I - Waking Nightmare

A rough draft in progress either discarded or adapted from the short story “Eclipsed” containing notes and scenes suitable for the series prologue.

Original note: This is the story of a person who has been possessed by a demon, and begins with the main character cast into a kind of limbo, a shifting wasteland of an endless nightmare. Told in the first person, the main character has no clear memory of who or what he or she was, or how she came to be in this situation. An encounter with a strange being allows the main character to begin to understand what has happened, and be brought to an oasis, a part of the nightmare that has become the home of the souls previously captured by the demon and a world they created within it.

pages ∙ words

My thoughts sped by, felt but unfathomed, as I drifted numb to everything. Blisfully distracted, from the endless distraction of thought, I allowed the noise to wash over me, and slipped into the depths of absolute silence. There was nothing to hold onto, and nothing bound to me. I knew nothing and understood. I found everything in myself. I was without boundaries, divided my naked soul from the void and the incomprehensible things I encountered there. Sensations cascaded through my mind and ideas, frightening in their clarity, dissolved into fragments of understanding the instant they formed. The calm inside the storm stirred with unclaimed dreams. Though I made no move to embrace them, I slipped blind into the one that swelled up and claimed me.

There was no sense of beginning as the illusion engulfed me, unfolding in a flicker of light, a shiver of cold, a flinch of pain—indistinguishable from a caress of pleasure—in an endless stream of disconnected sensations that slipped through me as fast as I fell away from them. Each impulse left a faint impression, a tiny ache of recognition out of which a sense of meaning was born. A hint of truth in the mystery, I discovered that they were all pieces of me, the ashes of my memories. Unfortunately, I had no idea how the glittering atoms of my mind fit together. All I knew was that I experienced a flicker of life each time a random connection was made.

I took a shuddering breath, and moaned, fighting against the impulse to wake.

The sensations coalesced into a dim world of unsettling objects that proved willfully unidentifiable. At a glance, the strange twilight would solidify into a place, but if I gazed too long at anything, it would begin to warp and waver, either changing into something else or dissolving before my eyes. Fragments of a dream that evaporated without a trace as I clung to unconsciousness, in denial of what I was already conscious of.

Once noted, I rejected that denial and forced myself to face the horror of what I had already sensed. I was hurt. I opened my eyes and confirmed the extent of the damage, a body burnt and maimed beyond recognition. I flinched away from the memory of the trauma. Thankfully, I could remember little of what had inflicted it.

I saw nothing in what remained of me to indicate who or what I was. My memories of myself were similarly charred and flayed beyond recovery. I could not account for my survival, but finding my immediate surroundings equally devestated, I doubted I would encounter many other survivors. It looked like the end of the world. It was almost beyond description.

I had woken up in the remains of a concrete walled room, or what survived as the building it was part of was blasted or torn from its foundations. The dark, bloody cavity of the sky loomed over a slaughtered world. The fields, foothills and distant mountains had been skinned, and shattered buildings showed their splintered bones. It was painful to look at, and grim enough to compel me to see to my own wounds.

It took a while, but I found the supplies I needed. I cleaned and dressed my wounds, transforming myself from a zombie into a mummy, and tried not to think about what it meant that I only felt the faintest echoes of pain. To say I was deep in shock could only be an understatement. I focused on practical thoughts and actions, because anything else would lead to screaming madness. Screw hope. Blind determination was the only thing that was keeping me going. Salvaging what little I could, I packed up and moved on.

I did not even contemplate staying where I woke up. The first thing I wanted to do was see how far the devestation reached. My best chance of survival lay in escaping from this wasteland. Given the state I woke up in, I was not surprised to find that my grip on reality was not entirely reliable. As I pushed through the wreckage, I would slip in and out of hallucinations. The most unsettling were the ones in which my body warped and wavered in its existence. At times, I would reach out, and even though I could feel my hands, I could not see them. Even when I could see them, they did not always remain mine. Without warning, parts of me became fused into the scenery and I would be forced to rip myself free of an arm or a leg to keep moving forward.

It gradually dawned on me that I could not distinguish between waking and dreaming. It was like a nightmare—the kind where I kept waking up inside a dream. I seemed to be doing the opposite, though, falling asleep and dreaming I was still stumbling forward in search of supplies, shelter and salvation. Day was an overcast twilight and night was unyeildingly dark. Because of my lack of coherence, time was impossible to mark. I always thought I was awake, and the only time I could tell I was dreaming was when things got impossibly surreal.

