty by a glorious (and permanent sunset). The most magical aspect, however, was the wildlife: loons were calling to each other. Those calls could portray unending joy or depthless sorrow and tonight their long drawn out cries echoed all around her.

She may have stayed there forever if it wasn’t for the swarm of mosquitoes that found her. They quickly swarmed her and all she could do was swat at them. Eventually she decided she couldn’t stand anymore and stood intending to leave. As she turned to run one landed on her arm.

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As she gained consciousness the realized she could hear a mosquito around her face. She figured it must have been what triggered her dream swarm. Angry with it for ruining her paradise she swatted at it and finally smashed it. For once it didn’t leave a bunch of blood and guts.

As her therapist had been asking her to do for almost a year, she wrote this strange dream down in her diary before getting up to get ready for school. Luckily this only took a matter of minutes, her being a jeans and t-shirt girl.

 It was the first day back so she was a bit nervous about schedules for the year. She hoped her friends would be in some of her classes and have her lunch period, but that wasn’t always the case.

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She ended up getting very lucky this year; her two friends shared her lunch period. Breanne was out going and friendly but sometimes callous. Sara was argumentative and quirky but also silly and fund to hang around. Today it seemed Sara and Breanne were stuck in an ongoing debate.

“Look, clearly a dragon would win. I mean come on, it *breathes fire*!Everyone knows feathers are highly flammable!*”* Breanne seemed very adamant.

“Yeah, but dragons are so slow and clumsy in the air. Gryphons are quick and nimble. You could never catch them with slow-as-molasses dragon fire.”

“Dragons aren’t clumsy fliers.”

“Well, regardless, a gryphon could dodge in, slash a dragon’s belly, and be out before the dragon could retaliate”

“Lauren what do you say? Dragon or gryphon? Sara obviously can’t face reality.”

“Well, you both have good points. I donno. I think it’s impossible to say unless you see the fight.”

“’No-side Lauren’ strikes again,” chuckled Sara. “I think she’s allergic to choosing sides.”

Lauren laughed. She had to love these guys even when they were picking on her.

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Her father, however had other opinions about her friends.

“And then they started arguing over dragons and Gryphons! It was so funny, dad. I told them the only way to know would be to see it first-hand,” Lauren was so energized at having had a good first day she found herself telling her father everything.

Her dad didn’t laugh, “Dragons and Gryphons aren’t real. You can’t watch them fight.”

“I know that. I was just making a joke. “

“I don’t see how you can only have two friends and have them both be bad influences. You need to be hanging out with kids who are interested in real things. We don’t want you reverting now do we? Both those girls are religious too aren’t they? You know it was religious crap that got your mother killed right? We need to get you some new friends. It wouldn’t be hard if you actually looked the part.”

“Dad, I like my friends and my clothes.”

“Well I don’t and while I won’t force you to wear things you are uncomfortable in, I will tell you this. I don’t want to hang out with those girls again. Why don’t you obsess over celebrities like normal girls?”

# Concerned

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The room was giant, maybe even endless, and filled with all kinds of strange and wonderful things. Meris had already passes a six foot tall clock, an army of statues and endless piles of books. He half expected to come across a legendary sword with which to save the land from certain evil soon. What he was actually looking for, however, was hiding friends.

Per the norm, Reven was partnered with him in this trippy game of sardines (no surprise). Meris preferred to keep quiet and sneak around and try to catch a talking hider unawares. Reven preferred to make as much ridiculous noise as possible and force a hider to laughing. As a result, the boys always split up to cover more territory, knowing they could always find each-other if they tried.

Meris tiptoed forward to stare at a unsteady-looking pile of furniture. He tried to gaze into its depths (it was a very *large* pile of furniture) but it was too shadowed to see into. Actually, now that he looked closer, the pile actually looked like a multi-story blanket fort made out of chairs and white sheet coverings.

There had to be someone here, if only he could hear a sound to be sure…

From the other side came a loud series of bangs and the fort shook alarmingly. In Meris’s mind that could *only* be Reven. Sure enough when he looked, he spotted his friend springing to his feet and walking away with a straight back and head held high.

And perhaps five seconds later both boys heard a stifled snort from the fort’s interior. In synchronization, they for it. After a few seconds of mad crawling and climbing they found the two residents of the fort: Brady White and Jan Stephen, a male female partnership with differing ages. Brady was still snorting into the palms of his hands and Jan glaring at him when they were discovered.

