

A misty forest path with two people in the distance. The path is covered in fallen leaves, and the trees are bare, suggesting autumn. The scene is bathed in a soft, golden light, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. The title 'Tangled Threads' is written in a large, elegant, black cursive font across the upper half of the image.

Tangled Threads

GRACE MACPHERSON

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I.

Maureen

I HAVE EXACTLY TWO OUNCES OF ENERGY left by the time I get home, and the trek up the stairs to our little flat takes one and a half of those. That makes me less than a pleasant person when I finally make it in the door, only to have Sean rocket into me, burying his carrot head in my jeans.

“Maureen, Jamie’s bein’ mean!”

“Well, go deal with him yerself,” I say crossly, and jerk free so I can get out of my sweaty Mackintosh. “Where’s Mum, anyhow?”

“In here, *a leanbh*,” she calls from the kitchen, and I dodge around Sean’s clinging arms. Mum is standing over a pot of stew, potatoes bobbing in the amber broth. It smells heavenly, but by now I’m too tired to much care.

“How’s Dad?” I ask, leaning against the shabby kitchen table.

The shadows in her face deepen. “He tried to speak to me today.”

I sigh, sitting on the edge of the table. What’s it been, two weeks since the stroke now? I don’t ask—it’ll only make Mum more worried. “I’m tired,” I say finally.

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She barely glances up from the stew. “Tell me about it.”

The words might be unsympathetic, but there’s a wry twist to her smile, and I manage a faint grin in return. It was hard making ends meet even before Dad’s stroke. Now I don’t know how we’ll make do.

But we will somehow. We always have.

“I’m dropping out of high school,” I say after a moment.

Mum looks up, eyes widening. “No, Maureen.”

I’ve been planning this speech all day, and I lean back against the table, pressing my hands into its edge. “We need the money, Mum. And I don’t care about the diploma.” I smile—a wobbly smile, but still a smile. “Liam’ll graduate next year. We couldn’t both go to university anyhow. It’s okay, Mum.”

She turns back to the stew, but there’s a set look to her mouth that tells me we’ll be arguing about it later. I decide I’ve made enough progress for now, and I arch my back, covering a yawn with the back of my hand.

“Mind if I turn in?”

Mum glances up again. “Without dinner?”

“I’m more tired than hungry, truly.” I give her another wan smile. “G’night, Mum.”

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Sean explodes into the room at that moment, wailing about Jamie again, and Mum gives me a distracted peck on the cheek before turning to the scuffling boys. I slip out into the narrow hallway and down to my little bedroom—not more than a closet, really, but at least it’s my own—and collapse on the edge of the cot because there’s nowhere else to sit.

I really ought to pull on my pyjamas—or at least comb out my rats’ nest of a braid—but for once I don’t care enough to do it. For once in this wretched life of mine, I just want to do exactly what *I* want to do—no responsibilities, no duties, no getting out of bed and going to work when I don’t feel like it. I know Mum would say that’s what being an adult is all about, and I guess she’s right.

But I honestly don’t care. Someday I’ll have to be an adult whether I like it or not.

Right now, I’m seventeen. And I don’t care if it’s childish to fall asleep at six in the evening—I’m doing it anyway.

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II.

Eric

I'VE HAD MANY PECULIAR DREAMS in my almost-eighteen years of life—but none so vivid as this.

I find myself standing in what looks to be an office, with no clear memory of how I arrived there. Dreams have a way of skipping over the mundane, so that's hardly surprising. But what holds my attention is the woman standing behind the office desk—inhumanly tall and clothed in a long white robe. I guess she's beautiful, but I'd be afraid to call her that. She's too inhuman, too unearthly for a word like that. Automatically, my mind terms her *the Lady*, and it takes all my self-control not to offer my best attempt at a sweeping bow.

“Hi,” I manage eventually.

The faintest smile lifts the Lady's lips. “Eric Gunderson?”

“Um . . . yes?”