After a while, I began to wonder if this was what death was. It seemed much more like hell. Having no memory of life or what I must have done to be sent there was the perfect punctuation to true damnation. I did not expect it to take long to descend into madnes once I started to have thoughts like that. All I could do, however, was push forward, alive or dead, dreaming or awake.

I only knew peace when oblivion engulfed me. In its familiar silence, I understood, for lack of a better word, what it meant to be me. Rather, the understanding was me. In spite of whatever had happened to me, I still existed. It was enough to bring me back from the edge. In lieu of anything else, that glimmering awareness absorbed me, focused me. Even in the face of my nightmares.

In the grip of one, I found hope.

At the time I was stumbling through darkness, dreaming or awake, I could not know. I pushed on in mindless determination. I fought with dispair and frustration, and above all I felt desperately alone. I tried not to think about it, but it had caused me to start seeing or sensing ghosts. Most were just figments of my imagination, just shadows or silhouettes of stone. Some of them were just a presence, usually distant and remote. Others evaporated into nothing when I would approach. I had trained myself to ignore them by the time the first one spoke. I had sensed this one approaching, and dismissed it long before it came close. It stopped seemed to regard me, when our paths finally crossed.

“*Where are you going?”* The enshrouding darkness reverberated to that intruding voice.

Exhaustion muffled my shock. I slowly turned to confront the presence. I had a hard time trying to define what I was sensing. It did not have a body, but it felt like a person was there. I tilted my head to regard it and muttered the first thing that came into my head.

“You’re not like the other ghosts,” I rasped, barely making a sound.

*“Nor are you, if you’ve seen them,”* the ghost responded.

I stood for a moment without breathing. I swallowed, and asked fearfully, “Are we dead?”

*“I would say, the lives we once lived are over, but you and I, we’re not quite dead,”* it clarified, its presence closing in around me. The contact was oddly comforting and unnerving. The way it projected words into my mind made me feel as if it could peer into my head. *“If you stay out here among them much longer, they’re going to drive you mad.”*

“What kind of ghost isn’t dead?” I demanded, thinking that this ghost was doing a good job of tipping me over the edge.

*“Well, any soul that has not actually died,”* the phantom declared.

I did not find that entirely reassuring. “I don’t understand. How does that apply to me?” I demanded.

*“It means, you have been stripped from your body and your mind is trapped in a dream.”*

“You have *got* to be kidding!” I cried out, half laughing. In spite of that, I was frightened. It was as good an explanation for what was happening as anything I’d want to believe.

<…gap…>

“*I don’t understand!”* I had no voice to utter this cry, but it filled me until I must have screamed out with my entire being. The explosive surge of emotion drained me to the core. I could feel what little understanding I had turning to ash as the flare was absorbed by the unknown. “*What’s happening to me?”*

“*You are dying*.” The tendril of foreign thought breathed on the ember of my soul.

The words echoed within me without meaning for a moment, as I staggered under the weight of oblivion. Then it hit me, in a hard snap of panic and agony across my dwindling consciousness. “*Why"?”* I demanded of the universe. “*What did I do wrong? Why can’t I remember anything?”* A rush of passion filled me and extended my existence in anticipation of the answer.

“*Does it matter why?”* the voice probed.

Did it matter? I had no idea. No. I did not care. Only one thing mattered. *“I don’t want to die!”*

A note of resignation passed from the alien presence into me. *“Then you need to stop fighting. You’re tearing yourself apart.”* These words of gentile recrimination made me pause. They caught me and held me; I responded to the touch like a caress. This was so different from the other embrace, the thing that had seized my mind, burned itself into every thought and feeling I possessed and then crushed me out of existence. Until that moment, I had forgotten. I had forgotten what I had been hiding from.

I had forgotten how my mind had been raped.

I hovered on the brink of remembering more, until I understood that I could not bear to. Not if I wanted to stay sane. I struggled to make sense of it, and on some deep level I almost understood it. It was not so much that I could not remember anything, but that my most important memories no longer belonged to me. They had been tainted by violation. The simple act of touching them filled me with a violent urge to tear myself free.

*“What am I fighting?”* I had to ask, conscious of forming the thought, and straining to sense if thought that responded had its roots in me.