“Found ya! Now scootch over and make room for us. Someone else will be here soon. Better be still by then,” Meris actually liked this part the best. Some-how, fitting a growing number of people in a small place always had interesting consequences.

And just as Meris became aware of his need to be quiet, he also became aware of the dust… and how much he needed to sneeze.

“Oh maaan,” he said trying to hold his nose shut and breathing jaggedly. Reven looked at him in anger and then alarm as he realized what was about to happen.

“Oh God! Don’t do it Meris! Not now!” and when that didn’t work he yelled in an exaggerated voice, “Everybody get out, this place is about to blow!”

This only caused Meris to start laughing and the second he did… he sneezed. He sneezed a sneeze so violent he shot backwards out of the fort (his last glimpse being all his friends diving for cover). The fort literally exploded outwards. Chairs flew every which direction…

Only to freeze in mid air. It was a moment before he realized he had shouted no and thrown his hand out. He had no idea how or why, but he had stopped the chairs, he could feel something flowing from him. As soon as he realized all of this he withdrew everything, worried that he might have hurt someone, and the chairs dropped strait down.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Mr. Fredricks approaching with a smile on his face.

“It's ok Meris. It’s just your Guardianship surfacing,” and he reached out and put a hand on Meris’s shoulder.

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Meris slowly blinked awake, feeling strangely tired for someone who had just awoken from a full night’s sleep. He shut his eyes again, hoping to at least steal a few more minutes rest, fortunately Mr. Fredricks seemed to share his idea.

He heard a soft chuckle above him and opened his eyes to find his favorite dorm-head standing over him.

“Still tired huh? I’ll bet you are. That was quite a display for a first timer, especially one so young. Just barely 13 right? You’re almost a year early. Oh well, everyone’s different. From now on you’ll have to remember that using your abilities uses energy just like everything else, but for today I’ll let you sleep in.” He winked at Meris and began to walk off, only to turn back around and add, “Oh and you’ll be moving into new quarters tonight, so pack up your things when you get up.”

“But, what about Reven?” Mr. Fredricks didn’t seem to be listening, however, and resumed walking away.

“Meris, It’s ok. You have to go and I’ll be fine. Besides you made a crappy babysitter anyway.”

“But what about the paralysis? What about the…the monsters?”

“Well, I haven’t been paralyzed in ages. How would I even know I still have that problem?”

Meris wondered, distracted for a moment, if Reven realized what he had just said. It was eerie actually. But before he could think too much on it his eyes started drooping closed and he couldn’t fight the sleep anymore.

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Meris’s new sleeping arrangement was actually pretty quaint. The room had normal beds and two four posters with heavy hangings to give his two newest teachers some privacy. The four student beds were arranged in a square with two padded armchairs in the middle. Each student was provided a chest at the foot of his or her bed for personal belongings and uniforms.

One of the other students was the person to actually show him to the room and explain how things were going to work.

“So including myself there is one other boy and one girl also staying in this room. Because these small rooms are co-ed the teachers are always male-female pairings. Ours is Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Haney. Here’s your bed.” He pointed to the comfortable looking feather bed just to the right of the door.

“Are they married?” Meris began installing his belongings into his new trunk while he listened in fascination.

“No, I actually don’t think there are any married partnerships working at the school right now. Most of the teachers are married to normals or Providers. Providers being the REM members without powers. Anyway the class will start at 6:00, right as you wake up although spontaneous lessons may happen anytime at night if the occasion arrives. About 7:00 they will have you go back to sleep. The timing ensures you will enter REM cycle along with everyone else. This is when scheduled dream demonstrations and lessons will occur. The lectures will be in the hour before or after this. The bathrooms are locker room style and are also co-ed just like in the barracks style rooms you came from.”

“Wow, if I didn’t know we are going to be monitored at all times in here I’d say they were asking for trouble.” Meris continued surveying the room with amusement.

His new friend chuckled, “I won’t say it never happens, but they do a pretty good job of keeping us out of trouble. The unbelievably high student teacher ratios has a lot to do with that.”

“So how much have I missed in class? What do I have to make up?”

“Well less than you’d expect actually. Most of the class is either taught at your own speed or in a round. All you’ll need is a bit of extra explanation in this first section and you’ll be fine.”

“So I guess lucid dreaming is pretty much a requirement at this point?”

