

I Think I'm Dreaming

The forest was dense and overgrown, a national park no longer cared for. Surrounded by police tape and signs saying “Keep out”, it was the last trace of the Forests of Old.

With sweat beading on her forehead and a wild look in her eyes, Alexandra Mara, a teacher of Scandinavian and other forgotten languages, hurried into what was left of Old London National Park. She tore through police barriers and charged past Access Prohibited signs.

Her left hand was clutching a journal to her chest. *Classrooms have eyes, forests have eyes, houses and streetlamps and bathrooms have eyes.* She glanced from side to side as she dashed further into the forest.

They know I see it, she thought. *They heard the kid ask questions, they know I believe.* Her ears were filled with the familiar drone of the health and productivity bots. It had never sounded so threatening before, and this time it was coming for her.

She dodged the tree branches and dry, dead roots on the ground, all whilst holding on to the journal inside her jacket. Her Vice was glowing on her hand, a thousand dots of light that made up a screen, forming the words:

‘Please report to Health and Productivity Office for: Violation of Code.’

Should've just told her no, she thought to herself. *Should've just put the girl in her place, made it clear dreams are nothing but dangerous ideas.*

The canopy grew thick, shielding her from the sky. The drone of the bot faded, but Ms Mara knew it hadn't given up. For now, though, she was safe. She scrambled to her knees and with quick hands flung aside the pine needles covering the ground and dug a hole.

She took the book out from under her jacket. A deep red cover with a dark blue spine,

branded with the title “Hannah’s Dream Journal”. Ms Mara gave herself a moment before she threw it in the ground and covered it with the damp earth.

“I’m coming back for you,” she said. The faded drone of the bot was still circling above. She knew it was only waiting for that sudden mistake, one wrong move.

Not denying that dreams once existed, was the worst move of all. Telling her students that she believed in dreams, had got the government on her tail.

If I never stop running, they can’t catch me, she thought. I’ll dream them away.

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The class room was empty. Harper Randall had found her seat in the second furthest back row. The desk with a perfect view out of the little window

Suddenly something caught her eye outside. Normally, all she could see was the locked down entrance to the New London National Park, but today there was movement by the trees.

“Ms Mara?” Harper said as she saw her teacher come out of the forbidden woodlands. She looked feral. Her white trousers were dirty and her hair was loose and tangled with leaves and twigs.

Harper could hear the soothing sound of the Health and Productivity Bots. Ms Mara had heard it too, and for the first time in her life, Harper saw a teacher run. Teachers never ran. With 24 hours every day to spend at school, they never needed to. But Ms Mara did in that moment, and as soon as she left the cover of the trees, the Health and Productivity Bot swooped down.

A wave of relief flowed through Harper. Good thing the Bot is taking care of her, she

thought to herself as it stretched its long robotic arms towards Ms Mara.

Harper's breath hitched when she saw the Bot's arms curl around Ms Mara's body, squeezing tight and lifting her off the ground. Ms Mara's legs were flailing but the Bot gave another visible squeeze, and she stopped moving. She hung limply under the Bot as it flew higher up into the sky, quickly vanishing behind the clouds.

Harper didn't understand what she had just witnessed, but it left the hairs at the back of her neck on edge. Finally, the rest of the students started piling in, from other modules, from tests and exams. Harper gave a little wave, as Lydia walked through the door. Her jacket was hanging off her shoulders and she was balancing an orange smoothie on top of a pile of books. She smiled at Harper, but broke their eye contact to look down at her Vice. The Vice on Harper's hand beeped to life at that same moment, the small dots running out from the thin bracelet, forming the screen on the back of her hand. She pressed her thumb and ring finger together.

'(1) New Message', it said. All around her, she could see Vices light up.

'Class postponed. Await information.' Harper looked up from her Vice, just in time to see Lydia slump down in the chair next to her.

"Had to run so I wouldn't be late," she pouted. "24/7 school administration and they still can't get out messages in time." Harper just nodded. She wanted to tell Lydia about Ms Mara, when a man walked through the door.

"Who's that?" she asked Lydia, who looked up from her Vice and raised an eyebrow.

"Dunno," she said, narrowing her eyes to get a closer look. "But he's wearing a Health and Productivity badge. Maybe he's the *information* we're *awaiting*?" she said, voice mocking. Harper elbowed her in the side.

