



The jerked beef looked like a line of flags waving in the night breeze. Properly dried, those thin strips of meat would stay edible for months to come; right now, eating was the last thing on Annie's mind.

Going out west like this was a bit like having what her mother used to call a dreamin' dream. That was the nonsense phrase Katherine Harker had used to describe the experience not only of waking up within a dream, but also being able to control the dream's events.

Annie could remember only one true dreamin' dream of her own (in which she'd dressed all the male members of her family in scarlet frocks and had them perform the Virginia reel in a hurdy-gurdy house, much to the amusement of her mother and her many cousins, who stood looking on and stamping their feet appreciatively on the booze-stained boards).

She often had dreams of the other kind - the kind where she was out of control and at the mercy of events. A lot of these were good but those that were bad usually involved what her mother called the Snallygaster, an invisible serpent that would slither in through a window during the night and wreck the house while everybody slept. To defeat the Snallygaster - which was only an invisible old ghost after all, all you had to do was blow it away. Only in the dreams Annie just didn't seem to have any breath.

The Snallygaster dreams were scary. But they weren't dreamin' dreams.

Her mother had claimed to have dreamin' dreams all the time. And now Annie was having one of her own.

That line of jerked beef was an authentic touch. She'd seen beef hung out like that on many a wagon as it toiled its way out west. She'd liked the taste well enough then, if not the stringy texture, but here and now - she was pretty sure these replicas were laced with poison. She would look at them, and enjoy the memory of them, but she wouldn't eat.

And the wagon itself felt real enough, with its hard seats and tattered canvas awning. The ox and cow in the traces weren't the same animals she remembered from her own past, but they smelt strong enough to be real.

Other wagons were strung out before and behind hers, their sounds making the symphony of the trail: the clank of tools in the panniers, the creak of the axles, coughs from the drivers and stifled giggles from behind the uplifted sheets ...

'Annie?'

Every other detail sank into shadow as she heard the voice.

'Annie, sweetheart. It's time for your story.'

Mama!

Without warning she was there, filling the cramped wagon with her sweet mother-scent, embracing the daughter whose eyes were filling with tears, who was choking too much to speak, whose arms gripped her mother's neck with such ferocity that they were pressed gently away.

'My little dear, whatever's come over you? Settle down now, and hear a tale.'

The embrace, in the manner of dreams, transformed into the tight swaddle of her childhood bed. Her mother was still there, beyond the covers, close enough to love but not to touch. Annie tried to free her arms but the bedclothes bound them tight. As in a dreamin' dream she knew none of this was real, but the power to exercise her will just wasn't there.

'Lie back, sweetheart. Don't you struggle now. Don't want the Snallygaster to get you.'

Soft Mississippi tones. Oh, Mama!

In the sky the moon was full, filling the floor of the wagon with deep blue pools. Her mother's face was in shadow, invisible in the night.

'Now where did we get to? Oh yes, Rapunzel. Well she stayed in the tower a long time. Many, many years. Her hair grew mighty long in all that time, mighty long. Then, one day, a fine young prince rode through the forest and saw her at the window, plain as day and beautiful as night.

"Rapunzel," he cried, "let down your hair!"

And so Annie listened once more to the story that had always been her favourite, crying silent tears in the dream that was not a dream, crying as she listened to the sound of her dead mother's voice in a dreamscape that, though it didn't really exist, was only too real.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but when she woke her mother was gone. She was alone in the wagon. Only now the wagon was alone on the trail.

Darting to the rear she pushed aside the lines of beef and stared out into the blue-black of the night. The moon was high, its shadows short. Far to the north she could see a plume of dust: the rest of the wagon train. Low hills obscured the horizon; rocks jostled the wheels. She'd left the beaten track.

Jumping down from the wagon she trotted forward past the front wheels, easily outpacing the slow oxen.

'Whoa,' she said, tugging at the cow. It didn't respond, merely ambled on. The smell of the two beasts was both familiar and pungent; it, more than anything she could see or hear, made her believe in the scene.

Unable to stop them she hoisted herself on to the cow's back. A saddle had been made ready for her. Had it been there all the time? She couldn't recall.

But then this is only a dreamin' dream.

The saddle was cinched as tight as it would go but the cow's thick skin was loose on its bones. The swaying motion lulled Annie and she found herself wondering if it were possible to fall asleep inside a dream. And, if it were, whether or not she would dream the dream of a dream ...

The trail - for it was still a trail, however ill-maintained - began to rise. The moon was falling now, and the shadows of oxen and wagon stretched far ahead, leading them on up the incline.

Beside the trail ran a wide creek, chattering in the darkness. Its voice became a welcome companion to Annie until they parted company at a set of gentle falls, the creek heading north and the oxen continuing on west. The silence, for a while, was unbearable.

When the moon failed altogether, and with no sign yet of the dawn, the stars became brilliant. Annie looked up at them and cried. They were so beautiful. The night sky of Stone was devoid of stars, a vast and soulless wilderness. In many ways she'd grown to love that weird, tilted world, but when the night came there was really no competition.

