

# The Dreaming

## Prologue: 10 Years Ago

My father once told me people used to dream. Visions stitched together by your brain just to play behind your eyelids like a projection. They can take you places you've never been, be memories with friends or family, morph the past and present together. Anything. Though you're completely unconscious, your lungs might burn or gasp if you fall, and your heart believes it all until you're jolted awake.

All I see is black. Nothingness.

I can't even imagine what it would be like to escape reality, where there was once a sun not covered by clouds, and ash wasn't constantly falling from the sky. To be able to lay your head down and see a different reality every night and for a moment, think you're living a different life. One with clean food and an ash-free house like ours after the hour I spent sweeping. But disease stripped us from everything, including these dreams. All anyone sees is black, unless you're one of the lucky few that do dream, and if you do, it's a one way ticket into Embermere.

I wipe my brow and set the broom to the side of our kitchen door to be used again later when someone inevitably walks through and brings in more ash. I turn around to set the table for breakfast when the kitchen door swings open and my mother hurries inside.

"Markos!" she shouts, soot trailing in from behind her. "Come quickly!" She smacks the side of the television until it turns on. When it does, the screen shows us the view from a sky camera as it flies over the battlement bordering Embermere. "Harper, set the table for breakfast!"

My father bursts through the door as something he calls a drone on the television soars over the inner city, over the wall built to separate us from them. The Purists, who walk in golden cloaks on cobblestone roads. Who, long ago, chose to save themselves from the devastation. The ones who ignored the petrified fists slamming against the wall.

“How do we know it’s real this time?” My father takes his seat as more ash blows in beneath his feet.

“They’ve already escorted the family into the kingdom. If it weren’t real, it wouldn’t have gone this far.” My mother faces me, my body frozen in place since she ran inside. “Sweep up this ash.”

I grab the broom again as my father asks, “Who’s the family? Where are they from?”

“No one knows yet, but they’ll be on screen any minute now.”

My father grunts, his eyes not leaving the blurry images on the screen. “It should be us.”

I position myself to see the camera panning the entire inner city, showing off every building untouched by ash and the privilege living within the walls.

“And they’ve ruined the Arts Wing. Look at that column grid, it doesn’t line up with anything. That balcony’s asking the frame to do something it was never designed to do. No wonder it sways,” Father said, looking at Mother, who nods while stirring our breakfast. “It’s not stable. What kind of Draftsman do they have? Children?”

I swivel my head to face him. I’m only eight years old, but I’ve been training to be a Draftsman since I could hold tools, having slept with them at night instead of a blanket.

The television buzzes, momentarily losing signal. Father jumps up and bangs the side of it until the picture returns. When the King chose someone else to draw up the plans to rebuild after the most recent attack, my father had thrown his tools at the television, breaking his favorite

hammer.

My mother shrieks, and I drop the broom. It crashes to the floor, but no one notices. This can't be good. Is the kingdom punishing us again? Delaying our long awaited entry to join them because we still aren't cured from Ashinosis despite religiously taking our mandated pill?

I chance a glance over my shoulder.

The drone flies inside the Palace, past the golden roofs gleaming in the morning sunlight with not a speck of ash on it and zooms in on four people, focusing in on two adults, hugging and crying next to a child. A child who was—

“Joehna!” Mother screams.

My mouth falls open, a heavy weight settling into my chest.

My best friend stands next to the king.

Mother's and Father's gaze shoots toward me, eyes drilling a hole into my soul. I step back, quivering.

“Did you know about this?” Father asks.

Words escape me, so I shake my head. Just yesterday we worked on a project as draftsmen apprentices. I reach down and pick at the dirt still wedged underneath my fingernails.

Father cocks his head, his brows knit together. “You didn't know? You spend every second together. You had to know!”

“I swear!” I breathe out. How could I? Dreaming isn't something we choose. If it was, we'd all be in Embermere by now. Dreaming chooses us. But that reality doesn't fix my heart sinking as the gravity of Joehna standing next to the King settles in my brain. No more walks to school together. No more working on projects or sneaking off to our hideout. He always manages to keep the gloom at bay. How am I supposed to do everything alone?

My father stands, marching toward me, his hand up.