“I think something bad has happened, I just saw the weirdest thing and now Ms Mara isn’t in class,” she said to Lydia, before the man in front of the classroom raised his arm to silence the class. He had positioned himself in front of the board, right under one of the fluorescent lights. The bright light made his bald head shine and the shadows on his face deepen.

“I’m here from the Health and Productivity Department.” Lydia threw Harper a look that said *I told you so*.

“I have tragic news about your teacher, Ms Mara.” Harper could hear her heart in her ears, but none of the other students seemed to care yet. Some of them were fiddling with their Vices, small dots moving across hands, messages being passed from desk to desk. “Ms Mara was found dead in the prohibited part of the Old London National Park earlier today.”

Wait, what? Harper’s heart fell, the sound stopping in her ears, leaving her with a heavy silence. She looked at Lydia, who stared back, not knowing what to say. Harper’s hand shot in the air.

“Thankfully, our bots located and retrieved her quickly. This tragic accident is just another reminder of why what’s left of the forests should be left alone. They’re not productive in modern society, and they are dangerous to venture into.” His voice trailed off as he saw Harper’s raised hand.

“Yes?” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“But I saw Ms Mara just ten minutes ago,” she blurted, eyes wide, “she came running out of the woods!”

For a moment, the man’s smile hardened, his eyes narrowing, before his face was back in that sombre, understanding look.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” he said, “like I said, our bots found her in the woods.”

He looked at Harper, daring her to contradict him. “There is no way you could have seen her, Ms..?”

“Randall,” she answered, “I’m Harper Randall,” she shook her head and held her hands up, “and I’m sure I did, right out there!” She pointed at the little window on the wall.

The man looked at the window, then narrowed his eyes properly.

“Didn’t think they made school buildings with windows anymore,” he muttered before looking back at Harper. His eyes were cold.

“Harper Randall.” All his attention was on her, and the rest of the room joined him. Some had even got the cameras on their Vices out. “Even at the Health and Productivity Department we’ve heard about you.”

Now Harper narrowed her eyes. The man smirked, still not dropping his diplomatic air for the rest of the group. He broadened his shoulders.

“The girl who believes in dreams, right?” he said, raising his voice mockingly. He waved a lazy hand towards the small cameras on the wall above the board, the ones they were all aware of, but never gave much thought to. “We heard you ask Ms Mara some rather daring questions about sleep and dreams the other day, some questions we’d rather see unasked.” He pursed his lips and looked out at the rest of the room.

“Now,” he began, spreading his arms, “Ms Mara was a wonderful teacher, but when faced with difficult questions such as ‘is it true that people used to dream’ and ‘can we make humans sleep again’, Ms Mara did not give you any good answers. On the contrary, it sounded, to us at the Health and Productivity Department, like she was trying to raise some twisted hopes, that she wanted you to believe in sleep and dreams as more than long-gone myths.” He paused and looked out at everyone, met their eyes one by one. The silence in the room was electric.

“Humans haven’t been able to sleep for the last hundred years, and anyone wishing us back to the primitive age of sleeping away half our lives, must be delirious.” He caught Harper’s eyes with his again, kept them there, refused to let her go. “Dreams have always been a tool of the weak, a fool’s imaginings. We are better off without them,” he said. “We produce more, we are more aware of our surroundings, more chained to reality, when that reality can’t be interrupted by silly lies concocted by our own heads.”

Then he turned back to the room again. “Dreams have never existed, they are dangerous ideas created by rebels, to tempt young people to join their meaningless crusades.”

With one last chilling look at Harper, he nodded his head and left. Harper immediately turned to Lydia.

“Lydia,” she said, “I’m sure I saw Ms Mara right before you got into the class room.” She pointed out the little window. “She came running out of the forest and one of the bots got her.”

Lydia looked at her disapprovingly.

“One of the bots ‘got her’? You make it sound like they killed Ms Mara,” she said, before putting her hands on her hips. “The bots are only here to help.” Lydia quickly gathered her books and jacket off of the back of the chair. “You know I care about you,” she said, looking at Harper, “but I won’t get roped into your crazy dream delusions again.”

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As the sun had just set, the school grounds were abandoned. Harper’s hands were

clenched into fists as she ran. Above her head she could hear the drone of the bots again. They were never far away.