She raised her hand and traced a path across the Milky Way, seized the Big Dipper and scooped herself a great draught of heaven.

They continued along the brows of hills, along elevated crests and scarps. Always the trail was the high place on land that was lifting higher and higher. They turned a bend and saw mountains but the skyline, indistinct in the meagre light, wasn't familiar. The geography was all wrong; suddenly she wasn't in Kansas any more.

The sound of the creek returned the instant they came around the corner, and as the oxen laboured up and over a steep ridge Annie saw it had become a torrent. It wasn't especially wide, but the water was fast-flowing and barred their way completely. They were nearer to the source and it was an angrier, swifter stream than before.

For the first time since she'd found herself on this dream-wagon, the oxen stopped walking. She climbed down from the cow, patted its neck and stepped forward. At the bank of the river she knelt, dipped her hands into the icy water. Something cut through her peripheral vision and she looked up in time to see a shooting star sear the spattered blanket of the sky.

Night dragon, she thought. The slash of light disappeared round the curve of the world. She imagined it bouncing clear of the atmosphere again and flying free, still burning, burning ...

She raised her cupped hands to her lips, and was about to drink when she heard voices whispering in the water.

... light ... moon ... name ... sun ...

While the water drained from between her fingers she stared entranced at the delicate dance of the starlight on the froth of the river. She thought there were two voices, entwined like ivy. Or maybe it was only the water, fooling her ears.

... sun ... name ... moon ... light ...

The more she strained the less she could hear. Soon the words were lost altogether in the river's babble. She stood up again, wiping her hands against her skirt; somehow she knew the water, like the jerked beef, had been poisoned.

Dawn was still some way off but behind her the starry sky was beginning to lose its opulence. To the west the mountains were solidifying out of the darkness, a long, buckled spine of shadow rising like an ancient defence. Cut through the middle of the range was a steep-sided notch, a high valley through which the trail she was on would inevitably lead.

A mountain pass.

The river proved shallow enough to ford. Sure-footed, the oxen drew the wagon safely across, with Annie walking beside them. Once she slipped and nearly fell; thoughts of Archan's poison flowing over her face helped her keep hold of the saddle. Once across, she climbed back aboard the wagon.

Inside, waiting for her, was her mother.

'Mama!' she said, backing away. It was her mother's face all right, but ... 'Your eyes!'

'All the better to see you with, my dear,' purred Katherine Harker. She reached a hand towards her daughter's face.

Eyes of steel, thought Annie, staring into two round mirrors.

'Say what you need to say, Archan,' said Annie. 'I see through the disguise, so you may as well spit it out.'

Her mother smiled, revealing gleaming silver teeth.

'Oh, but my dear.' That voice, so familiar! 'Is that any way to talk to me, when I've come so far to see you?'

'It's all you'll get, you bitch!'

For a moment Annie thought she saw her mother's real face behind this cheap replica. She flinched, half-believing it was real and that she'd as good as slapped her own mother on the cheek.

She'll lose her temper now, she thought, knowing the dragon of old. But the dragon didn't. Instead she moulded Katherine Harker's features into a dazzling smile. The voice however was ancient and cruel, and impossible to mistake.

'Oh my dear, you have found strength! How amusing! That a faery should think itself capable of fortitude when it is barely even real! Even in its prime your species was nothing but a notion adrift on the breeze, an aethereal fancy made solid only once every hundred years. And in recent ages what have your kind - you men - done but grub in the soil and build monuments to yourselves? The basilisks soon discovered the folly of architecture - what is Stone but the greatest folly of all? - but you have surpassed even them with your love of making. The soil enslaved you long ago, and the soil is where you look ever and always. Fitting it is that the soil is where you all return, at the end of your pitiful days.'

'And you are different, Archan?'

'You need to ask me this? You dare? I, the last of the dragons - an immortal dragon who looks not merely to the sky but beyond it? Not only will I outlive you, faery - I will out-be you! So tell me, knowing all this, do you still feel strong?'

'Strong enough for you.'

The wagon lurched. Katherine hissed like a snake and lunged at Annie, who caught her mother's wrists in her hands. Their faces pressed together; this close, the breath spilling from between those shining teeth was thick and foul-smelling. The skull beneath Katherine's fine skin flashed red. Annie tightened her grip, forcing herself to watch the pain flicker in her mother's brow. The inhuman metal of Katherine's eyes clouded a little. Annie clenched her hands, wincing as her Katherine's wristbones grated together.

'You cannot defeat me,' came the growl from her mother's mouth.

'Maybe not,' replied Annie. Her voice was steady now, still and cold. The pre-dawn sky was bright behind Katherine's head; it looked as though her hair was glowing. 'Not here at least. I might have you in my hands, Archan, but you're still a mighty long way away.'

'Ah,' Katherine said, 'but I'm gettin' closer all the time, girl!'

Annie could actually see her breath now, thin red streamers falling from her lips like trails of blood.

'We've met like this before, Archan. Twice. You got anything new to say?'