The smile deepens, and I have the urge to run as far away as possible. But then I chide myself for being an idiot. She's just a woman, after all—and this is just a dream, even if

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it's oddly lifelike. But dreams always are while you're dreaming them. . . .

"Can I help you with something?" I manage after a moment.

"Indeed." The Lady circles the desk to stand before me. She's even taller than I thought, and my neck is beginning to burn from looking up at her. "You see, Eric Gunderson, I have a mission for you."

I manage a nod, hoping my expression looks suitably grave.

"I am a Weaver," the Lady continues with undisturbed serenity. "I am also immortal. For thousands of years, I have watched over the dreams of humans, protecting them as well as I may from the Nightmares that seek to destroy their rest. And so far, I have been successful."

She pauses, fixing me with a stern look. I try not to squirm, and hope my dream-self manifested in something more dignified than my pajamas.

"But quite recently," the Lady says, her voice softer than before, "the Nightmares have grown at an alarming rate. You see, Eric Gunderson, a Nightmare, once made, can only be repaired from within. And I, as a Weaver, cannot enter a human dream."

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I manage a subtle glance down and find myself dressed in a suit and tie. This bolsters my confidence enough for me to say, “So, you want me to fix your dream for you?”

“Not *my* dream—the dreams of your own kind.” For the first time, a hint of anxiety flickers through her mask of serenity. “There are many, Eric Gunderson—hundreds, if not thousands. And they have grown rapidly. I do not yet understand the cause, but I cannot allow such Nightmares to torment sleeping minds. And that is why I need your help. You have a rare gift for one of your kind: you retain your self-awareness while in a dream, and so I can safely entrust this mission to you. But you are imprecise in your manipulation of dreams, and so you will need a partner. If you are willing, you shall meet her.”

I straighten my spine, resisting the sudden impulse to clear my throat like a self-important businessman. “Yes, well, I suppose I’d like a few more specifics first. For one thing, I’m not quite sure what you’re asking of me.”

The Lady’s eyes narrow, and she studies me like she’s an artist selecting the right brush. I don’t like the idea of being her tool, but I stand quietly till she says, “All I ask of you, Eric Gunderson, is to dream. Your partner will do the real work—her expertise is in dream manipulation. But she can be . . . unreliable. Most people are in their dreams, I have found.

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They seem to think it is a world without consequence. But nothing is without consequence—not truly. Your task is simply to remind her of that—and to brave whatever horrors you may find within the Nightmares you face.”

“So . . . I don’t have to do anything besides dream?”

The Lady’s eyebrows ascend. “You have no task in the waking world, if that is what you mean. But I think you will find your task more than a mere dream, Eric Gunderson. It will require the utmost courage of you. Your ordeals will not be real, in the sense you use the word—but they will feel real. Whatever the Nightmare inflicts upon you, you will suffer as long as you sleep. It will not be a pleasant task.”

I manage an uncertain laugh. “You’re very convincing.”

The Lady’s face shows no sign of amusement. “I wish you to be fully informed before you make any commitment. If you enter a Nightmare and fail to repair it, I do not like to think what the consequences will be—for you, Eric Gunderson, and for the world.”

I draw in a deep breath. The logical part of me thinks it’s all ridiculous—this is what I get for eating too much ice cream too soon before bed.

But another part of me wonders if it’s real—maybe even *wants* it to be real. I’d like to be the hero for once—the

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dragon-slaying prince in all the stories Mom and Lizzy used to read me.

I'm just not sure I'm cut out for it. I might be wearing a suit here in the dream world, but in real life I'm curled on the living room couch in a bathrobe and plaid pajama pants. Not exactly hero material.

But there's enough of the gentleman in me that I don't like to refuse a lady's request—even if she's the product of late-night snacking.

“All right,” I say at last. “I'll do it.”

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III.

Maureen

I LIKE DREAMING. It's the freest part of my life. And tonight, when I find myself in a castle fit for McCumhaill, my heart bounds with excitement.

