Prologue

Lucilia felt the wind blast her at a hundred miles per hour, swirling her hair behind her, threatening to rip off her dress. She let her legs dangle freely, the wind now knocking them together, now pulling them apart. She felt the thrill of hanging on with nothing but her hands, plastered flat against the white runes on Tearcy’s neck, their magnetic aura covering her palms in a stillness untouched by the wind. She watched the ground recede before her, until she could see Earth spread out below; then she slammed into what felt like a thick layer of mud, which would have broken her neck if not for her protective charms. She and the dragon burst up from the ground again, the mud and dirt sliding smoothly off her frictionless hair, unable to find the slightest atom of a foothold. Three, she counted and they shot up vertically even faster, repeating the same process again, four, five,… She let her mind search for the dreaming souls on each plane, their numbers decreasing exponentially as she climbed, three on the ninth plane, only one on the tenth plane, none on the eleventh, twelfth,…

The planes shot past at the rate of three a second now, and she strained to keep the right count in her mind. Suddenly Tearcy fell into a horizontal position, legs splayed wide, wings straining to slow her down. They slammed into the ground of the nineteenth plane from below, knocking the wind out of her lungs. Had this been physical reality all her bones would have been shattered into pieces.

She fell on Tearcy, her body temporarily paralyzed. She reached out with her mind to scold Tearcy but then noticed a powerful blip in her mental radar. There was a dreaming soul on the eighteenth plane. This was unheard of.

They landed on the roof of a white laboratory, surrounded by barbed wire. An upturned trash can moved slowly towards the back entrance, and then stopped as a small girl cautiously extricated herself. She took her ten-inch laptop out of a huge pocket in her pink sweater and booted it up with one hand while she deftly dismembered the ID scanner with her other.

“Share your vision with me, Tearce,” Lucilia said as she placed her palm on the flowery runes on Tearcy’s neck.

She looked through dragon eyes at the monitor below. The girl’s fingers moved at inhuman speed, the code appearing on the screen even faster than she was typing. Tearcy slowed down her frame rate, and Lucilia saw the lines scroll upwards flawlessly, not a single letter blurring. Lucilia looked in awe; the girl’s mind kept the words on the screen in order as flawlessly as a computer. She took out another gadget from her cat-shaped purse, docked it into the computer, slid a card in the slot, compiled her program, and retrieved the card. She put the card to the ID scanner and the door opened with a click. She slipped inside.

Lucilia knew that she had found who she was looking for. She closed her eyes and scanned through the building. At the center of the building was a safe containing a single CD-ROM. Suddenly she felt an unconscious antagonism directed at her and saw soldiers moving in the building towards the roof. The girl could detect her presence; she had little time to spare. She concentrated on the safe and added a surprise.

“Happy birthday, spy girl,” she said as she mounted Tearcy.

Suddenly a squadron of soldiers poured out onto the roof, and started throwing balls at them.

“Fly!” she urged Tearcy, and they burst through the skies of the eighteenth plane. A fine white powder showered off her shirt and Lucilia caught a strong whiff of garlic. She laughed in relief; the girl was obviously not hardcore enough to imagine soldiers with real weapons.

Lucy sat in the chair in her room, perfecting her newest version of the codebreaker program on her computer while reveling in the latest four episodes of her dream-fantasies. She’d sneaked on board an airship full of smelly boys who’d wanted to introduce junk food to the pastures of Farmtown, a quaint village occupied by citizens who ate whole wheat bread and salad every day, and made predictions about the future with religious fervor. They had predicted that yesterday, a gift from God would rain down into their pastures, and the boys had chosen to take advantage of this by raining down potato chips, pizza, hamburgers, and fried chicken on Farmtown. She’d learned that the food delivery system was to be managed by a complicated machine with lots of pipes. She’d reoriented them so that instead their poop came out and rained down on Farmville. She’d saved Farmville from the addiction of junk food, given the pastures a good amount of fertilizer, and taught the residents the perils of holding their heads to the sky shouting Hallelujah. It was certainly a nice break from all the CIA missions she was called upon to do.

“Lucy, there’s a new job for you,” her father said. “Lucilia needs your help.”

“Bring her in.”

Lucy almost called out in surprise; Lucilia looked like a more grown-up, taller version of her. The mud on her cheek, the rags she wore, and the dank smell around her clashed with the regality of her features.

Lucilia explained how her uncle Tristan had murdered her father to get the throne and was now being crowned king of the dreamworld. It was a process that took a whole day, she said; he had to undergo a complicated ritual at the Fountain of Dreams, thousands of feet below the ground, to have the magic of the dreamworld transferred to him. He was already down there, and if they did not stop him within a day, the entire dreamworld would be doomed.

Lucy wasted no time in packing up her laptop, swinging her purse of spy gadgets onto her shoulder and bending down so that her cat, Waru, could jump onto her hand, before running out after Lucilia. Lucilia helped her onto her dragon, and it dove towards the ground. Before Lucy could utter a word, they had gone right through and into the sky again. She looked at Lucilia in confusion.

“It’s in a different dimension,” Lucilia explained.

The scene repeated itself several times, until they came to a huge castle. Lucilia directed Tearcy to the courtyard, and guards began swarming over.

“What do we do?” Lucilia asked.

“I’ve got this under control,” Lucy said, holding up Waru towards the charging soldier.

The soldier looked into Waru’s large round eyes in confusion. Suddenly Waru leapt up into his face and clawed at his eyes.

“AARGHH!”

Waru leapt between the guards with lightning speed, creating a circle of soldiers staggering around hacking blindly at each other. The two girls ran through a gap in between, Lucilia pointing towards the stairs leading down to the fountain.