“Actually, you’d be surprised how many guardians still have problems with lucid dreaming by this point. I take it that’s not an issue for you?”

Meris shook his head and smiled sheepishly back at him.

“That’s cool. I had to actually be instructed how to lucid dream. They made me walk around with this big red A written across my hand for like two weeks. A little embarrassing, ya know? Anyway you don’t know how lucky you are. You’ll still have to do all the work with your dream journal, but you won’t have to memorize all the tricks for reminding yourself you are dreaming. It’s a little distracting when you are supposed to be paying attention to your instructors and you have to keep stopping to flick light switched and hold your nose to see if you can breathe; all just to remind yourself that you are dreaming.

Meris laughed, “Wow, do you still have to do all that?” Having placed the last of his uniforms away, he turned towards the boy and sat on the trunk.

“Oh no, not anymore. Now-a-days reality checks are second nature and all I’m working on in that accord is achieving WILD. Oh by the way this one here is my bed.” He pointed to the bed opposite Meris’s and sat down on its trunk.

“Wild?”

“Actually its W-I-L-D. It stands for Wake Induced Lucid Dream. It basically where you can meditate yourself into the REM state and thus into your abilities. I did it once, but haven’t since. I’ll get it soon though. We all do.”

“Well that’s cool. I wondered how my dad worked during the day. Well I better run and catch my REM class. Thanks for the introduction umm… what’s your name?”

“Oh! Did I not tell you? I’m Fred Hammond. I’m considered a junior. You’re in like 7th grade right? It was nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

---

Meris finally saw Reven that afternoon in REM class. He didn’t look upset, but then again he never looked upset when he didn’t want to. He waved and smiled at Meris as if nothing had changed.

“Oh stop frowning at me I’m Fiiiiiiiine!” Reven shook his head and laughed.

“What? But I wasn’t…”

“Yes you were. The corners of your mouth were level with your throat. How’s the new room?”

Meris brightened a little. It was hard not to around Reven. “Oh, it’s pretty awesome! Only six people to a room. Oh and there are giiiirls, so you’re going to have to watch out for cooties!”

“Oh shut up Meris. Girls don’t have cooties! That was years ago. You never know when to let go of things.”

“Meris! Reven! How many times do I have to clear my throat before you boys finish your little chat? Class started three minutes ago and you haven’t hear a word I said. *Shut it*!”

Reven smiled and apologized. Meris looked like he had run over someone’s cat and practically begged for forgiveness.

“Ok, ok Enough. Just listen please! As I was saying, Our powers depend on how each of our brains function. Artists, people who are right brain dominant, connect with their dream worlds very deeply. More so than any normal dreamer and this connection can be seen or felt in how they interact. Think of the dream as a pond. The way Artist interact is taking the world into themselves in waves moving toward themselves. Essentially the dream becomes a reflection of their wills and they can make changes wherever desired.” Fascinated, Meris watched as the teacher drew a wave graph on the board with directional arrows.

“Their deep connection it also why they sometimes create what we call reverie ectypes or dream images. These will be discussed in much more detail later in your educations, but essentially Artists are pulling a piece of a dream back with them when they wake up.”

“Guardians, being left brained individuals, are typically critical and questioning individuals. Whereas Artists are terrible at lucid dreaming and can never achieve it reliably, Guardians, once the learn how to lucid dream, will never forget. Essentially their brains are constantly pushing against the dream around them causing outward moving waves.” She drew another graph under the first.

 “They can easily reject their surroundings allowing them to freeze a dream’s progress or end it all together. They also have the unique but dangerous ability to push thoughts, ideas or even memories into another’s mind while in the dream. It makes since if you consider that dreamers are essentially just the mind of a person laying in the real world somewhere. Accessing another person’s dream is very intimate and not to be done lightly.”

She stopped talking for a minute and drew two new graphs: one with wave double the height of the original and the other a simple straight line.

“What I drew here is essentially the reason Artists and Guardians always work in pairs. They can both amplify each other’s abilities due to their unique interactions or they can completely nullify each other’s abilities. When two wave crests or troughs meet they add together, but if a crest and a trough meet, they subtract from each other. This subtraction is why we end up with Providers. They are people with brains so closely balanced that whatever powers they would have cancel each other out. This also may be why the strength of our powers varies from person to person.”

