

Dark Dreams

Chapter 1

“There might be some value in your theory, but the degree of its persistence could be better restrained. I expect it from them, but to have you wash yourself in the same watery ideal speaks of an unbefitting practice I wouldn’t try to perfect.”

The morning, by all convenience, was good, but the news was not, and Dessermene could feel it weighing down inside his head.

“It was first, and foremost, a thought, nothing more,” Risset quickly countered.

For all his smiles, he never struck her as being in a good mood.

“Every intention starts with the idleness of thought, so do not presume it of insignificance otherwise.”

Her arm slipped around his as she came up to stand beside him.

“A complacent city makes for an easy matter to attend, but that is where the Assemblage have mistakenly drawn the line inside their limited minds, and I felt the need to express this point, since you’ve yet to react in a meaningful way from our earlier conversations. It is a stretch by far to assume I’d share their views, or carry their considerations, but that does not mean I won’t entertain their contents, lest some spoken matter seeks to catch us unaware.”

She drew him window-wards.

“The Assemblage fear the bloodshed of Gravers will expand itself into a crisis they’re not ready to deal with, and because of it, they attach themselves to some tragic misunderstanding that they are somehow relatable to these people as if, it’s laughable to say, they cared. They coddle fear instead of stability, and by realizing as much, comes the surety of distinction between their goals and yours.”

“All valid reasoning, but there is more to this than disfavor come out to test me. I’ve spent a lot of time creating ripples, teetering on the edge of rationale, but perhaps a reckless hand dipped in impulsive fickleness would serve a more satisfied claim than the diversified horrors I’ve come to know.”

She loosed her grip as a messenger made entrance to approach them.

“Perhaps you’ve indulged too much in personal validation, and new ideas know not what to make of you. I would not hasten anything I wasn’t willing to chase.”

She inclined her head and left.

The messenger was about to speak when a waved hand saw her silenced.

“I know you wish to speak with me, but could you please refrain from invading the minds of the innocent to intrude upon conversations you have clearly not been welcomed to? I’ve enough concerns to go around than to reassure a missing memory in heads with nothing to hide.”

The messenger’s eyes fluttered for a moment before re-opening, as if for the first time, and found herself a shrinking figure in his presence.

“It is quite alright, you may leave,” he said as the surprised girl, fighting through embarrassed confusion, bowed and hurried away.

Every step doubled in imitation off walls he'd come to visit often, only to slink back to a moistened depth as humidity grew forth beneath him on sticky tendrils reaching for escape. A mossy landing at the stairwell's end disappeared to slick sounds hovering out of sight around a weak cone of light breached from an indistinct ceiling. It's hostile intent dissuaded any pre-emptory lingering from catching on, as the Suu-Ara were less than genial to uninvited guests blundering over foot and mouth to interrupt their constant tinkering.

"I'm here, so let's brighten up the place a little, shall we?"

The room grew vaster in its construction as spheres of ghostly light drifted into existence, startling the darkness to reveal a fixture of prolific research, eerily marked by agitated smoky liquids fighting alongside darkened shapes of fearful contemplation. Malformed rocky architecture provided an endless shelving disaster, while a substantial sheen fell upon every surface like a leak left untended, latching itself to saturated flora climbing around every fixture, lost of direction.

"We are well aware Dessermene," the voice claimed from multiple instances, "that you are not of a scientific mind, but we would like to iterate that our allowance of time does not run unending to your static reveries. Progress is not illusory, it is interactive."

A random flask found itself under the scrutiny of an imperial whiff.

"It's *Patriarch* to you, and if you would like to reference your concerns, I ask that you do it as one person, because you know it gives me a headache trying to follow your multiplied monologue."

"Very well," the disembodied voice conceded.

"As to your efforts," Dessermene remarked distractedly, "I'm sure my feeble praise and assurances concerning them do not need to be revisited innumerable, as by my recollection, was it not by your own admissive ethics, that dwelling on past achievements did not progress your present?"

He did not wait for an answer.

"The Mym are magnificent and have proven themselves capable and efficient, much like yourself, and for every improvement, they've become quite marvelous, so why should I be concerned?"