The halls are dark, but I focus hard on the closest wall, and a torch materializes in an iron bracket. I wrench it down, hold it high, and start down the hall.

Can't say I remember just when I realized I manipulate my dreams, but I must have been going on ten. Before that, I just sat back and watched—didn't make for the best nightmares. But imagination can do a lot, and so can temper. Now, just a thought is enough to change the cold stone to carpet and my pyjamas to a gown the color of moonlight. I tweak my face while I'm at it—bigger eyes, clearer skin, softer hair. . . .

"Mornin'," I call cheerily when I see a figure standing at the far end of the hall. Usually dream people wait for me to make them speak, but this one doesn't.

"Evening, I should think," he corrects in the most atrocious of accents. "But you sound Irish, and I suppose there's a time difference."

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“Stop actin’ the maggot,” I say, and he frowns.

“Excuse me?”

I toss back my hair and step closer. The nice thing about dream people is that they don’t mind when you insult them. “Yer bein’ thick is all. What do you mean, time difference?”

“Well, the Lady didn’t say you were from Ireland, only that I’d meet you here.” He folds his arms. “And at least in the United States, it’s the middle of the night.”

“Don’t look so cross, I was only slaggin’.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Slagging?”

An analytical dream person—this is new, and rather interesting. “Teasin’. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

“Anything,” he corrects, and offers his hand for me to shake. “My name is Eric Gunderson.”

“Maureen,” I say, and give his hand a cautious shake. I’ve never had a dream person introduce himself before, but this one seems nice enough—if a little cross. “scuse me, I got things to do.”

“Not on your own,” Eric says, stepping back and folding his arms again. “The Lady warned me you were headstrong.”

“How kind o’ her.”

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I attempt to step around him, but Eric grabs my arm. “What are you doing? You know how important this is.”

I give him Mum’s best skeptical look. “*What* is?”

He sighs. “The . . . mission.”

“A ravin’ madman isn’t what I’m lookin’ for, thanks very much.” I pull away and step back. “Now I’ve got some dreamin’ to do.”

Eric looks first confused, then appalled. “She didn’t tell you?”

Really? This dream person persists in pestering me? For a moment I’m tempted to call down a lightning bolt from the sky—but that would ruin my castle, so instead I put a hand on my hip. “Who tell me what?”

“The Lady who. . . .” Eric growls a sigh, pulling his hand through his sandy blond hair. “I can’t believe this. It’s so unethical.” Shaking his head, he turns to me, earnest blue eyes holding mine. “Just listen—Maureen, was it?”

I nod, but don’t bother to relax my skeptical expression.

“I’ll explain.” He pauses and frowns. “Actually, it’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Just give it a shot,” I snap. Apparently this dream person wants his chance to shine before I can get on with my life.

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Well, dream, rather.

“All right,” Eric says, and then, after a profound pause: “We’re in a dream.”

“Sure, and y’ don’t say so?”

This earns me another glare. “Just let me talk.”

“Have you gone and kissed the Blarney Stone?” I mutter, but am quiet after that.

“*Thank* you,” he says. “We’re in a dream, but it’s not yours. Actually, none of your dreams are.”

“Makin’ more sense by the minute, Gunderson.”

“Hush,” he says, waving an exasperated hand. “Hear me out. All your dreams are woven for you—”

I toss my hair over my shoulder, keeping one dark lock and twisting it around my finger. “By fairies, everyone knows that, but it’s still mine ’cause I’m the one dreamin’ it.”

“All right,” Eric says, looking somewhat relieved. “My point is, the Lady said the Nightmares are getting worse. Something is warping all the dreams into Nightmares—and she can’t fix it because she can’t enter into the dreams. So she asked me to help—and I thought she asked you too, but apparently not. This is supposed to be the worst Nightmare of all.”

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I glance around the corridor—the high, arched ceiling; the still shadows between the columns. “Looks all right to me.”

