

Did you sleep?

“**D**id you sleep?”

Slow eyes rolled to meet mine, then slid away again.

“No,” the baby replied. “I didn’t.” She’d clearly given it some thought - as though she’d been considering ways to broach the subject in the most politic fashion, then finally settled for the direct approach.

“Really? Why not, sweetheart?”

“Bad dreams,” she said solemnly, her large blue eyes scanning the breakfast table like she was watching for an insects' version of the second coming, or some medieval battle to be played out by arachnid battle formations in glittering armour, pennants flying.

“No good,” I said gravely. It was earnestness in solidarity while I think of ways I can jolly her along. Hero daddy mode is kicking in. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No, Daddy, I don’t.”

We pause for a beat or two.

“Oh. Why not, sweetpea?”

“Because it was pure evil, Daddy, and I don't want you to

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catch it.”

I watch her for a moment – her gorgeous, innocent blue baby eyes, her large cheeks – stunned.

Where had the baby learned about evil? Did she even know what it meant? I decided to probe.

“Who told you about *evil*, sweetie?”

She shook her head emphatically, sending her mid-length, light-brown baby hair flying in little streamers of baby earnestness.

“I can't tell you, Daddy.”

Concerned now - hero daddy is at risk of being replaced; worried, guilty daddy is suddenly waiting for his interview, resume clutched tightly in hand. Who has been filling the baby's sweet head?

“Why not, sweet?”

The baby doesn't miss a beat. “Because it is pure evil, Daddy, and I don't want you to catch it.”

I'm thinking about this now - dwelling unhealthily, speculating like a fool. ‘*Is*’ pure evil? Not ‘*was*’ anymore? Security escorts hero daddy (roughly) to the door. Worried, guilty daddy gets an immediate start.

“Did – *it*, tell you that, sweetpea?”

“The dream?”

“Yes.”

“I can't tell you, Daddy.”

I stopped her – I knew the drill by now. I let her go out to play, and then sat there quietly for a while, thinking about her dream.

What did I know about dreams? What did I know other than what I had heard, the little slices of nightmare one reads about, as vague windows on a soul - pictures woven into a tapestry of illness of one kind or another - whorls on the sea of tortured thought - clouds against a sky of sickly mind.

But none of that was true.

I knew dreams. *Everybody did.*

They were things that came to you in the night, things that invaded your mind-life like a thief, bringing visions you can't protect yourself from - notions of hell and horror or heaven and delight. The ultimate spectator, you can only ever just ‘be’,

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merely existing within their vivid clutches, powerless, victim, bit-player on a stage of mind as pure insanity reigned and raged and twisted and turned.

I remembered something in particular I had heard once, that people often died at night, in the early hours of the morning - in the low time, the grey time, the lonely desolation of the dying night time, just before dawn. Did people really just die in their beds? Or did they die in that other place, the dream place – trapped forever in that horror-filled Tartarous of mind?

When I thought about that, I found myself acknowledge, in some small, dark corner of coherent thought, that we should all be afraid of our dreams. . .



That night I dreamed of the cat.

The dreamscape was of clouds and wind, bleak and blowing cold knives, as the thing swept over hills of rolling dark. A skeletal cat with eyes of green fire, its teeth gleamed from its fleshless face like little malevolent stars.

“We are your dream, Daddy,” the skeletal cat said as it came - the baby’s words, I vaguely registered. “We are evil, pure, ageless and forever. Will you catch us now?”

I tried to answer it, but terror took the words and I could only gasp as voice refused to come. The skeletal cat slowed, its bony haunches held low for the spring, its claws long and gleaming – menacing – deadly. It floated the last little way to close the gap between us. Its jaws gaped. Its vast wings spread open like leaves, torn and tattered.

“Are you ready now, *Daddy?*”

I woke suddenly, sitting bolt-upright in bed, as consciousness pulled the ripcord and tore me from sleep. A shape stood by the bed. *The cat – waiting for me.* But the figure wasn’t feline. It was the baby, I realised, standing there in the dark, watching, quietly waiting for me to register she was there.

“Baby?” My voice rasped in the moonlight, guttural-sounding, choked short.

“Bad dreams, Daddy,” she said in the quiet of the night,

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explaining her presence.

“Do you – want to tell me about it?”

“I can’t tell you, Daddy.”

Those words again.

“Why not, sweetheart?”

“Because I don’t want you to catch it,” she whispered, as though whatever ‘it’ was might overhear and thwart her plan.

The litany.

What had the cat said again?

The baby’s words from that morning, nothing more.

After holding her for a while, I put her back to bed. She was willing to go then, unafraid. *Only dreams*. . . I still don’t really understand why I didn’t just scoop her up and put her in bed there beside me. We could have slept through the night together that way, comforting each other against the night, protecting each other.

I heard her talking, after I had kissed her goodnight and put myself back to bed. I heard her muttering against coming sleep.

“Will you stop it?” she said softly.

I lay there, unmoving, listening.

“*Can* you stop it?”

“I will try,” she said then, her voice suddenly deeper, a baby-like parody of an answer from dream – but not dream. “My name is Augustus Litvinus Octavius. Praetorian. Descended of the eleven families, protector of the Western approaches, last of the survivors of the campaigns of Marcellus Artorio Galamus,” her little voice spoke out clearly in the night. “And *I* will try for you.”

“Try for me,” she said in her own voice then, and then said no more as sleep finally took her.

Augustus Litvinus Octavius would be her protector tonight.

I drifted off then, thinking no more of what she had said. They were impossible words no baby would utter, had I *really* thought. That night, though, they were not strange. For one night only, as the dream taught me now, nothing was strange anymore.