'I have plenty to say, faery! Tell me: do you remember the first time you dreamed of me?'

Annie shuddered, her confidence wavering. Archan stabbed Katherine's fingers towards her captor's throat; Annie drew back, but didn't let go.

She did indeed remember that first dreamin' dream, only too well. It had risen without warning in the middle of one of Stone's dead black nights, a

short and dreadful nightmare in which she had seen Archan's face plunging towards her out of the darkness like a steam locomotive.

At the last moment the apparition had slammed to a halt ... and transformed into the face of her mother. The likeness was perfect, except for the teeth, which were the evil serpent's silver fangs.

'Hello, my dear,' her mother had said, stabbing at her with a long forked tongue. 'I'm back!'

The dream had spanned only a few seconds, or so it seemed to Annie when she woke up, sweating and clutching at Jonah. Now, looking back, it seemed to her it might have lasted for hours.

'Oh Jonah!' she'd blurted. 'Oh shit, Jonah - it was her!' And at once Jonah had known who she meant.

The second dream had been longer, but although Archan had tried rather harder to frighten Annie again somehow it had the opposite effect. The scares were cheap and ultimately unconvincing. Annie had emerged from this second dreamin' dream not cowed but invigorated.

She'd been stumbling alone through a field of sharp, volcanic rocks, tracking something she could not see. Suddenly she'd come upon a gibbet sticking straight up out of the pumice. From a crudely knotted rope swung the body of her mother. The rope creaked, and Annie heard the scuttling of the mice nesting in her mother's clothes. The corpse's eyes clicked open, flashing silver, and the lips peeled back to reveal those same needle-teeth. Katherine croaked, her breath like rust.

'Get a new act, Archan,' Annie had said. The words seemed to buoy her up, tangible things in the damp air. 'This one's gettin' a mite predictable.'

Katherine's face scowled.

'Brought you a message, girl,' said Katherine's voice.

'Spit it out.'

'I will spit you out, when I have eaten you whole and split your bones to powder!'

'This is my dream, bitch, not yours. What's the message?'

The body rotated completely around. The head remained motionless as it did so. Annie tried to ignore the sound of her mother's vertebrae being torn apart.

'You might have locked me out of this world but I have found my way into another. What's more, there is place - a very special place - where these two worlds meet. A crossing point, if you like, a place to pass. And I am going there - in fact, I am already on my way. But what I would really like is for you to be there too. And Jonah, of course. In fact, you could bring along all your friends. It could be quite a reunion. A very brief one, of course ...'

'What is this place? Where is it?'

Katherine's head, the neck to which it was now only loosely attached creaking like a storm-bent tree, tilted up towards the blue-grey sky.

'Up there,' she grated. 'The summit of Stone. The place where ... where ...'

With a hideous ripping sound Katherine's body detached from its head and bounced on to the pumice. Sharp volcanic shards slashed a hundred cuts into its skin. Annie watched with cold detachment as her mother's disembodied head waltzed on the end of the rope.

'We'll be there, Archan,' she said as the silver eyes turned first cloudy then black. Dark blood dripped like tears. 'If you want a showdown then you got yourself one, sure as shit falls off a shovel!'

It was this second dream that had really fired Jonah's imagination.

'The very tip of Stone!' he proclaimed. 'The place where the future comes to an end! What did she call it? A crossing place?'

'It's a trap,' said Annie.

Jonah nodded. 'Of course. But also a final chance.'

* * *

Archan jerked in Annie's grip, jolting her mind back to the interior of the wagon and the reality of this dream.

'You dreamin', girl?' she cackled. 'That second time we were cut a little short, you might say. There was something I wanted to tell you about that special place up there.'

'Then say it and go. I'm sick of your games, Archan.'

Katherine's face pressed close, its eyes bulging. 'Oh, my dear, I have plenty more games, plenty a' play for a rainy day as dear ol' mama used to say!'

'Say it, if it's important!'

'Oh, it is important. The most important thing of all. And the one thing I forgot to tell you - its name.'

'Its name?'

'Yes. I believe you do not know a thing until you know its name. Names have power, Annie - you'd do well to remember that.'

'The top of the world, you said. That's where we're going.'

Behind Katherine's head the dawn came like an explosion, setting her hair ablaze. Far to the west the opposing flanks of the mountain pass flashed like flame.

'There,' Annie said, looking at the slash of sky flanked by indomitable stone. In this dream it might be a mountain pass, but in the waking world it was the very peak of Stone.

'That's right, my dear. Stone-tip and mountain track - the two things are one but they share the same name: Sunlight Pass. That's where we're headed, you and me and Jonah makes three. That's where we'll meet for real, at last and at the end.'

'Sunlight Pass,' repeated Annie and her mother melted into the air like the ghost she was.

* * *

S t o n e & S u n b y G r a h a m E d w a r d s

The ox and cow plodded on, drawing Annie and the wagon out into the west, up the first of the steep gradients leading to the sharp-edged notch in the mountain.

Heading out west towards Sunlight Pass.

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