From an obscure alcove in the indeterminate space, stepped a young man carrying the view with a set of penetrating, translucent blue eyes, garbed in singular sleeve wraps attached to a choker, and a burgundy, leather-studded sarong. A bald head stole nothing from the attraction, but the lack of a mouth did offset the image a bit.

"Indeed, they are works of excellence, but I do have valid concerns about using the Ordained to achieve these results. Dissection is a considerable thing of curiosity, but discretion becomes all the more necessary as a self-imposed limitation, since we cannot recreate all that we take."

A memorable scent lured Dessermene's seeking fingers to an open container, from which he brought back a stained digit that he touched to his lips.

He exhaled slowly.

"That is why we have Averendes to see to it that whatever you might find, especially of the non-communicative type, stays withdrawn to your illicit tampering."

The young man moved forward dragging a low, worn hem to the heel, but of assured footing, no feet could be found.

“A hasty answer for a climatic advent. He is by every definition a simple man of simplistic character, and power is an abusive friend appealing to reach for greater heights. If he seeks to pursue in methods as we have, there could be much to lose.”

Dessermane purposefully crushed a bottle within his grasp, splaying its insides in an artistic display of mess, dripping upon the floor.

He looked from it to the Suu-Ara.

“Lose?” he asked casually. “What can ever be lost in a trade for something far greater, aside from finding its payment but a matter of mere inconvenience? You should already be privy to the stakes of losses, but much like broken glass, it can always be replaced – perhaps not with something of the same standard as before, but close enough to bear no argument against it.”

His hands found hold to friendship behind him.

“This scientific, perforation, if you will, conceived itself through you, so if there is some tangible fear or anxiety, it is clearly of your own making. You are far too thorough to anchor yourself with neurosis, unless, I am perhaps in line to find a revelation unwittingly forgotten by distraction...”

The lingering silence made no effort to react.

“Anything more?”

“A final word then, *Patriarch*. We have modified the Dissonant Lyre as you have requested, but we believe the pressure on the Mym is not an equitable exchange. It is relevant to push boundaries, and breaking them is unavoidable and sometimes necessary, but not when there are answers yet to subscribe. We have expanded many avenues with the latest batch, but I would not signify their end just yet.”

“You have done what I have asked and that is all that matters to me at the moment. I’m currently feeling inconclusive with what is to come, so expect to hear from me when I preside over my feelings to care.”

Dessermane’s swift departure left a thankful void, from which sprouted an abundant chorus of glowing stares reflecting curious consideration.

Clear water trailed itself a dotted line over ample curves to lift the stain of dirt and blood off her, revealing the marked skin beneath, while an audible disapproval made the effort all the more fun to laugh at.

“Elcyra!” a trill voice tethering the complaint, “There is a degree of modesty you could try to follow, and though there is no law that states public bathing in the fountain *is* forbidden, it does bear a certain level of common sense you don’t seem to have.”

“You only demand modesty Vissana because you have no fun with your own.”

A snigger to her left emboldened her cheekiness.

“If you find this all so amusing Alareya,” Vissana said haughtily, “then perhaps you too should join her since you smell like the back end of something nasty come to see the light of day.”

“Maybe I will,” she replied as a thick thread of black locks doused themselves underwater.

“How many was that today then?”

“Has it reached the stage where it suddenly matters?” Vissana asked with pursed lips.

“I’m sure murder can be meditative, but I’m not convincing myself that there’s time enough to satisfy everyone – the dead submit, the living seek rationale, and we seem to worry about our worth amongst it all.”

A silver-handled dagger suddenly embedded itself in an invasive spray of water a few inches from her feet, followed by a self-confident laugh filled with contrived humor.

The voice attached to it was no better.

“A struggling conflict of purpose matched against pride for a creature clearly unfamiliar with its own relevance. I have trouble deciding whether I should find that endearing or sad.”

He was a reasonably well-built young man, slightly effeminate, but arrogantly Paethianistic, skirted by two side-standing fools preened for practiced assuredness.

“Whores do not become this elegant city, and yet you pander it blatantly with an official air that does not breathe easily, and is more inclined to breed symptoms of nausea.”

Not fully original, but trying hard to be nonetheless.

Vissana and Alareya stood quietly mindful as the bubbling water dazzled a misty rainbow.