“Markos,” Mother interrupts, and he freezes. “She couldn’t have known.”

My gaze shoots to my mother.

She blinks a few times before clearing her throat. “Go set the table for breakfast.”

They exchange a look before my father groans on the way back to his chair. Mother turns her back to me, and I set the table.

Over my shoulder, some lady with red hair piled on top of her head struts into view of the camera.

I’ve never seen red like hers before, bold and bright. Mother calls mine russet, sometimes red, sometimes brown depending on the lighting.

The announcer’s purple dress falls to the floor and puffs out around her legs. “We’re here today, live, in the kingdom, to welcome our newest family!” Though it was too early in the morning for her overly energized voice, it brings me out of the numbness of Joehna’s absence threatening to take over my body. “But before we share this ground-breaking news, I’ve just received word that the final member of The Black Hand has finally been imprisoned for his crimes against the peace and prosperity brought by Embermere. We can finally put an end to the heinous crimes performed by these extremists.”

While everyone on the screen erupts with cheers and shouts, I’m left wondering what this person did or why this group had such an odd name.

I lay out our plates and spot clean a few places of ash on our table as the announcer explains to everyone watching, which had to be the world’s entire civilization—at least what was left after the volcanic eruption—about the Dream Council. How in the middle of the night, Joehna’s parents had alerted them and they promptly arrived and moved Joehna’s entire family

into the Kingdom. Like they did with all the dreamers.

A figure in red padded armor comes into frame: a Sentinel, named for their near perfect aim. There was something inhuman about them, the way they moved. Like a machine. He handed Joehna's father a large pile of purple and gold clothes—a sign of royalty. I'm sure they will burn his gray, ash-ridden uniform after the celebration.

The redhead walks into view of the camera again. “And a special bonus, today also marks the 400th day of our first Dreamer!”

A picture of the first person who dreamed all those years ago appears on camera, and my parents exchange a look. They're going to sneak out past our town's curfew again. Something they've done my whole life, always assuming I didn't know, but they've never been that good at sweeping away the ash they let in.

Joehna and I would occasionally guess at what that man dreamed in our hideout. What threat he stopped or protected the kingdom from. Shortly after his dream, the kingdom rebuilt the wall taller and more impenetrable. Everyone on our side of it was made to wear gray. Basics, we called them. And that's what we were.

The announcer continued talking, something about how all remaining dreamers and extended family would receive new robes. I try to ignore it because nothing matters anymore now that Joehna's gone. It doesn't even look like he wants to be there with the fake smile he keeps flashing, the one that shows most of his teeth and his widened eyes. The cameras wouldn't be seeing his crinkled look, the smirk that only pulls up one side of his lips. Only I saw that one. Except, not anymore. His dream had left him with no choice. His entire life will now be different, and so would mine without him.

The screen goes black. My father grunts as he stands, throwing the remote into the

cushion. He kisses my mother and leaves the house without looking back. My mother's back still faces me as she tidies up the room. Except, I had just cleaned everything so there was nothing to do.

"Time for school, Harper."

"I don't want to go."

"Today is like any other day. Go get your things and leave."

My gaze drops to the floor, and I slump to my room to grab my bag. I want to stay in bed. The walls feel smaller, caving in around me. In every class, I couldn't stop looking at the empty chair Joehna should be sitting in. I would never leave my friends.

After school, I walk home in a daze, forgetting to sweep after coming inside. I set the table once again, and after a silent dinner, my father exchanges a look with my mother.

"Harper," she says. "Finish cleaning here and go straight to your room. It will be an early bed time tonight."

I glance between them, neither of them looking at me. Anger bubbles up within me. I'm sick of all of this. I spring up from my chair showing extra excitement for the task because this time, I wasn't staying behind, pretending not to notice the ash they'll bring in, or how their mood always improves the morning after they left. This time, I'm going to follow them.

It feels like hours before they leave, my skin itching with anticipation as I peer through a crack in my window shade. I wait until their silhouettes disappear into the ashfall before I throw on basics, including Mother's scarf to cover my mouth. I slip outside. Lanterns light the path, like floating beacons in a storm. Creeping along the dirt road leading into town, I pass pine trees where a mixture of earthy and citrus scents collide with bitter ash. A few houses still have lights on, surely about to turn off before the curfew makes them.