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The dreamscape arrived like a trap: desolate, blowing, cold. The skeletal cat was waiting for me.

“Did you listen, Daddy?” it whispered, mocking me again. “Did you hear?”

I could not reply. There were no words. I watched its knife-like claws tap a tattoo on the barren earth. Pits formed where the tips struck the ground, and fluid welled there, staining its talons red.

“Time to catch us, Daddy.” Its wings unfurled, leathern sails beating in the dream-wind as it suddenly sprang high.

Gaping jaws, flashing eyes. . .

I closed my dream eyes. I opened them again as a dream gust buffeted me. The skeletal cat was gone.

“Damn you, *Praetorian!*” the cat’s voice screamed, distorted, rage-filled. “Did the Aeolians teach you *nothing* of hell?”

“Eat my steel, *dam-ned cat!*” a voice boomed in the dream night. “And the curs-ed Aeolians *be damned as well!*”

A long scream filled the night, but not of pain – of rage and fury and steel on steel, as far away, two dream creatures closed for the struggle.

Up on the ridge, a throng had appeared, ringing the cold bleak dream-like hills, watching from the darkness, as the two nightmares fought, their eyes hovering in their skulls like dim, grey bulbs.

Silent witnesses to the mortal combat of dreams.

Of those two, though, there was little but a blur now – flashing steel glinting as the *Praetorian’s* sword whirled like a propeller, as the skeletal cat hovered and darted, its forepaws outstretched for the strike, but beaten back each time by the *Praetorian’s* flying steel.

The dark throng applauded then, subdued, respectful, as one or the other of the two performed some feat of combat I had missed. The thronging ones were somehow closer now, and I could see them clearly: some cowed, some naked, some tall and willowy, their unnaturally long limbs held quietly by their sides; others squat and misshapen, tortured; the elfish, the dwarfish, the demonic, the animal, all of them of the nightmarish - the populace of dream, come to watch the nightmare fight.

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But fight for what?

“For you, Daddy,” the baby’s voice answered.

She was standing beside me now, in my dream, watching the scene quietly.

For me?

“For you.”

Why?

“Because I did not want you to catch it.”

We fell silent as the skeletal cat suddenly shot up into the sky, beaten off, but not for long.

“I see your lectors, *Praetorian*,” it screamed from high above.

From far below, the armoured figure yelled back. “And I see your back, foul *cat*.” He spat the word like it was a mouthful of dust. He held a shield now. Scored and pitted, one whole quarter of it had been torn away. His helm was beaten and dull, his sword notched and battered. “Bring your wings down to me, filth cat, or be *dam-ned*.”

But the skeletal cat merely hovered above him, circling slowly, beating its tattered, leathern wings, spitting great gobbets at the dream throng every now and again.

Can dreams kill each other? I wondered dimly.

“They can, Daddy,” the baby answered. “They do.”

We both fell silent again as another voice called to the skeletal cat, from somewhere far away, behind the hills.

The dream throng seemed to fall respectfully silent again – or was it fear that drove the voices from their throats.

“You know it, Belial Sutol,” the voice thrummed. “Felid one. The host is called. Have at it, or be gone back from whence you came.”

In reply, the skeletal cat’s jaws opened wide, huge now, its teeth seeming to grow into vast scythes as it shrieked once again. It spun, screaming, and then dove, a blur of white and brilliant green as it plunged onto the lonely figure of the *Praetorian* – the baby’s dream champion: *Augustus Litvinus Octavius, descendent of the eleven families, protector of the Western approaches, last of the survivors of the campaigns of Marcellus Artorio Galamus*. . .

For the second time that night, the drogue chute of sanity flew

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open.

Wrenched from sleep, bolt-upright again, bathed in cold sweat, still in darkness - no moonlight now. Dawn was coming. The baby is there again. I can see her face this time in the half-light, her eyes welling with tears.

“Sweetheart,” I said, holding my arms out to her. She rushed into them. “Bad dreams again?”

She nodded.

“Me, too,” I said.

She looked up at me sharply.

“Oh, Daddy!” she hissed, eyes round with sudden horror. “You didn’t!”

“Catch it?” I said. “No sweetheart.” I chuckled softly. “You can’t *catch* a dream.”

She slowly shook her head. “Not the dream, Daddy. It was never the dream. It was the evil – the evil cat – pure, ageless and forever.”

A moment – a beat of time that felt like it lasted a life’s span – then the numbing mask of shock as I recognise the words.

From *my* dream. . .not hers.

“What did you dream?” I ask her for the last time. “You can tell me now.”

In my heart of hearts, though, I know what she is going to say. She holds me tighter at the recollection, as tight as she can. “I dreamed the cat, Daddy. I tried not to let you catch it, I really did. And the man in my dream said he would try, too. But then he caught it instead, and it made him - go away. And the others went in the hills and there was only the evil cat left, and it said it’s waiting for you now.”

The numbness again - *it had been the same dream. We had had it together.*

“What happens next?” I hear myself say, as though I’m listening from miles away.

She could only shake her baby head, the tears flowing freely, her little shoulders wracked with sobs. She didn’t reply.

We both knew.



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I wait now, the eighth day without sleep. I know I can't fight it any longer, as much as I'll still try. Tonight will be the night, I think. And I think of the baby's champion, Augustus. My champion, I've since realised, he's never been far from my thoughts.

Brave Praetorian to the last.

Remembering his final stand against the skeletal cat, the pure evil of all our dreams, I can only hope I do nearly as well. . .