Meris found this strange. So, providers would never develop powers period? That hardly seemed fair. He wondered if they would need anyone else if they ever did.

# Someone on your mind?

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They were sitting in the stands together and that was all that mattered. The noisy crowd, the rambunctious band, the lame but energetic game, none of it mattered. *He* had sat down next to *her* and smiled. It was *intentional*. She didn’t even know the he noticed her.

Out of nowhere he also produced a tiny purple stuffed rabbit and handed it to her. Her heart fluttered. What was going on?

And then she remembered it was a dream and nothing in dreams is real. That didn’t stop her from wanting it to be true. Wanting it so bad that it hurt.

“I know you are lonely so I’ll keep you company. You’re dad will like me. I’m smart and realistic. Stop thinking about Sara and Breanne, you left them behind long ago.” Oh how she wanted it to be true. Tears began to leak down her cheeks.

“You aren’t real Kendall. If you were you’d be disgusted by me like everyone else.”

“But I forgave you! I forgave you for snitching. Don’t you remember? Come on! If you just acted a bit more normal you’d be the perfect girl for me. Will you give it a try?”

“I only ever remember you and your friends pretending you were going to jump me outside! You never forgave me so why should I change myself on the off chance you may like me someday?” she stared at the floor, squeezing the bunny in her fist. It was soft and comforting.

“I do like you I just need you to show me.”

“You are a DREAM! Get away from me Kendall! You will never be real!”

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Pssst “Hey Lauren. Hey wake up.”

Lauren blinked in confusion, realizing that Rachel (one of the social elite) had woken her. Rachael never talked to her.

“Come on Lauren, let’s have some girl talk. I heard you mumbling names in your sleep. Who do you like huh? I’ll keep it between just you and me.”

“N…Nobody !” Lauren didn’t like the feel of this, but what if this was her only chance to do as her father asked and make better friends?

“Oh! Come *on*! It’s ok. I’ll bet he secretly likes you back.”

“Um… promise you won’t tell?”

“Absolutely!”

“He’s… um… well, Kendall.”

“*Kendall*!! *Really*! Girl, he is way out of your league.” Rachael was speaking in a voice that was far too loud. Half the bus was already listening in. Lauren began squeezing the rabbit in her hand again. The comfort didn’t come this time.

“*Shhhhh* You’re not supposed to tell remember?”

In response Rachael laughed cruelly. “Hey guys! Guess what? Lauren Likes *Kendall*! How sad is that! He hates you, you know. You don’t stand a chance!” She was practically shouting by the end.

Lauren could only draw into herself and cry silently. She was a fool and she knew it. Now everyone on the bus and soon the school would know it too. She spent the rest of the bus ride so deep in misery she didn’t even noticed the laughter or glances anymore.

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At home she went straight to bed. She didn’t feel like facing reality right now. Unfortunately she only managed to stare at her shelf of animals staring back at her. Some looked angry, others sad. None were happy. She got up to pick a few to bring back to bed with her; maybe they would be happier there. She also felt completely insane while doing it.

When her dad got home she hadn’t moved.

“What are you doing? Are you feeling ok? Do you need something?”

“No, just tired.”

“Ok then. Just don’t forget your homework after your nap.” He was about to walk away when he glanced back. “Where did that stuffed animal come from?” he asked pointing to a tiny purple rabbit that was now sitting on her bedside table.

Suddenly she realized where is *had* come from. But that was crazy. She probably just picked it up from her bus seat without realizing it.

“Bus…” was all she mumbled back to her father before pretending to fall asleep. However, she had never felt more awake. After her father left the room she turned to stare at the creature. It had given her an idea. Could she make dreams reality if she tried hard enough? Not literally of course, but figuratively. Could she change herself enough to get friends again and perhaps (did she dare hope?) a boyfriend? What did she have to lose? They had already stripped her of her dignity, perhaps she could make them eat their words and mean thoughts.

# Acute Guardian Angle

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“Everyone here? Good. You are dreaming. If you feel your mind beginning to wonder I want you to focus on the clock I’m holding. Notice it’s not working correctly or looks funny. You’re up Mr. Bannon” Mr. Henry smiled over at his partner.

“Ok guys, everyone ready to begin? Let’s try the first thing we discussed. Lesser demons, the one usually stupid enough to charge into people’s dreams and try to take over, typically are either extremely distractible or so focused they notice no one else but their victims.”

