

A Dream Sequestered

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Payton Anderson awoke from a fitful sleep. Still lying in bed, he opened his eyes to look around. He recognized his bedroom, but at the same time felt as though he were in some foreign place. It had the appearance of his room, but did not give him the usual sense of familiarity. Confused, he left his bedroom and walked toward the stairs that led to the first floor. As he walked downward, pausing between each step, he noticed that the strange feeling was still there. The entire house had the old familiar look, but none of the familiar feeling.

Payton recognized this feeling. At times, when sleeping over at a friend's house, he would wake up in the middle of the night and have no idea where he was. In the past, however, that feeling would subside immediately upon looking around and taking in his surroundings. This time, his surroundings offered no relief – his home felt like something out of a dream.

With each room that he entered, his state of confusion grew more intense. Nothing he looked at or touched brought him out of the dream-like state or made the house feel as it should.

“*Maybe I'm dreaming*”, he thought as he ambled toward the back door. Payton stopped and pinched himself - nothing. “*Ok, so maybe I'm awake and the house is dreaming.*” He smiled at the thought and kept walking. He was beginning to feel stupid.

When Payton touched the doorknob, he stopped in his tracks. Something felt terribly wrong, but he could not quite place it. After standing at the door for a moment, he looked at his reflection in the glass and saw something – though it had no distinct shape – dart past him toward the kitchen. Whirling around, he saw nothing there. He peered around the wall at the room where he thought the shapeless thing had gone, but saw nothing there either. Deciding that he was just paranoid, he returned to the back door.

Payton's sense of worry increased when he stepped outside and realized that his back yard was suffering from the same illness as the house. Even the air felt sick. The leaves clinging to the oak trees hung limp, not fluttering as they normally would in the night breeze. There *was* no breeze, he realized. Looking up, he saw that there were no stars in the sky. This in itself would not be a harrowing site, except for the fact that there were no clouds in the sky to obscure the twinkling dots of light – there simply were no stars.

Every hair on Payton's body stood on end when he heard the sound. From behind him, back toward the house, there was the distinct crackle and hiss of a match being struck. He whipped around, eyes bulging, and stared at the shadowed figure leaning against the brick wall.

Most of the man's body was a field of black, like a trench coat that did not flow naturally. It was almost two-dimensional. The features of his face were impossible to discern. Everything under the brim of his black hat danced with unnatural shadows as the man held a lit match near his face and puffed on a cigar.

Payton tried to speak, but nothing came out when he opened his mouth. All he could do was tremble in silence.

“Heya sport,” said the man in a deep, unnerving voice. Smoke billowed and swirled around his head as he spoke. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

Payton knew that he should be asking who the man was, but that is not the question that came out. “Where am I?” he asked. His voice squeaked, making it clear that he was not altogether calm.

“Definitely not in Kansas, Toto.” The man continued holding the lit match to the cigar even as the small flame made its way to his fingers. It did not seem to bother him in the least. “So listen – it’s obvious you’d make for some intriguing conversation, but I’m afraid we’re running out of time here.”

“Uh... What?” Payton sputtered.

“Like I said – intriguing. Anyway, here’s the gig. I need your help.” The man held up his hands in a gesture that was probably meant to be comforting. “I know, I know. You don’t even know me - and let’s just say you don’t want to. Not yet, anyway. It’s not your turn as long as you’re a good boy and don’t make a fuss.”

Payton sat down on the grass. Everything was spinning now and he felt as though he would fall over if he tried to remain standing. He looked up and saw the man lower the cigar from his face. Without the dull, red glow of the cigar, his face became a featureless pit of blackness.

“What are you talking about?” Payton asked. “If this is a dream, then go away. I don’t feel like playing along anymore. I want to wake up,” Tears began to well up in his bulging eyes.

“Hey, settle down, sport. I already told ya, it’s not your turn. There’s nothing to be afraid of. I just need your help.” The man returned the cigar to his mouth and blew out gray smoke that seemed to hang in the air as though time had stopped.

Payton was hugging himself now, trying not to shiver. “Who the hell are you?” he finally asked.

The man whistled. “Ah, that question. Yeah, that’s a tough one. Well, here’s the rub. I can’t tell you that directly, but I can give you a riddle. If you ever figure it out, congratulations – but there’s no door prize, so don’t kill yourself over it.”

He took another long drag from his cigar, but this time held it in for a moment. As he began speaking again, smoke billowed out in amounts that seemed impossible. It covered most of the yard as it seeped downward and hung just above the grass.

“On a feathery bed made by the gift I shed,
I awoke and hid from His sight.
But domain have I taken over lands forsaken;
Battle will I make against the Thief in the Night.”

Payton felt chilled to the bone. What was once stale air that clung with a sickly warmth to his skin had suddenly frozen, as though solid, around his body. It felt as though death had been woven into a net and cast about his shoulders.

“What? I don’t understand!” Payton shouted, feeling the fear grow inside him with each passing second. His breath turned to fog as he spoke. “I don’t care what you need. I want to wake up. You can’t make me stay here if this is a dream. It’s *my* dream!”