There was a long pause before the voice responded. *“You’re fighting a demon,”* the stranger informed me soberly and with sympathy.

I understood the words, but they seemed impossible to believe, let alone attribute to some part of myself. I called on every scrap of memory, the shattered knowledge that still belonged to me, and reached two quick conclusions. *“I’m dreaming,”* I realized, and without a doubt had been wrestling with some serious demons while caught in the grip of a nightmare.

*“Actually, you’re trying to wake up,”* the voice ammended, *“and each time you confront the demon.”*

*“That doesn’t make any sense,”* I complained. *“Shouldn’t that be the other way around?”* It seemed more likely that encountering a demon in my nightmares would scare me awake. Except, what I had encountered in my nightmare had driven me to the brink of oblivion. My actions, and my reaction to what my mind refused to even remember, argued that I had endured something unspeakable. I realized the horror in words, *“When I wake up, I am not me anymore. I just black out. This isn’t a dream I can wake up from, is it?”*

*“I’m sorry. No,”* the stranger confirmed, stepping unexpectedly into focus and adding with an encouraging smile, “but it is one you can share.” As she moved, the air moved ahead of her carrying the strong scent of rain, wet rock and pineneedles. These scents filled me and the landscape changed dramatically. The twilight turned into a stormy sky over a grassy meadow in the middle of a damp forest. The trees danced and twisted in the grip of a vengeful, howling wind. I stumbled back away from the woman and noticed that she stood poised on the edge of a cliff facing me. I hovered formless and insubstantial in the air above her.

*“What is this?”* I babbled in shock, gripped by vertigo, but having no body, unable to fall.

“This is the alternative to oblivion and death,” she explaned, spreading her arms in a sweeping gesture that included a vast panorama of world and sky.

<…gap…>

“That would make it easier,” a voice cut through my silent thoughts without warning.

I was not sure if it was a trick of my imagination, a thought of my own with the illusion of sound. I had not thought of trying to speak—the notion had never crossed my mind—reason enough to be shocked by the first words to enter my consciousness.

“Oh, hardly the first, just the first you have recognized as words,” the voice corrected me gently. “About time, too. I was starting to fear you would never respond,” the speaker appended with relieved concern. As I concentrated on the voice, I found it harder to keep the world around me in focus.

“I can’t see,” I gasped, or would have gasped if I could connect to more than an idea of my body. “Where are you? I hear you… I can… I *think* I can feel you.” I felt the words form, and I knew the sound they should make, but as I spoke, I had no real sense of speaking. I did not actually hear myself speak.

“Easy now. Don’t panic. You’re still in a delicate state,” the voice warned me in calm tones. “You must have figured out by now that it’s not the world that’s out of its mind—“

“It’s me,” I cut in. “I am dreaming. I’ve been dreaming but I can’t seem to wake up.” I did not add the suspicion that had been forming as I dreamed of waking up, over and over, but never became aware of who or what I was. “It feels like I am awake, but…” I trailed off as the shocking realization hit me. “I am blind, aren’t I?” It seemed so obvious. The parts of my mind that had returned to me gave me enough knowledge to realize I had lost my memory. A head injury could have cost me even more.

The voice paused. I knew the answer would be an affirmative, but was surprised by what she—by this point I seemed confident that the stranger was female—confided. “It is a little more complicated than that.”

I was not sure what to make of that. “I can’t see, I can’t seem to wake up—or rather, I can’t tell if I am awake. I can’t remember who I am and I can’t feel my body. I can think of a simple enough explanaiton for all of that,” I stated, numb with apprehension.

“I still do not think I can explain this, and by that I mean, make you understand, while you are still in such a delicate state,” she elaborated, clearly afraid of how the truth of my situation would affect me. In a hesitant voice, she told me, “It has taken me a while to put you back together. I saved all the pieces of you that I could.”

I did not like the sound of that. My mind flashed back to the dismembering aspects of my dream. I pushed the panic aside, because the fact was, whatever was left of me, I was not able to see or even feel. I wanted to ask for more details, just to keep myself from imagining the worst. After a very long silence, I finally worked up the nerve to ask the one question I thought I could deal with. “What happened to me?”