In town, streets are deserted. Only an idiot risks their health to sneak around. Last year, one of my classmates never returned to school because he'd inhaled so much ash and couldn't rid his system of it. Thankfully, my mother's scarf was built to withstand it. Everyone wears her style, and she made a business of making them after losing her job last year. Something my father seems to bring up a lot during times of scarce food. I often see her crying in her room.

Following my parents at a distance, I weave through dirt roads eventually coming up on the communal courtyard with the Center in view—my father's most prized creation as our city's head Draftsman. *This* is where they sneak off to for these meetings? I guess it makes sense because everything happens here. School, town meetings, and where everyone takes their pills daily. The ones that are supposed to cure us of Ashinosis.

Except, they don't go inside. They go around to the back, past the Sentinels standing guard. My heart rate quickens. I should go home and not risk getting caught and punished by the Sentinels, then later worse by Father. I let out a breath. I need to go. To see Joehna for the last time. Ever. Even if it's just on a screen.

My heart beats so fast, I'm scared the guards can hear it. When the Sentinels turn away, I make a run for it. I make it past the stone steps and check over my shoulders. No one's coming. I made it.

I wait until the patrol passes again before ducking into the same alleyway, but I'm met with a dead end and a dumpster. The buildings create an alcove where the only way out is the way I came. Where did they go? The surrounding stone brick walls hold no windows or doors. I lean against the dumpster, colliding with ash, which seemed fitting for my situation.

What was the point? What was I really doing outside at night, sneaking around, fighting against something outside my control. I slump to the ground as the realization that I couldn't

bring Joehna back hit me again.

I stand up to go home and instinctively shake the ash from my pants. But there's none. I check around the dumpster, ashfall gathering on all sides but not the ground, nearest to the stone wall. Streaks on the ground means the ash had been swept away. People had to clean ash from their roofs, their doorsteps, and inside their houses, but who would sweep a dead end back alleyway?

I follow the clean section up the stone wall and find a discolored stone brick at eye level—one only a Draftsmen would recognize.

A secret door.

I almost yelp with surprise. That's where they went. I take a deep breath and push on the stone. It gives, and a small section of wall opens with it. I rush in and close it behind me. A string of lights hang from the ceiling of a narrow brick staircase leading down into the ground. The temperature immediately drops and I remove the scarf, able to breathe without ash threatening to dive into my throat. My heart pounds with each step, not sure of what I'm going to find. The stairs end and a long musty hallway stretches out in front of me. The walls seem to close in around me the farther I go, as if they don't want me there. Before long, I come to a door on the left with light escaping underneath it from the room beyond. A shadow passes, and I stop, crouching down to listen.

A faint voice calls out, "Is there anyone else coming?"

Someone else answers, "No, the Monroes were the last ones."

My breathing hitches. I tiptoe past the door, turn a corner, and follow a switchback staircase up to a small room. Voices echo below me, and to my surprise, this room sits suspended above a larger room where people have gathered. Whoever built this place made enough space

for hundreds of people to fill it.

I instinctively glance at the door on the other side of the room, waiting for a Sentinel to kick it down and catch the crowd of people below, but they continue talking, likely waiting for Joehna's naturalization ceremony.

A loud booming voice speaks up, redirecting my attention. "Thank you all for arriving tonight. Soon the celebration will begin on the screen. Then we can resume our discussions." It comes from a regal looking man with long graying hair and a thick beard. I've seen him frequently talking with my father. He lost his right leg in a building collapse over a decade ago which left him in a wheelchair. I assume Father was involved because he always got silent anytime I asked.

A noise sounds behind me, and a projector machine lights up. I let out a small gasp, then cover my mouth, hoping I didn't give my position away. The machine casts a light through the window and onto a wall in the larger room below, displaying the party happening inside the kingdom.

Immediately, I spot Joehna. His father's hand sits on his shoulder like he had left it there all day. But the same cheeky grin spreads across Joehna's face. Although it's fake, it's the only thing I recognize about him. His normally brown hair is streaked with gold and slicked completely back. Gold glitter covers his cheeks, making his brown skin glow. The camera zooms in on him, so close, everyone can see his eyelash tips painted lavender, making the green in his hazel eyes come to life more than I've ever seen before.