“So mute and silent,”

He was starting...

“Trained, but slightly wild,”

to become...

“A leashed animal, obedient, but dirty.”

a nuisance.

Elcyra stepped forward assertively, slowly wringing out the touch of cold from her red ombre hair that had run shivers of incentive to her most sensitive of extremes.

“And so says the one to the other hoping his teeth to be the sharper bite. Walk away boy,” her voice lean on delicacy, “and I’ll let you keep your life to play the rich, enchanting house pet you value so much. You can parade your bloodline to the Patriarch as much as you qualify to do so, but I wouldn’t count an instant where it would work with me, *Eiven*. You are like a subservient side-rule of miniscule power, given just that little to keep you from interfering in affairs you clearly couldn’t swim in, let alone stand.”

A practiced swipe split through the nearby chatter of prying eyes, and drew the lightest shade of blush.

“You are a simple tool to serve the needs of Paethians across Ashfallei and nothing more than that! An overstated misuse of flesh that has no place in this world but to satisfy our ever-growing significance, and gradually fade and die like a lesser race comes to see its end.”

Elcyra no more turned her head than spoke to speech.

“Look at me when I speak to you insolent wench!” he raged in anger as he gripped her jaw, only to find that he had no place to hide from the dark smile returned his way.

Particles of compressed air violently separated themselves from the circular impact bored into his body where her wrist disappeared into his stomach, propelling him with swift destruction through the air into a solidified barrier of unexpected wall that cradled his crumpled frame – a slick slide into a heaped mass of irregular angles made for an upending meal.

A quick retraction of her right hand saw the second man shrink from the knees down to curved steel, but the third attack hovered a fatal frame away from the third man’s anxious face. Elcyra looked to Alareya, but before she could say anything they were surrounded by weapons cold of purpose and attached to men on edge.

“Release him his life and step back! We are not sanctioned to interfere in your matters, but any act against the citizenry, especially members of the Assemblage, is equivalent to treason as prescribed by the Patriarch’s Law.”

The guard purposefully moved his wavering weapon closer.

“There may be more than one murder come to find this day.”

Her threat hovered a while longer before slinking back in flesh like an old friend come home.

Thin, inch-wide straps of silver sprouted from a steel flower attached to her lower back, running the length of her nakedness from back to front, and up to cup from butt to breast.

“He’ll live, painfully, at least for a while, but I guarantee it would have been the shortest day of your life.”

Vissana and Alareya looked on as the city guard escorted her away, while the remaining few eyed them speculatively as they saw to the disfigured mess draped against the stone.

Up on the highest tier of Ashfallei, standing atop a balcony that accompanied the room housing the personal quarters of the Patriarch, Elcyra looked out over the vertical drop to see the gossiped peaks of the city below – a smoky mix of eggshell light and grizzle dark fixed atop a jagged range of glassy, saffron stone. However, the towering tips were comparative toys to the immense female edifice that loomed over the city, hands outstretched to support it from below. It felt like an immodest show of entitlement, but she could not deny that it was handily crafted. Below that, poured out a never-ending sea of magnolia-colored sand pitted with misshapen boulders against a fallen set of flayed hills.

A prickling sensitivity touched the back of her neck, announcing the Patriarch’s subtle approach. He produced a disarming charm of personality; an almost intoxicating allure that was difficult to resist when speaking to him, but she knew it to be a superficial attraction instilled by the sound of his voice. She had contemplated all manner of ways to cut and kill him, but his voice always found its way to her, and she always obeyed. Trivial, incessant thoughts were the only things she’d discovered so far to lessen the effects.

“It’s a shame that you cannot adapt to your surroundings when you’ve been given every freedom one could dream of,” he said offhandedly with no attempt at a simple greeting. “I should not, for any reason, allow such things as grotesque and unsightly as what happened today to disturb the peace, for I have *people* to address, and there is very little in justification to comprehend in favor of your actions. However,” he assessed her features with open consideration, “as in the way many things can be persuaded to be a different facet of itself while not changing its base distinction, I too can find that events leading up to today’s fracas as misguided misinformation.”

The Patriarch smiled widely, but Elcyra let leeway seize her sight.