Instead of giving me an answer, she asked me the last thing I would have ever expected. “Do you know why demons try to steal souls?” It clearly took me too long to process the question, because she resumed speaking, “More importantly, did you ever wonder what happens to those poor souls? Well, I found out when a demon devoured mine. It took everything from me; my thoughts, my memories, my entire mind was devoured and digested as it swallowed my soul and took over my body. Only an echo of me survived, trapped in the darkest depths of the demon’s mind.”

I let her words play through my mind for a while, and she said nothing while I thought. On the surface, what she confessed seemed absurd. The questions nagged at me. They should have been empty, theological and philosophical questions a person might ponder with or without any belief in the existence of demons, and never reach a meaningful conclusion. On the other hand, she was claiming to have been in a state like mine. The problem was her explanation for how she became an “echo” of herself.

“I can’t say I ever thought about it,” I confessed, focusing on the initial question. “Why do demons try to steal souls?” It seemed like a good question to start with, if I was going to have to challenge her testamony.

“If you believed in demons, you would probably have heard that demons do not have souls of their own. The same is true of angels. The thing you might not know, even if you believed in angels and demons, is that they cannot exist without a soul either. An angel’s existence is dependent on the soul of its creator. The only way an angel can survive without the support of its creator is by taking possession of the soul of another,” she explained.

“Fallen angels,” I prompted, discovering that my memory of theological trivia was more intact than my memory of me. What she was telling me was not that far from what I had picked up in the course of my life. From what I could remember, even religious people tended not to take the idea of demons too literally, however. “You’re right. I’m not sure I can believe what you are implying,” I confessed.

“To be honest, it does not matter right now. What matters is that you understand the situation you are in,” she countered. By this point, I could almost picture her, as my mind tried to compensate for my blindness. “What you have now is pretty much all that is left of you.”

I considered that. All I had at the moment was my thoughts and emotions, fragments of memory, and a neverending nightmare. I might be paralyzed or in a coma with severe brain damage. I might be dying or even dead. For all I knew, the voice I was talking to right now was rooted in my subconscious, allowing me to confront myself with the fact that I was trapped in my own mind with no way to determine if anything was real. “Dreams,” I concluded, realizing that there was a point to the conversation, even if I was simply talking to myself. The alternatives to dreaming were becoming lost in nightmares, insanity or oblivion.

The voice proposed one more alternative. “If you can accept dreams in place of reality, then perhaps you could reconsider your notions of reality.”

It took a moment, and then I realized the point she was trying to make. If I could accept the idea that I had really been stripped out of my body by a demon and trapped with other souls in its mind, if that was really the situation I was in, then the first thing this situation did was prove the existence of my soul. If I refused to accept this as the truth, and it turned out to be true, I would be condemning myself to my own personal hell, trapped in my own dreams and nightmares for eternity.

“Assuming that I do, then what?” I asked, wondering where things could possible go from here.

i] introduction

the edge of oblivion

a nightmare wide awake

lost in a shifting wasteland

another lost soul

it's not the world, it's you; you're all over the place

gathering my ghost

wandering in the shadow of reality

a gathering of ghosts

you're not like the other ghosts

ii] escalation

confronting angels

an escort

gods

the process of realization

the manifestation of my humanity and divinity

a singular duality

a startling revelation

crossing the threshold

the sanctuary

iii] complications & confrontations

a period of adjustment

the midnight visitor

confronted by the dragon

a challenge to my humanity

the cost of creation

the conflict

the matter of my initiation

the manner of my initiation

preparing

iv] climax & conclusion

the eve of my initiation

confronted by the gods

a test of my immortality

offering up myself

death and resurrection

witnessing the feast

in the company of gods

drawn into the dance

allies and adversaries

A velvet tongue savoring a fleeting echo of spice and sweetness. My being vibrated as the image unfolded and devoured me, extending my being into a vivid sensual reality. The resolution collapsed as I tried to gear my attention to capture the thread. I almost touched the forgotten life on the other side of oblivion. I fell away from it hungry. This impulse was far stronger. I could suddenly feel the aching of my insides. The pulling of a desire as ancient as the ocean. Longing and pain.