My last image of Joehna is this?

Everyone sits on the floor, staring up at the wide screen. That same high-pitched voice from the red-headed woman speaks to the camera. "—And here we are with Joehna's family at

the Dreamer celebration. Tonight, we are not only celebrating his success as a dreamer,”—as if this is something he worked for— “but also the success of all of those before him, including Bes Gang, also with us tonight, who dreamed fifty years ago.”

While everyone claps and cheers on the screen, silence echoes below me.

The red-haired announcer holds up a glass of something. “To the dream of each dreamer that changed the course of history as we know it.” Her lilac dress contains lace covering the entire bodice, sparkling through the sweetheart neckline and down to the ruffled bottom. It flows freely down to the floor with gold specs throughout the bodice. She speaks the name of every dreamer before Joehna, but when she says his name, the crowd erupts into another round of clapping. He walks onto the stage next to the only other living dreamer, Bes Gang, who matches the paintings hanging in our school building. He must be over a hundred years old.

The camera zooms out over the strings of lights creating a web around the city’s center above the stage. It then flashes back to the red-haired woman who gave a monologue filled with dramatic pauses. I zone out until she says “King,” then a man strides to the microphone clearly hiding a limp. It isn’t hard to see the crutch he’s hiding under his golden robe. A little, timid boy follows behind.

“Thank you, Pandora, for being our spokesperson of the night and helping us remember the names that have changed our history, giving a chance at success in our Kingdom. Each dream has been unique, foretelling us of something that would have been detrimental if not for our dreamers. We are forever in their debt, and we rejoice in their families joining us.” After a small round of applause, he continues. “This furthers our Dream Council’s nutrition guidelines. Our pills have created a healthier lifestyle for all, shielding internal organs from ash, and giving select individuals this rare power to dream and prevent harm to the Kingdom. We are constantly seeing

improvements made to these pills, and now that we've seen success from our newest version, we will now be taking the pills twice a day."

People murmur below. Mixtures of hope, confusion, and anger spread across the many faces in this room.

"We believe this effort will finally eradicate Ashinosis. My kingdom of Embermere looks forward to welcoming all once we rid the land of it." The King holds up his hand, immediately silencing the crowd. "It is not common that a King should have the privilege and honor to produce two dreamers during his rule. The future I will leave my grandson one day is better than it ever could be thanks to Joehna." He pats his grandson's back, catching him off guard, but he quickly regains composure. "Now, let us continue this celebration of our newest member."

Another noise sounds behind me and the screen turns off. I'm guessing no one cares to watch the Purists drink and eat more food than they know what to do with. Especially since our food comes from trade or the rare animal unaffected by ash we find to kill. Some families barely survive out here.

That same booming voice from earlier speaks up. He wheels his chair over to the center of the room. "Our plan has been in the making for years and what happened today finally gave me the missing piece. A way to get into the kingdom. Our way." But his voice seems to drown out as my attention is brought elsewhere. Someone gets up and walks toward the back of the room.

My mother.

Suddenly my curfew jumps back into my head. I backpedal and run down the stairs, blasting through the hallway leading back to the secret entrance. My heartbeat mirrors my pounding feet. Without looking back, I find the brick and press it. I don't hear the door creak, so

I hope she doesn't see me.

I hurry through the same path home, though not as careful as coming out here. I'm too nervous to care. By this point, lights are out in all the houses and the patrol has gone through here. I don't think about that as I run through the streets, heaving through my scarf, eyes dry with ash air.

At home, I brush the ash out of the house, covering my trail before practically flying into my room. I throw off my mother's scarf and jump into bed, pretending I was here the whole time. I try calming my breath waiting for her to return. Minutes later, she opens the door, and I'm thankful I sprinted home. Through a crack in my door, I notice she's alone. My father must still be there.

I'll never know what the older gentlemen ended up saying that night. And I never saw Joehna again. For ten years I've been alone, having to make new friends, continuing on my path to become a Draftsman. Ten years to the day since Joehna dreamed. Ten years to this morning, where I shoot out of bed, sweating.

I dreamed.