There was a door on the first landing, with a keypad and a paper posted besides the handle.

“Uncle likes riddles,” she said, “You have to solve each problem to open the door. But hurry, we have less than 24 hours to get to the bottom before he completes the ritual.”

“No problem,” Lucy said, “This is what I do best.”

Lucy took out a pencil, scribbled on the back of the paper, and punched in the answer a minute later. Solving the problems in her sleep was exhilarating as always, but something bothered her about this place; there seemed something definitively alien about those problems posted on the doors—like they had come from someone else’s mind. The stone walls shrank around her dream like a cage, making her claustrophobic. Lucilia pressed her hand to the door as Lucy punched in the answer each time, indicating her impatience; she would bound through ahead of Lucy to the next door and rip off the paper into Lucy’s hands like they were running a relay race, then bend down with the lantern while Lucy sat on the steps and solved it.

Twenty minutes later, she woke up to her mooing alarm clock. It was time for school. Oh well, she thought, I’ll just have to continue the episode this night.

When she fell asleep again, she was in the passage where they left off. They continued downwards, but progress slowed down. She lost track of time, and her surroundings grew less distinct. The edges of her vision went fuzzy; it became hard even to take in all of the text on the paper at once. When she paused and tried to remember the last riddle, she couldn’t; she couldn’t remember what she had done with the paper after she had solved it, did she throw it on the floor or put it in her pocket or give it to Lucilia? The thousands of feet of ground above her were crushing her mind…

The night after that, she couldn’t remember any of her dream when she woke, except the ring of light around Lucilia’s lantern bouncing ahead of her down into the darkness. She lay awake, afraid of falling asleep again; she did not like where the dream was taking her. Once, and only once, her dream had gotten out of hand, and she had made up her mind to reset her adventure, imagining herself back at her desk rather than continuing her previous mission, and it had worked. She tried to do that again, but found herself spiraling again into the dark stairway. She closed her eyes and tried to reimagine her settings but Lucilia’s light touch and insistent voice, “We’re almost there,” wouldn’t go away.

She forgot to remember she was dreaming; she forgot the beginning of the riddles as she read their ends; her numbers in her calculations seemed to change when she de-focused; answers would jump into her mind after a period of time and she would punch them in, only mildly surprised that they were right.

Lucilia watched with satisfaction as Lucy struggled with a simple algebra word problem and got the wrong answer. Lucy pushed the door, finding it natural that it opened, oblivious to the fact that the door opened at Lucilia’s touch and that the keypad was just a decoy. She noticed the pencil marks Lucy left on the paper fade as soon as Lucy tossed it away and noticed the unused laptop lose power. The gradual process of taking her down to the bottommost dream plane was working out perfectly.

On the third night they arrived at the crypt. A huge fountain stood in the center, lit by a ring of twelve yellow submerged lights. Thin slivers of light, jolted by spray, joined these to the center. Tristan, in the image of the boy in Lucy’s art class who liked to pull her hair, was kneeling before the fountain, chanting indistinctly, a bright ball in his hand.

“Waru,” Lucy said, “Stop him!”

Waru jumped on Tristan’s face, causing him to yell and drop the stone in the fountain. It sank slowly towards the center.

“Quick, get it before it falls down the drain,” Lucilia yelled.

Lucy dove into the pool, having forgotten about the laptop still in her sweater pocket. Lucilia smiled as she climbed over fountain wall after her.

Pain knived through Lucy’s head. She suddenly realized that she was dreaming, but nothing had ever felt as concrete as the small ridges of stone at the bottom of the pool and the pain now threatening to split her head open. The water had drained away and the bright ball was nowhere to be seen. She looked up to see Lucilia pressing her hand against her head, immobilizing it against the drain opening. Lucilia’s hair formed a cylinder around her vision through which faint slivers of lantern light peeked through, framing the smirk stamped on Lucilia’s face. Lucy was suddenly aware that her laptop had fallen out when she dove in, and was now irrevocably damaged. She remembered with crystal clarity that the answer to the last question should have been 95788, not 12345.

“Waru!” she shouted, and the fuzzy white and orange face peeked through the curtain of hair.

Waru clamped her paw on Lucy’s face, silencing her. Lucilia placed her hand on Lucy’s head, and Lucy gasped in horror as the hand went through. Something popped out and sent an electrical cascade of pain through her head. She felt like someone had put a large needle into her brain the wrong way in and was now pulling it out, splitting open her flesh as he did so.

Wake up, she thought, as Lucilia reached in with her other hand, sending another explosion of light through Lucy’s vision. In her mind, she saw a picture of tadpoles with bulbous, glowing yellow heads being pulled out of a head resting on a pillow, close by yet a world away.

“I’m sorry, there is no waking up for you anymore,” Lucilia said as the last one came free.

Lucilia dragged Lucy out of the fountain and forced her up. Waru sat on her shoulder, its eyes looking innocently at Lucy. Tristan was nowhere to be seen.

“I don’t understand! What’s going on?” she said in panic. “Waru, Lucilia betrayed us!”

“I’m afraid Waru isn’t on your side,” Lucilia said, turning to the cat. “Thank you for your help.”

Waru meowed and dissolved in a cloud of white and orange hair. Lucilia clamped Lucy’s hands behind her back and handcuffed them together, as Lucy wriggled helplessly. Lucilia pushed her towards a dark hallway and threw her in a cell.

“Sweet dreams,” Lucilia said as she vanished, leaving Lucy trapped in her dream-turned-reality.