A ghost shadow of flesh aching for the unimaginable. Confusion. I could not remember the reality of hunger. I felt the starvation of the mind. I craved sensation. All that there was to feel however, was the strange presence that seemingly held me between its lips. Please, I begged from some unknown depth. I projected all I was into the sweeping embrace of the Other. What madness is this? The voice queried. Even as it recoiled, its whispering filled the thread of my being with hints and echoes of contact. The interference strumming across the naked thread of my soul and awakening the fire within. I felt the stirring of my spirit. I felt the reunion of my shredded will with my ruined mind. You are dying! The Other shouted through me. There is nothing to come back to but pain. Not even a shell. You are carnage, it declared projecting rage, shock and sorrow mixed in with satisfaction.

Parts of me absorbed this report and cringed. The horror, the mental agony I felt at the idea that whatever life was, I had gathered my self to confront only the worst possible aspect of it. And yet, I could not comprehend any other possibility. My understanding, my being, was dedicated to living. To existing. I could not wrap my self around the concept “not to be”. I want to feel... whatever there is to feel. I cannot turn away. I cannot recall the magnitude of desperation and anguish that was in my mental voice, all I could feel was need.

It gradually dawned on me that I was dreaming—caught in a nightmare, to be specific—the kind where I kept waking up inside a dream.

Each time I awoke, I thought it was for real, until some innocent part of the scenery transformed into a terrifying apparition that scared me awake. When I was not being frightened out of my wits by something that turned out to be harmless on further observation

At some point, I adapted to the shifting ruins and the barren, tortured landscapes, though I did not notice it until I discovered that I was not the only shadow of a person shambling through this hell. On occasion, I would glimpse a figure in the distance, but when I pursed these phantoms, the landscape would shift and they would be gone. As I began to watch for these lost souls, I realized that they had been there all along, their presence betrayed by the sound of incoherent mutterings or the scuff of random footsteps.

The figures I glimpsed were as fleetingly real as the world around me, but that sense of reality was chopped up and shuffled together, impossible to hold onto for more than a heart beat. The only constant was a presence that seemed to have been near me, but never with me, in the nightmare.

When I finally did find someone who did not vanish as quickly as he appeared, he seemed to be oblivious to my efforts to get his attention as I stumbled along in his wake. I followed him out of the ruin of a nameless city into the tortured wasteland beyond. We were joined by a growing number of mysterious figures that stumbled out of the shifting storm to wander aimlessly until it chose to swallow them up again. Those who were not seemed to fixate on the same stranger I had been following.

I finally caught up to him, standing on the lip of a ravine hugging a blanket tightly wrapped around his body and hooding his head.

“Hello?” I called out as I approached.

He shivered and hunched in close. I stared in shock as he exhaled a visible cloud of frozen breath, further evidence of cold I had not detected. I was about to speak when he suddenly interrupted. “There are a lot more of them. They’re definitely following me,” he stated in a tone that seemed worn with frustration. He was standing facing off to my side, and while I was within his field of view, he gave no sign of noticing my arrival.

I stepped into his line of sight and waved my hands—or at least tried to. At some point in this dream, I stopped thinking about my body, and now I did not seem to have one.

“Wait,” he held up a hand and looked around himself. “Did you feel that? Kind of like a warm breeze?” He paused, and for a moment he gazed right in my direction. “Yes. It’s a warm… presence,” he resumed, nodding toward someone I could not see. “No, that’s not like a ghost at all. It’s the damnedest thing,” he declared, shrugging off the blanket and sticking his hands into me and then rubbing them together as if he was warming himself before a fire.

“Hey!” I cried out, stumbling back from the sudden stab of cold that pierced me. It was more than just cold, however. It had drained me, distrupted my focus and set the world around me back to whirling around in chaos. Strangely, though, the man who had touched me, and a small area around him, had suddenly become more stable, more real.

“It moved! It moved when I touched it!” the man cried out in excitement. He started to feel his way forward, hands extended. As he moved, the air moved ahead of him carrying the strong scent of rain, wet rock and pineneedles. These scents filled me and the landscape changed dramatically. The twilight turned into a stormy sky over a grassy meadow in the middle of a damp forest. The trees danced and twisted in the grip of a vengeful, howling wind. I stumbled back away from the man and noticed that there were several others now standing with him on the edge of the ravine.

“What is going on?” I gasped in confusion.

“Did you hear that?” the man asked, with an abrupt look at his companions. When they all shook their heads or responded in the negative, he cocked his head in a gesture of careful listening. “It sounded like a voice, like someone shouting through a thick glass or something,” he explained to his friends.