Reven, could hardly contain his excitement. He was finally in his *real* guardian lessons. If their teacher, Mr. Bannon, and his partner, Mr. Henry, hadn’t been there to keep them in check and conscious of where they were he would have been running around enacting epic battles with the other four. During the night they were not permitted to intentionally use their powers, a tad disappointing, but probably wise. Reven could think of all sorts of mischief he wanted to get into… Shan over there had a bed full of stuffed animals just asking to be messed, Tidus was crushing on Shan, and Hendric was arachnophobia. Not that any of these things were secret; with people constantly sharing your dreams, there’s not much you can hide. Since all of them had been raised to share *everything* from a very young age, these things weren’t even embarrassing in truth, just amusing quarks. Reven wondered if he was the *only* one managing to withhold a secret.

His eye wondered and fell on the large clock. The numbers were all in the wrong places and the hands seemed to be twisted. Oh right, dream. He snapped his attention back to his instructor.

“There are a few ways to confuse a distractible demon and that’s what I’ll have all of you try today. The first is creating duplicates. Watch.”

The class was standing in a plain field of grass edged by a forest and a hedge row. Cows were grading nearby with tall white birds lazily snapping up the bugs their companions startled. Mr. Bannon walked up to the nearest cow and put his hand on it. The cow did not react at all.

“Notice how it didn’t react at all? A real cow would have at least looked at me, maybe moved away. In fact it doesn’t feel. This is because I am thinking of it, not as a cow, but as an extension of my surroundings the dream. If I think about it clearly enough, I can feel the connection and, to an extent, I become a part of the dream as well. As dreams are designed only to react for the benefit of the dreamer, I pretty much don’t exist to this cow. Once I achieve this state of mind I can do anything.”

Reven watched in fascination as cows, exact duplicates of the first started appearing all around them. There was nothing one second and the next there was a fat grass eating milk machine. What he wouldn’t give for a glass of milk. He was just about to make one when…. Clock. Right, dream class.

“Now you guys won’t be doing anything near as complicated as cows yet but you’ll get there. To make the copy convincing you need to take in everything you can see and feel about the original and hold that in mind while making the copy. Here.”

He gestured to the ground in front of him and a pile of sticks appeared.

“Each of you take one of these sticks and spend the rest of our time making me five convincing copies.”

Reven rushed forward and grabbed a stick before the others eager to start. He flipped it and turned it over in his hands trying to notice all the little details about it. Ok, what did she say? Hold it all in mind? And…

Shan started giggling behind him. His concentration broken, he turned to see what amused her. She seemed to be peeking over Tidus’s shoulder at his first attempt. Which was…

“Oh my Gosh Tidus! Your stick is see through!” she managed to spout between giggling fits.

It was. You could see the sticks outline and a bit of it coloration, but you could mostly see Tidus’s hand holding it and the ground below it.

“Now Shan, your first attempt isn’t much better.” Mr. Bannon admonished.

“Mine looks great! What’s wrong with it? Umm wait, where’d it go?”

“If you were paying more attention to *your own* work rather than your classmates you would notice your copy crawled away. My guess it partway through your mental scan of your stick you got distracted be a cow and then went back to finish your copy. Always, always, always restart you mental rundown of an object over if you get distracted the first time. If not you will be creating some rather hideous things you’ll wish you never saw.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry Tidus. I guess we both suck.”

“Now Tidus you forgot to concentrate on the stick as a part of the dream. Remember it’s not really a stick. You need to feel the connection.” That’s what Reven almost forgot and now he returned to his task. He concentrated as hard as he could on the stick: its coloring, all the little branchlets.

He felt it. He could feel it all: the ground, the grass, the birds the cows. It all felt like and extension of his mind. Like he was a projector throwing an image not on the wall, but 360 degrees around him. In his excitement he forgot to concentrate on his stick. He cursed internally and let the feeling go.

He studied the stick again connected with it and immediately made a copy. He hoped that, in doing it quickly he wouldn’t get distracted. He was right but…

…he felt something tickle the top of his head and looked up. His ‘copy’ was the size of a spindly branch and was absolutely smooth. He noticed it begin to drop.

“TIMBER!” shouted Hendric.

Reven felt a body impact his push the both out of the range of the falling branches. To his surprise Shan had tackled him to save him from the branch. As if it would have even hurt if it hit him.

“Uh thanks for saving me from the *dream* branch Shan!”