“For now,” he says darkly. “But these Nightmares . . . the weaving can only be mended from within.”

The weaving can only be mended from within. Why do those words sound so familiar? And then it all comes over me in a rush. . . .

Grand, just grand. I slide to a seat against one of the columns, trying to calm my pounding heart. “Sure, and what yer tryin’ to tell me is. . . .?”

Eric crouches down beside me, expression concerned. “We’ve been sent in. By a Lady, I don’t know her name.”

I close my eyes. Tall, she was, graceful as a queen, in long white robes like something from Greece. *We need you, Maureen*, she had said. *The weaving can only be mended from within. You keep your wits about you in a dream. It will be dangerous, but will you help us?*

Sure and I will, I’d scoffed.

She smiled. *Then you have our gratitude.*

Guess the Fair Folk don’t understand sarcasm.

“Are you all right?” Something brushes the side of my face, and I jerk back.

“Grand, just grand,” I mutter, aloud this time.

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“Oh,” Eric says, sounding taken aback. “Well, that’s good. Are you . . . ready to go?”

“Go?”

“I guess she didn’t give you specifics.” He reaches into his jeans pocket and pulls out a folded sheet of paper. “We need to find the tangle in the weaving, and do it fast—before the Nightmare begins.”

I give him my best skeptical look.

Eric chuckles. “The Lady said that most people don’t stay aware of themselves when they’re dreaming. They just watch things happen around them. But with concentration and practice, you can control your own actions. And eventually, even manipulate your surroundings. She said you can do that better than anyone else she’s seen.”

“Sure,” I scoff.

“And she needed a child to do it.” He hesitates, face grave. “Dad wasn’t very happy about that part. But adults either wake or are immobilized once they realize they’re dreaming. So she sent us two.”

“And why are you here, anyway?” I stand, brushing my hands on my silken skirt. The dress is hot and itchy, I realize, and squinch up my face till it shifts to jeans and a hoodie.

“Huh,” Eric says, staring at me.

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“What? I have something on my face?”

“No, I’ve just never seen. . . .”

“We all do it, a bit.” I whisk my hair back in a ponytail and secure it with the band that appears on my wrist. “I notice you’re not wearin’ your pyjamas.”

Alarmed, he glances down, but relaxes when he sees his jeans and t-shirt. “Well, anyway . . . I guess you’re a good ally.”

“And a rotten enemy,” I add. “But what’re you doin’ here?”

He grins. “Keeping you on track. She said you’re powerful, but not always the most reliable. Guess we’ll see if it’s true.”

“Land sakes,” I mutter. “Sure, come on, then. Let’s go untangle that thread and save the bloomin’ world.”

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IV.

Eric

I'M STILL NOT SURE what to think of Maureen, even as I follow her down the stone corridor to a wooden door. It looks heavy, and I step forward to open it for her, but she snaps her fingers and it swings open.

That works too, I guess. But it does make me keep my distance from her as I step into the courtyard.

“What’s your plan?” I ask.

She twirls around, wrinkling her nose at me. “Wind yer neck in!”

“What?”

Maureen waves her hand, looking annoyed. “No use in soundin’ upset is all. We don’t need a plan yet.”

“We always need a plan.” I jump down the steps after her. “Most dreams are the size of a planet. How are we going to fix the weaving without a plan?”

“Luck,” she says without turning around.

I glare at the back of her head. “Right, well, you might be Irish, but I’m not.”

She does turn at that. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

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“I’m Norwegian, okay?”

“I thought you were American.”

“I’m from a long line of planners.”

“Sure, and the Vikings used their plannin’ to accomplish grand things.”

Ouch. “Look, I can’t really control what my ancestors did to your ancestors, so if we can just get on with this. . . .”

Maureen starts to walk away, but thunder growls above us, and she halts, looking at the sky. “Storm’s comin’.”

I wonder how you can tell. “All the more reason to keep moving.”