“What kind of dream is this?” I demanded aloud, carefully avoiding the searching hands, while I grappled with his strange reaction.

“Whatever this is, I don’t think it’s just another ghost,” the man began to speculate, returning to a conversation I had stumbled into. There was a pause, and when he resumed speaking it became clear that someone had spoken to him and I had not heard it. “I think you’re right. I think we’ve found what’s been attracting all of the other ghosts. This thing must be like a beacon in the night.”

I stood there, my mind racing as I turned to look at the thick wilderness that had suddenly appeared and listened to the man’s one-sided conversation with his friends, and began to reconsider my situation. With growing apprehension, I reached out and touched him. When I did not feel myself being drained by the contact, I asked, tentatively, “Are you… is this… real?”

The man froze in place and held up a hand to silence his friends. “I heard it clearly this time! It just asked me if I am real. If this,” he gestured around him, “is real!” He turned around and looked in my direction. “I can hear you. Can you hear me?”

A crack of thunder and a blinding flash of light accompanied the shock that ran through me. The men all jumped and cowered in response to the sudden lightning strike, and I had to step forward to grab at the man who could hear me. In a flood of excitement, I cried out, “Yes! Yes, I can hear you!”

By this point, I was certain that I was in that weird place between dreaming and waking where I felt conscious but had no sense of reality. The absense of sights or sounds, the feeling of infinite space and timelessness, while remotely terrifying, were not unfamiliar. I might have been cut off from the world, but it was still there in the background.

…though harder to recognize than negative space, being neither the words nor the page.

Oblivion was marred only by my awareness of it. I clung to the sense of timelessness, the familiarity of nothing, but drifted helplessly toward consciousness—and she was waiting.

“What do you remember?” her words intruded gently, catching my mind in their grip. A breath of thought passed through me, and moved me to where I could know. I stood before a mirror and when I glimpsed the image within it, all I could do was scream. The sound shattered me, cutting its way out of me, piercing, perfect and pure.

The splintered fragments sang with clear notes of horror and denial above the thunder of their colliding masses; but it was the inescapable silence over all that deafened me. It filled me as I tried to hide myself within it. But I could not escape the voice that followed me.

“Do you remember me?”

I writhed as the words wrapped themselves around the inward curves of me on their way to my deepest depths. There I was nothing, a single, naked thought. Alone. In the dark place I found her and her first words, the words that filled me with hope and horror.

“You are not alone,” I breathed their echoes.

“You are not alone,” she agreed with me.

I clung to the reassurance, and I dreamed of waking up again. I dreamed of flesh and bone, the comfort of a bed and the notion of a home. I reach for my humanity, my identity still unknown.

I turned and tried to reach out to her, reassured to feel her presence surrounding me. I relaxed into her formless embrace. So different from my response to the other presence, the thing that had seized my mind, burned itself into every thought and feeling I possessed and then crushed me out of existence. Until that moment, I had forgotten. I had forgotten what I had been hiding from and what I had been asked to confront.

I had forgotten how my mind had been raped, and my very soul devoured.

I hovered on the brink of remembering more, until I understood that I could not bear to. Not if I wanted to stay sane. I struggled to make sense of it, and on some deep level I almost understood it. It was not so much that I could not remember anything, but that my most important memories no longer belonged to me. They had been tainted by violation. The simple act of touching them filled me with a violent urge to tear myself free.

Now I remembered. She had sent me back into that nightmare in search of more pieces of me. I sat bolt upright, awake, safe in the bed in her dream. “Can you see me?” I asked in desperation. I looked down and saw her arms around me.

“Take it easy,” she cautioned, restraining me. “Open your eyes. Look at me,” she prompted patiently.

That basic proof of my body was reassuring enough for me. It had taken a long time for me to learn how to make myself solid and to fully share this dream. I itched to go look in the mirror, in spite of the fear the notion roused in me. I still did not know what I should see there, but I desperately hoped it would be me.

“How do I look?” I asked, knowing she would tell me if I had dreamed up some monstrosity. Her fingers gently brushed hair out of my face and explored my features. It felt like my face was at least human, and her expression was calm and serene.

“I’ve told you, you have to be patient. You’re still to easily upset. Now, tell me what you remember,” she prompted me, pushing me back into the pillows piled against the bed’s headrest.