Was it my fault? she thought to herself. She knew she'd been asking the wrong questions, but with no sleep for almost a century, she didn't think her questions would be dangerous.

And now Ms Mara was gone. *But the bots are there to protect us*, Harper thought. She shook her head. It hurt with confusing thoughts. She willed her legs to run until she reached the edge of the forest where Ms Mara had been taken. In front of her, Old London National Park was bristling in a nervous April breeze.

Above her head, a bot had slowed to a halt. She'd always thought of them as flying carers, but now they felt threatening, watching her. *What had Ms Mara been doing in the forest? How bad could it have been for the bots to turn on her?* Harper needed answers. Suddenly, she felt something she hadn't felt since she was a child; a kick in the gut, a feeling telling her to do something. It was one of those feelings the adults always told her to suppress, not entertain. It willed her forwards, wanted her to enter the forest.

She could hear the bot whirring as it picked up speed, but it couldn't enter the forest like her. She ran. Her head was screaming at her, yelling that this was prohibited ground, but that feeling in her stomach willed her on. On her hand, the Vice was screaming at her; 'Violation of Code'.

If Ms Mara was in here, it was for something important. Thoughts raced through her head as she dodged dry branches *And it was my questions that got her in trouble.*

The bot never stopped droning overhead, but for now, Harper was safe within the trees. Suddenly, she came to a stop. She had no idea where she was, the green surrounding her was unfamiliar and the dim light of dusk made it difficult to see. Even though, she felt that

out here you wouldn't need any juice to keep you going, the colours would be enough, the smell of trees, the uneven ground would keep you alert.

Her eyes fell on a spot where the pine needles had been dug up. *If no one else has been here, Harper thought, then this has to be what she risked her life for.* She threw herself to the ground, desperation and determination apparent on her face.

Her fingers dug through wet dirt, but they didn't have to dig for long before she felt something under her fingertips. A journal. It hadn't been in there long, the moisture in the ground hadn't properly seeped into the pages yet. She lifted it out of the ground.

"'Hannah's Dream Journal'," she read on the cover, written in uneven hand writing. Her hands started to tremble. Still on the ground, she gently opened the cover and turned the first page.

'February 23rd: Slept well. Dreamt that I was in a hot air balloon. Soared above London and almost got the balloon caught on the top of the Shard. Balloon kept going up and up into the air, before I reached space and landed on a star. Had a picnic looking down at the earth.'

A dream journal. Wonderful imaginings of people's inner minds had played out while they were sleeping, an adventure Harper would never know.

She couldn't hear the bots overhead anymore, but knew she would soon be able to hear rustling in the trees, angry voices yelling. If they were willing to kill Ms Mara for this journal, then they wouldn't leave her in the forest with it alone.

She stayed on the ground and turned another page.

'February 27th: Trouble sleeping, stared at the ceiling for a couple of hours. Dreamt of the sea. Was on a boat in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight. Lay on my back and stared at the sky.'

Harper rubbed her eyes. The thought of staring at the ceiling for hours was unimaginable to her; self-reflection had always been frowned upon. Not working, not doing, only *thinking* was the worst thing anyone could do.

Harper widened her eyes as she noticed something else. Next to the story about the boat on the ocean, there was a note in a different hand, a hand she knew from marked assignments and messy white boards.

“Hallucinations match, saw endless ocean.” Harper put a finger on the writing, before noticing another note.

“Hallucinated myself flying above the trees.” She almost dropped the journal. Quickly she flipped through it, and on every page, she saw Ms Mara’s handwriting, frightened notes confirming she had seen dreams in secret hallucinations.

Harper could hear faint yells from the forest outskirts, heavy boots and smaller, more agile bots whirring in between the trees. She couldn’t stop flipping through the journal, though, and stayed on the forest floor, witnessing her teacher’s descent into dreams, into this madness accredited as myth.

She didn’t know how much time had passed, but she felt herself letting the forest in, felt the ants crawling over her legs, pine needles in her shoes, the damp of the ground seeping through her trousers. She let them. She knew the Departments were looking for her but she still didn’t move.

She could hear them closing in. The whirring became louder, the boots heavier, but Harper Randall had reached the last page of the journal. With awe, she let dirt-stained fingers glide over Ms Mara’s last note.

As quick bots reached her, she read her teacher’s words out loud, the words that had

gotten Ms Mara killed.

“I think I’m dreaming.”

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