The stone beneath my feet softens to grass, and I spread my arms for balance as the world blurs around me, coming to focus in a pale meadow with a misty sky. Fighting back nausea, I turn to Maureen and wave an arm at the scene around us. “What did you just *do*?”

Unconcerned, she brushes a strand of dark hair out of from her mouth. “Hmm?”

“The—” I break off into a frustrated splutter.

Maureen laughs, the sound mocking but not altogether unpleasant. “It’s a *dream*, Gunderson. Get used to things changin’.”

I take a deep breath and rein in my irritation. As calmly as I can, I say, “You took us farther from the storm.”

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She cocks an eyebrow. “And where would you want to be goin’? Deeper in?”

“Look,” I snap, “the tangle in the thread is where the nightmare is coming from, right? So the closer towards it we go, the worse things are.”

“Pity,” Maureen sighs, looking at the sky. “A grand soft day this is too.”

“A *what?*”

“The mizzle,” she says unhelpfully.

“All right,” I say, and point towards the dark sky on the horizon. “Take us there, please.”

The vertigo isn’t quite as bad this time . . . but it’s still bad. I resist the urge to collapse on the ground when we land, mostly because Maureen is standing beside me as calmly as if she does this every day—or every night, I suppose. The lashing rain clears my head quickly enough, and I glare at Maureen, who’s watching me unconcernedly from beneath the rim of her umbrella.

“You could have given me one, you know.”

“Didn’t ask,” she says, grinning. “And it’s all in your head, anyway.”

“Then why don’t you just stop the rain?”

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“Sure,” she says, and waves her hand. But nothing happens, and she pauses, closing her eyes. When she opens them, she looks troubled. “Can’t stop it.”

“What does that mean?”

Maureen shrugs, picking her way forward through the sharp rocks that line the ground. I follow, grateful for the hiking boots my subconscious mind gave me. “Could be,” she says from ahead of me, “that there’s a Weaver runnin’ rogue, and he knows we’re here. Or maybe it’s just how nightmares work. I don’t have ’em.”

“But,” I say, then stop to catch my breath. After a moment, I continue, “But maybe you don’t have nightmares because you’re able to manipulate your dreams. Like you’re fixing the tangle without even realizing it.”

Maureen turns back to me, putting one hand on her hip in a jaunty pose and flashing me a bright smile. “Well then, this should be a cup o’ tea.”

I sigh, run my hand through my wet hair, and trudge towards her. “Not necessarily. The lady explained it’s not always easier when you’re conscious of what’s happening. Sometimes that gives you less control, because your rational mind begins to take over.”

“Sure, and when has my rational mind ever taken me over?”

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With a toss of her hair, she turns and continues up the rocky slope.

I wish I didn't suspect she's right.

* * *

The air feels clearer as we go up the slope, which becomes a rugged mountain with a pebbled path. The clarity is more concerning than anything else, not to mention the sharpness of our surroundings—no longer a dreamy blur. The closer we get to the tangle, the realer everything feels.

No use thinking that way, though. None of this is real, and wondering will only make it worse. So I keep a tight grip on logic as I follow Maureen's light steps up the mountain path.

Suddenly she stops, her umbrella dropping to her side as she points at the sky. "Look!"

I halt beside her, shoving my hands into my sodden pockets as I follow her finger. She jumps as a bolt of lightning shatters the sky, and I stiffen more than I like to admit. But as the flash fades, I see what she means: a rip in the bland gray of the sky—and beyond the tear, tangled strands of blue and red and yellow.

"Well," I say, "there's our tangle."

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But Maureen looks pale as she lifts the umbrella to cover us. “And how are you proposin’ we get there?”

“Can’t you fly us?”

“Sure and I will,” she snaps.

I figure that’s a no. “The Lady wouldn’t have sent us if there wasn’t a way.”

“Sure and it’s a grand lady to send children on a fool’s mission!”

I sigh and shove my hands deeper into my pockets. Slowly, the heat from my legs begins to warm them. “She didn’t have any other choice. Let’s just get this fixed and go home.”