I took a deep breath, allowing my eyes to linger on the sight of my hands where they lay in my lap. Once satisfied that they did not seem abnormal, I leaned back and closed my eyes.

I remembered I could not stop dreaming. I was afraid I had died in my sleep.

I remember that she was trying to dream me. It was why she kept asking me to remember. She wanted me to remember being me.

I could not remember anything at first. Memory did not exist. Nothing seemed to exist. I had no points of reference. Oblivion engulfed me, marred only by my own awareness of it. It was a familiar silence. I understood, for lack of a better word, though there was nothing to understand. I suppose that I just... understood myself. The idea of myself. It was enough to bring me back from the edge. In lieu of anything else, that glimmering awareness absorbed me. Focused me. I was a single naked thought. Alone.

You are not alone.

The enshrouding darkness reverberated to that intruding thought. I tried to look but I had not realized yet that there was nothing to look *at*. Suddenly it was vitally important to regain the thread of my last rational thought. I flailed desperately for a measureless eternity but the only points of reference I cold find was the hard presence which had uttered its thought within me. I became aware then of the limit of my understanding and I was terrified.

I don’t understand! I cried out with my entire being. The explosion of emotion expended in that outburst drained me to the core. I could feel what little understanding I had turning to ash as the flare was absorbed by the unknown.

You are dying. The tendril of foreign thought breathed on the ember of my soul. I felt a quickening as the threat implications penetrated and became part of my dwindling consciousness. Why? I demanded of the universe. What did I do wrong? Why can’t I remember anything? A rush of passion filled me and extended my existence in anticipation of the answer.

Does it matter why? the voice probed.

It gradually dawned on me that I was dreaming—caught in a nightmare, to be specific—the kind where I kept waking up inside a dream. Each time I awoke, I thought it was for real. I became more focused—or the chaos seemed more coherent.

It was unsettling the way my body warped and wavered in its existence, however. At times, I would reach out, and even though I could feel my hands, I could not see them. Sometimes, even though I could see them, they did not always remain mine. Without warning, parts of me became fused into the scenery and I would be forced to rip myself free of an arm or a leg to keep moving forward.

I had to keep moving, or the strange landscape would begin to collapse in on me. As I stumbled on, I grew tired and desperate for some kind of shelter, a safe place to rest—even knowing I was inviting the world to collapse and turn inside out. I was in the eye of a storm, but if I stopped moving it would catch up to me and tear everything around me to pieces. More than once, I was torn to pieces too, cast back into the abyss for an eternal instant.

I could not remember anything at first. Memory did not exist. Nothing seemed to exist. I had no points of reference. Oblivion engulfed me, marred only by my own awareness of it. It was a familiar silence. I understood, for lack of a better word, though there was nothing to understand. I suppose that I just... understood myself. The idea of myself. It was enough to bring me back from the edge. In lieu of anything else, that glimmering awareness absorbed me. Focused me. I was a single naked thought. Alone.

You are not alone.

The enshrouding darkness reverberated to that intruding thought. I tried to look but I had not realized yet that there was nothing to look *at*. Suddenly it was vitally important to regain the thread of my last rational thought. I flailed desperately for a measureless eternity but the only points of reference I cold find was the hard presence which had uttered its thought within me. I became aware then of the limit of my understanding and I was terrified.

I don’t understand! I cried out with my entire being. The explosion of emotion expended in that outburst drained me to the core. I could feel what little understanding I had turning to ash as the flare was absorbed by the unknown.

You are dying. The tendril of foreign thought breathed on the ember of my soul. I felt a quickening as the threat implications penetrated and became part of my dwindling consciousness. Why? I demanded of the universe. What did I do wrong? Why can’t I remember anything? A rush of passion filled me and extended my existence in anticipation of the answer.

Does it matter why? the voice probed.

I responded to the touch like a caress. This was so different from the other embrace, the thing that had seized my mind, burned itself into every thought and feeling I possessed and then crushed me out of existence. Until that moment, I had forgotten. I had forgotten what I had been hiding from.

I had forgotten how my mind had been raped.

I hovered on the brink of remembering more, until I understood that I could not bear to. Not if I wanted to stay sane. I struggled to make sense of it, and on some deep level I almost understood it. It was not so much that I could not remember anything, but that my most important memories no longer belonged to me. They had been tainted by violation. The simple act of touching them filled me with a violent urge to tear myself free.