The dark figure shimmered as he burst into laughter. “Sport, if you had any control of the situation, I wouldn’t have gotten in here to start with. I’m here because you have a weakness. The door I walked through wasn’t opened by anyone. It opened *itself* because another door remained shut for too long. Get used to it, kiddo. I’m here until I’m bored with you.”

“I don’t care *who* you are!” Payton screamed, forcing himself off the ground. He pointed a shaky finger at the black figure that was again puffing on the cigar. “And I don’t care how you got here! Whatever it is you want, do it yourself or find someone else!” Payton felt too weak to continue standing and sank back to the ground, where he began sobbing.

“Oh, don’t worry, sport. I already have your 12 year-old sister lined up for the job if you play hard to get. She’s younger and more vulnerable, so she won’t be able to put up much of a fight. But I like a challenge, so I came here to play with you first. It really makes no difference to me either way, though. You can do my bidding or I can go have fun with her.” The figure blew out another puff of smoke and turned to leave.

“Wait!” screamed Payton as he clawed at the ground, trying to make his way toward the dark man. “Leave her alone! She’s just a little girl!”

Payton’s strength withered and he sank back to the ground, pushing his face into the cold grass. He began sobbing again, convulsing with each whimper.

“Now, now,” said the man as he walked – or rather hovered – toward Payton. He kneeled down and spoke with a soft voice. “Look at yourself. You’re a strong, 18 year-old man and I have you laid out on the ground, whimpering like a starving child.”

Payton lifted his head and looked up at the face that still held no true features – even at this distance. “Screw you.”

Red eyes flashed in the shadowy face. “You people have been doing that since you were put here. Do as I tell you, maggot, or force your sister to do suffer my bidding.

She's young enough that she's still got a chance to make up for her so-called sins. And I think we both know just how naughty she's been lately. Do you really want to make her pay the piper so soon? This young, before she ever gets a chance to straighten up?"

Payton used what strength he had remaining to lift himself on his hands and knees. Looking up, he asked, "Okay, what do you want from me?"

The dark figure stood up and walked over to lean against the wall again. "That's more like it," he said after taking another drag from his cigar. "Okay, so here's the deal. Your old lady is a lost cause. She turned to the other side a long time ago and I missed my chance. Your old man, however, is another story. I still have high hopes for him."

Payton stood up on shaky legs. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't have to know what I'm talking about. 'Yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do or die,' I believe was a line spoken by one of your pathetic *thinkers*," said the shadowy man. "Anyway, back to my problem. You see, good 'ole pops is supposed to go with your old lady to church this weekend. Normally, that wouldn't be much of a problem. Churches are running over with people that I can still count on when the going gets tough. But this isn't going to be one of those cases. I think dear old dad is actually going to jump ship on me this time, and I won't have that. I need him."

Payton's eyes widened. "What the hell are you asking me to do?"

The dark man smiled, though no one could have seen it. "Well, that's the good part. You get to choose how you're going to make things work out in my favor. You see, someone's obviously gotta go. Either your nagging mother has to be sent to the great beyond – though it's not so great – or you have to relieve daddy dearest of his worldly problems before he has a chance to ruin everything. He's worth more to me as a dead sinner than a living convert."

Payton had somehow known what the monster was going to say, but that did not stop him from vomiting when he heard it. After the heaving subsided, he wiped his mouth and looked back up. "You're out of your mind! I'm not going to decide which one of my parents gets to live – and then murder the other!"

"Well, it doesn't have to be quite so bad," replied the dark figure. "You can easily save yourself from part of the conundrum. Don't decide which gets to live – just kill them both."

Payton's anger swelled to an unbearable level and he felt as though his chest would explode. "Go back to hell!" he screamed. "I'm not killing my own family for you! And neither will my sister! As soon as you leave me to go to her, I'll run wake her up. Her room is right beside mine, so I can get there before you have a chance to manipulate her!"

The shadowy man smiled another invisible smile. “Excellent idea, sport. I always loved a good race.” He walked over and stuck the burning end of his cigar into Payton’s chest.

Payton awoke screaming. The searing pain in his chest felt very real. He looked down and saw a red, oozing burn that was still smoking as his flesh bubbled and formed a round scar. Remembering his sister, he forgot about the pain and swung his feet around to jump out of the bed. As he turned, however, he came face to face with his sister. Her eyes were solid white – seemingly lifeless globes that stared out at nothing. She held a lit cigar in her left hand and her other hand was hidden behind her back. Payton heard a dripping noise and looked down at the floor. Directly behind his sister’s feet, a small puddle of blood was forming. He was paralyzed with shock as he stared into the eyes that no longer seemed to belong to his little sister. He also noticed that the front of her nightgown was covered in fresh blood.

She raised the cigar to her lips and took a long drag. She blew smoke into Payton’s face as she spoke. “Nice try, sport - but you’re a little slow. Your thinking is way too three-dimensional. Now be a good brother and hold still.”