“I can’t,” she whispers, pale again as she hugs the handle of the umbrella against her chest.

Patience, I remind myself, and try not to sound too sharp as I ask, “Why?”

Her eyes are full of misery. “I’m afraid of heights—”

I clap my hand over her mouth, cutting off the last word, but quickly withdraw it. “Sorry. It’s just . . . we’re in a Nightmare. Let’s not talk about fear.”

Now Maureen looks more irritated than frightened, which I suppose is an improvement. “You got a better plan?”

“Well—have you ever dreamed about flying? You could imagine us wings, and. . . .”

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“No,” she says flatly.

“All right, then what’s your idea?”

Maureen scowls at me. The next moment, I feel the wind running through my wings, and I whirl around to find she’s given me a magnificent pair—dirty brown beside her white, but still magnificent.

“Great,” I say, and I actually mean it. I’ve missed the joy of my childhood dreams, the sheer wonder of—but no, I can’t let myself think that way. I *am* a child, I have to be to finish this.

So with an adult’s resolve, I put away all thoughts of adulthood, spread my wings, and pull into the air. Maureen hesitates, but I hold out my hand. Slowly, she takes it. Her fingers are dry despite the rain, tense at first, but they relax as she lifts into the air beside me.

“See now?” I say, grinning. “That’s not so bad.”

She looks skeptical. “Sure. Let’s get this over with.”

I keep hold of her hand as we fly towards the tangle—I’m afraid she’ll lose her nerve without it. Halfway there, she starts to look down, but I say, “Maureen?”

“Yeah?” Her eyes rise to meet mine.

“Don’t look at the ground.”

She tosses her hair. “You’d be a grand mum.”

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“I’m just saying, it’s not as bad if you don’t look down.”

“All right then,” she says, and fixes her eyes on the tangle ahead. “Hope you’ve got a good pair o’ hands.”

Without thinking, I glance down at our hands, then pull my eyes back towards the tear in the sky. “Why?”

“’cause I can’t knit to save my life.” She gives me a saucy half-smile. “And one o’ us will have to do the mendin’.”

I don’t exactly have any expertise in weaving, and it’s a moment before I answer. “We’ll . . . figure it out somehow.”

The rain pounds harder as we rise, and I struggle to lift my wings against it. Maureen’s hand goes tight on my own, and I glance at her to see that her mouth is pressed hard in an expression of concentration. “Rain’s too hard,” she mutters.

“Let’s just glide for a moment.”

She nods, but the moment she relaxes her wings, a gust of wind tears her hand from mine, and she goes floating towards the ground. I pull in my wings and dive towards her, catching the hand that’s reaching for me as her mouth opens in a scream, lost in the roar of the wind.

“It’s all right, Maureen!” I shout as my fingers slip through hers. “You’re flying. It’s all right!”

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But the next moment my wings disappear, and I plummet towards her as the world goes dark around us.

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V.

Maureen

I REGAIN GROGGY CONSCIOUSNESS to find that someone is breathing against my hair, which would be more concerning if I hadn't just sprouted wings and then lost them at the snap of a finger. People breathing on me is fairly normal compared to that, and I lie still for a moment, then open my eyes.

Which is when I realize my eyes were already open. I can't tell where I am except that it's dark, and that the person breathing on me must be Eric from his scent—a warm sweaty smell that's somehow not disgusting, but homey and comforting like my blankets when I haven't washed them in a while.

Land sakes, though, I have better things to think about than Eric's smell, and I slip out from under his arm to sit up and stretch. I twist my back till it pops and realize I'm straining my eyes peering into the darkness—trying to see something, anything till I half fancy I can.

Which is how every hallucination starts. I tear my hands through my tangled hair, letting the pain on my scalp ground me in reality. Darkness here. Nothin' to see.

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Beside me, Eric sucks in breath, and I try to pat his hand, but somehow smack his stomach instead.

“Ow,” he mumbles. Then, “Maureen?”