“I have done as was told, and killed for reasons that are not my concern to justify,” she stated plainly, “but for these acts of which I do not empathize, it would have me wonder why so great a skill as mine is wasted on it? You do not torch a field, just to kill a weed, yet that is all I do. As long as you favor indifference to my inquiries, I feel these *misunderstandings* will pursue their course.”

He seemed almost amiable by her arrogance.

“Please, let us sit down,” he gestured to a nearby table. “A significant question I’ve perhaps left, too long, to interpretation.”

She obliged as he moved to do the same, but knew his graciousness to be a ruse for her affability – a call she could no more deny than to obey.

“First, let’s give precedence to your reason for being here in the first place. Antagonizing a sleeping beast you have no intention to fight is pure idiocy. I’ve reached a reasonably settled ‘peace,’ if you will, with the Assemblage, yet having you make sport of Corderant Gasciden’s son teethes a slow grind to a bite. His warped ministrations of you are clearly directed to me, so when you stumble, *I* fall. Whatever sick fascination takes to comfort him you will, herewith, endure, because frivolous flesh I can fix, but compounded distrust is a layered fruit I have no time to peel.”

Regret was always a belated answer to a question Elcyra kept forgetting to ask.

“Now,” he turned topic, “there is much that I would have from you, but I believe it is comparable to that which I give. You speak of purpose, but for the *duty* given to you, I sense we diverge upon the true meaning of what stands to fault in your eyes, correct?”

She nodded.

“There is a must for superior accomplishments, or at the least, a decent amount of blood to trail your passing into remembrance. We value the simple things, you and I, though we are an entirely different complement to each other.”

An odd statement, but she betrayed her resistance to listen.

“Tomorrow marks another day in service to me and the needs of Ashfallei, but as you’ve already persevered to prove, it is all but another passing to the next predictable moment as circumference to a loop. Now, if you cut that loop at any given place, it becomes nothing more than a straight line with an indiscernible start and finish, but sometimes, that is exactly where you want to be. However, none of it matters without that first step, not so?”

She nodded, but could already feel something amiss.

“Gravers serve to labor as befits the requirements of food or construction, or menial tasks out of hand, but they are nothing beyond that – beasts of burden with words and emotions articulated to be of use, ensuring the expediency of necessary work. We’ve grown substantially, in part to them, but slowly their insinuations become a more realized grievance for compensation, as if we had stolen from them; so we give. Yet, when gifts are no longer given, but asked for, it becomes charity – and to be charitable under threat,” he said smoothly, “requires an adjustable reconsideration. Sometimes, the end is where everything starts, so my proposition is relatable to the cut I mentioned earlier; but it’s a deep one. Deep enough to bury every breath as crosses your blade for not understanding the difference. Life is *full* of hard lessons; some we never truly come back from.”

He grew quiet and waited, then looked at her levelly.

“I cannot advise you if your thoughts are not made audible.”

“Gravers are only what you have made them to be, yet now you view them to be mistakes in need of fixing by methods too extreme for reason. I do not see how compensation equates to death for an agreement of mutual beneficence. Is it fair to pursue violence as a prominent solution for simple dissatisfaction, which if suitably addressed, should remove the problem entirely?”

“That’s a very subjective way of looking at it, and all the more surprising to hear it coming from you. I’m sure their aggressiveness towards you has not gone by unnoticed?”

“It stands to reason for what I’ve done.”

“As it does to what I’ve done,” he said a little more acutely. “They’re a volatile sort, and if I do not expend as fits such severity, then we can all but count the hours before things escalate. I still see vagueness where there should be none. You sought a purpose, and so I’ve given you one to resolve this internal conflict of reasoning you find so inescapable. Perhaps it’s a little more difficult than you were expecting, but it is answerable, and you’re the one carrying the scissor.”

His face was just that little darker around the edges.

“I’ve heard enough that I will not bring it up again.”

It was all she was willing to offer, as further call into the matter would probably be seen as a provocation – one thing among many the Patriarch did not appreciate.

“Then let us consider this matter settled. For *now* however, come closer,” he beamed with disarming charm.

Elcyra moved forward then doubled-over as she found herself on her knees gasping for air with her hair tightly clenched in his hand.