“Oh shut up! You should be thankful I *wanted* to save you!”

“Or was that you couldn’t keep that cute figure of yours off me?”

“You’re such a pain in the ass Reven! More like I wanted to tackle you and get away with it!”

“You’re my guardian angle!”

“Oh God, Shut up!”

“Excuse me…. This is a class and I expect you to behave as such! Back to work you two!” They both looked toward Mr. Henry to see him frowning. Mr. Bannon shock his head at them and went to help Tidus who was still having invisibility issues. Shan walked a few yards away with a last disgusted sigh at Reven and resumed her work. At least Hendric seemed to appreciate his joke. He caught Reven’s eye and gave him a grin and a thumbs up.

“That’s a good first attempt Reven, but I can see from here that you forgot the texture of your stick. Also, I don’t recall any of the sticks being that… large. Please keep things like texture, size and ultimate location in mind as well.” Mr. Henry was back to business as always.

Reven grinned, “Yes Sir, Sorry about that.”

After that he had no more issues with his copies, the next few were almost perfect. He brought them over to Mr. Henry for inspection.

“Ok, you pass. Remember to exit using the void, we don’t need you making a Echo on top of all the other ruckus you caused this morning.”

“Yes sir!”

He took a second to remember his first lesson, yesterday’s lesson. He put his hands In front of him and imagined he was holding the air and pulled it apart. I tear into the void opened and he jumped through. Eventually he wouldn’t even have to use his hands, he would just envision it. But for now he was still a beginner. He floated in the void for a moment (really it felt like he was falling endlessly) and concentrated on waking up.

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When he opened his eyes he knew better than to try and move. He knew what was coming and could only lay there and ask God Why. Why him? His visions were occurring almost nightly again. In his blissful dreams and lessons he could forget for a while, at least for now, but he always had to wake up to reality.

He felt the fear as usual; it had not lessened in the least. What had changed was he no longer fought. He could feel silent tears rolling down his cheeks. As had become the routine he felt his ‘self’ float from his body. If a soul could shiver, his surely was. He didn’t go far though. Tonight it was an office with book shelves and filing cabinets on every wall. An ancient but handsome oak desk sat in the middle of the room and behind it was the nightmare that seemed to guard his passage into the real world. They were always there and always watching him like some hideous guardian angels only, they leading him to hell not haven.

Those red eyes peered at him with cruel humor and a misshapen hand rose to its forehead in a mock salute. He shut his eyes and clinched his fists. He didn’t care who this poor bastard was; he or she would probably be dead soon anyway, why should he care. He just wanted them OUT of his HEAD. He’d seen them all before, men, women, doctors, and drug addicts. If they were being affected by demons it wasn’t his business, the idiot REM member protecting them should be paying more attention.

When he opened his eyes he was once again back in bed. He rolled over and buried his face in his pillow, hugging it tightly. He was tired of seeing their faces: the demons and the people they had touched. IT seemed the more he saw the harder it was to forget.

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He was finally able to push it aside later when Mr. Bannon and Mr. Henry gave them a tasty bit of information to chew on.

“Well, since you all proved you know the ‘how’ of the void exit, let me explain the ‘why.’ I know you all have heard at least a little about reverie ectypes before. Essentially the last thing an Artist touched in the dream world it very likely to appear in the real world with them. This can be both helpful and highly dangerous depending on what is brought back. Depending on the strength of the Artist’s gift the ectype may remain for a few hours to a few short minutes. Recognize this?” Mr. Bannon held up a stick. “I brought this back with me. I want you to pay attention to it throughout the lesson.”

“All objects or organisms brought back from the dream world will function just like they would normally until the fade, with the exception of tools and electronics which don’t function correctly in dreams anyway. It is very important that, from now on, you pay close attention to your exists. Entering into the void is the only way to keep from pulling things back with you.” As he spoke Reven noticed the stick begin to blur around the edges.

“I doubt I need to describe the consequences for bring back a night mare. Luckly, however, we are not alone. Our good buddies, the guardians can actually destroy the ectypes for us if we make a mistake.” On his cue Mr. Henry walked forward and stared down at the stick. In a sudden, violent movement he smashed his fist down on top of the stick. Reven nearly jumped out of his seat at the noise and let out a nervous laugh. The stick, however, did not break in half; there were no pieces whatsoever. It had simply vanished.