“Here,” I say as cheerily as I can sitting in utter darkness in someone else’s nightmare. “Still alive, I see?”

“See?” He releases a frustrated sigh. “Can’t you conjure up some light or something?”

“I’ll give it a go, but you’d have better luck getting Sean to mind Mum.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” I say, and squinch my face in concentration. No light results, and I shrug before I remember he can’t see it. “Ah, well. A good laugh and a long sleep will cure most ills, that’s what Mum says. We’ve had the sleep, so we might as well laugh and be on our way.”

“Sleep?” Eric says crossly. “Knock on the head is more like it.”

“Ah, wind yer neck in. You’ll live. On yer feet now.”

He doesn’t budge.

I reach down, grope for him in the dark, and haul him up. “Ah, see now? You’re almost dry. It’s not so bad, then.”

“I hate the dark,” he mutters.

I’m about to release his arm—but he didn’t do that, not when we were flying. So instead I lower my grip from his

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elbow to his hand. His fingers are sticky with sweat, but I figure it's not as bad as what's on the twins most of the time, and I squeeze his hand. "You'll be fine. Now come on."

His hand tightens around mine. "To *where*?"

I haven't gotten that far yet, but he doesn't need to know that. For a moment, I'm silent, first scuffing a foot along the dirt floor, then lifting my head and smelling the air. "Grand," I announce, "I smell rain."

"Gah," Eric says.

I cock an eyebrow, but stop when I remember he can't see it. "Gah? What kinda word is that?"

He doesn't answer, so I jerk him towards the smell of rain. "Come on, then. It's dark is all. Rest of it's a cuppa tea."

"Right," he mutters. "Tea. Like that fixes everything."

"You American," I accuse.

He exhales in what could be either a sigh or a laugh. I decide in favor of the latter.

"See, there? Just laugh and it's all better. Off we go, now."

And I walk smack into a wall.

"Ah, here!" I snap.

"Where?" Eric says from behind me, humor coloring his voice.

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I whirl around to glare at him, and hope he feels it through the darkness. “You could have a wee bit of sympathy!”

“Wind your neck in,” he suggests gravely. “You’re less likely to hit your head that way.”

Laughter drowns my anger, and his lower chuckle joins my giggling till I calm myself. “Well, and what’s *your* plan?”

“To follow you,” he says, “so you can find the walls first.”

“Sure, and aren’t you a grand mate!”

He chuckles again, his fingers closing around mine again. “Then let’s go together. Which way is the rain? Here?”

“Oh, sure,” I say crossly, “back into the wall, let’s. No, thickhead, it’s this way.”

“Maybe lay off on the insults?” he suggests, but he chuckles again as he follows me down the tunnel.

* * *

Gradually the tunnel slopes upwards, narrowing as it rises. I’m none too fond of tight spaces, but by Eric’s breathing alone, I figure I’d better not let on.

Tangled Threads

“Land sakes,” I snap at last, “can’t you take one breath without soundin’ like yer dyin’?”

“Sorry,” he whispers, and draws in several slow breaths. “If we could just have some light. . . .”

“Well, we can’t,” I say, and step forward into empty space.

I’m dead, I think as I plunge over the edge of a precipice, my skin burning against Eric’s as my fingers tear through his. I’m going to fall and die and wake up from this blooming nightmare at last. . . .

“Maureen!”

It’s his voice, sharp and urgent, but it seems strangely far away, farther than the unseen bottom far beneath me.

“Maureen, try to reach up.” His hands are on my wrist now, so tight my hand is tingling. “I need your other hand.”

“Quit acting the maggot,” I whisper. “Don’t pull yourself down, too.”

“No.” His hands squeeze so tight I wonder if he’ll break my wrist before I can fall. “Give me. . . .” He grunts, hauls harder on my wrist. “Give me your hand.”

“Eric, I can’t,” I whisper. Dirt sprinkles my hair—he pulls one last time, grunts, and comes plummeting in after me.