“You acted out as my right hand, and now I’ll have to reign you in with my left. Sometimes, a flaw can be found to elevate a thing of beauty beyond its limitations,” he said as her face grudgingly, yet unavoidably, turned to the side.

Amid the subdued defiance, a dark shade grew out its presence. There was more than a simple breeze come in through the window, but it lurked its way to a strangled snarl as it watched with twitching idleness, before slipping away.

“Provoking the Patriarch seems like a cumulative rash growing into a sore that no salve can fix, and though I know it not to be a display of arrogance, mostly, it is difficult to try and construct similar thoughts as she possesses for behavior I think does not serve the purpose of what she thought to make of it.”

The reflective desire in the mirror wore a cautious frown.

“She wants a visible reaction, like a reflex that cannot be faked, so she keeps pushing. We’d probably be fools for trying to get in the way of that.”

The door swung open silently as Elcyra stepped in.

“I’d prefer you criticize me in presence as opposed to the low murmur that generally follows after me like bad habits caught hard on addiction.”

“So what did he have to say then?” Alareya poked before turning and catching the unsteady shape faltered into her hands.

A chair caught to seat her as hands held her broken frame aloft.

“He doesn’t *say* anything,” she coughed through a bitter grin. “He declares and poses rhetoric with hardly a seam to offer up opportunity for disagreement. I’m sure we’re all his pretty little monsters come out the cupboard, but only in relevance to his need. He fancies a war would somehow save us, so the slaughter will continue, and when the scale of blame comes,” her look aflame with scorn, “we’ll be there to carry it.”

Anxious faces searched for meritable dispute.

“I suppose a scared enemy doesn’t have time to think of anything else,” Vissana fiddled with a dampened cloth and sense of irony, “but for the effort of trying, he’s foreseeably avoiding handling it another way on principle. We’ve discouraged a fair share of contention by

avoiding most people in general, but today's incident no doubt incurred a distinctive miscarried courtesy from Eiven's family."

Elcyra waved a comforting caress from her face.

"Dessermene should find it within his realm to influence a gainful bargain, besides, the Paethians are more than aware not to antagonize us, but some feel they're above such warnings, so it falls to me to remind them why that is."

Elcyra forced her way to a simple cot centered against the wall of the large room supplied to them. It was a habitable space without excess, unlike the people around them doused in their obsession for frivolous status – something she actively chose to disregard, like her modesty. It was unexpected and deviant, and altogether pleasurable to watch the squeamish cringe with distressed sensibility. If she wasn't being defiant, it made her compliant, and that was a dangerous notion to nurture.

"We're supposed to be subservient, not stupid," she added.

It seemed like a discussion about what had transpired failed to elicit itself in Elcyra.

"Valthoth's Deluge is tomorrow," Alareya intruded, realizing futility had won the room, "and that may well preoccupy them enough to forget it just that *tiny* bit. Speaking to Dessermene beforehand, even if not by choice, should alleviate any immediate response, but I wouldn't make any long-term bets just yet."

"I've heard nothing outside, and we haven't had any unexpected guests, along with the fact that Elcyra was not detained beyond a personal reprimand, so let's consider it a fortunate conclusion and get some rest. Tomorrow will look better, if only because I can avoid your faces for a good few hours."

Vissana drew a curtain around her as she took off her robe and climbed into bed.

"I guess our maiden needs her beauty sleep; wrapped up in hopefulness she'll not have aged for the worst, come the morning," Alareya mocked.

"At least I still get to have one, because it's more than obvious that such things are entirely wasted on you."

Vissana waited, then smiled deviously as smug silence heard her out, only to find a surprisingly hefty weight land on her a few seconds later as Alareya pounced on top of her. While the two of them danced a silhouetted affair of struggled outcry, Elcyra drew in her thoughts of the Patriarch's words, formulating valid reasoning where there shouldn't be conflict of one at all.

Her split lip tugged a weary wince.

Why should she argue the validity of a concept proposed by a man she didn't trust, and would she be able to disagree with the darkest improbability while secretly reinforcing it for lack of a better offer? There was no easy self-assurance with murder held in hand.

She cupped her head as it poured with heavy thought.

She could play at being someone else's reflection, but it could not take away the sharp ridges behind it; they would stay hidden, and pity the soul that brought them out.