Tangled Threads

We don't fall more than ten feet, but they're still the most terrifying ten feet of my life. Somehow Eric managed to get himself underneath me, and he groans as I try to sort out the tangle of limbs on the sandy floor. Eventually I pull myself off and locate his shoulder, which I give a cheery pat.

"All right, then?"

He groans again.

"Anything broken?"

I hear him rise, grunting. "Probably a rib." He inhales. "Ouch. Make that two."

I reach for his hand in the dark, twisting my fingers through his. "You'll be fine," I say in my most mum-like voice. "For the test of the heart is trouble and it always comes with years. And the smile that is worth the praises of earth is the smile that shines through the tears."

"Thanks," he says dryly, "that's so helpful right now."

"Just somethin' Mum says. And if we don't listen, she starts givin' out, so you might as well stop pityin' yourself now."

"Fair enough." Eric's hand shifts in mine as he stretches, making a soft sound of pain. "Giving out what? Because if it's food, I'll take it."

"Givin' out?" I repeat, confused. "Y'know—scoldin'."

"Oh," he says. "Then I think I'll pass."

Tangled Threads

“Pass what?”

He chuckles, but it sounds like it hurts him. “Come on—ouch.”

“Here’s to a fellow who smiles,” I quote brightly, “When life runs along like a song. And here’s to the lad who can smile when everything goes dead wrong.”

“No use crying over spilt milk,” he answers. “Which way is the rain now?”

“Gone,” I say. “Let’s try . . . straight ahead.”

We go precisely two steps before my outstretched hand grates against stone.

“Or left,” Eric says.

“Or right,” I counter.

“Left,” he says.

“God between us and all harm,” I murmur, and follow his lead.

VI.

Eric

I GUESS IT'S SILLY to leave a nightlight on when you know you're going into a nightmare the moment you fall asleep, but that's just how much I hate the dark—the emptiness and vastness of it. Right now, the only thing anchoring me to reality is Maureen's hand in mine, small and dry, with three hard spots on her palm. I focus my mind on those spots, close my eyes and picture her hand till the image blocks out the darkness all around. It chases away at least a little of my panic, even if I'm not feeling exactly chipper.

“I think we're going up now,” I remark with more confidence than I feel.

I hear Maureen's rolled eyes in her voice. “Sure and he's a genius now.”

“Up is good,” I protest.

“Said the fly in the dragon's throat.”

“The—what? Actually, you know what? Never mind.”

“Fine by me,” she says, and we fall silent.

Tangled Threads

After a moment, desperate for something to keep the darkness at bay, I ask, “Where are you from?”

Maureen’s quiet, and I’m not sure if she heard me—or if I even asked aloud. Maybe it’s just my mind playing tricks on me. But then she says, “Dublin.”

“Ah, the Emerald Island. Do you have siblings?”

I hear her grimace in her voice. “Nine.”

“*Nine?*”

“Two older, seven younger.”

I pause in walking to feel my way around a corner. “I always wanted siblings.”

“Want mine?”

“I don’t think it works like that.” I swallow—the topic of siblings is perhaps better avoided for now. “Anyway . . . what’s it like in Ireland?”

“Wet—and crowded.”

This is getting more depressing by the minute. “Do you think you’ll stay in Dublin as an adult?”

Whoops. There’s the A-word. The Lady would not be pleased. But Maureen doesn’t seem to notice the faint tremor that runs through the ground—or maybe it’s only my imagination.

Darkness can do funny things to your mind.

Maureen scoffs at my question. “Not if I can help it!”

Tangled Threads

“Then where would you go instead?”

A pause. Then she says in a small voice, “I don’t know.”

Silence falls again, and I start to close my eyes against the darkness before I realize they’re already closed. In desperation, I ask,

“Can we please talk?”

“’bout what?”

“Anything.”

“Yer as bad as the twins.”

“How old are they?” I ask. I know it’s grasping at straws, but straws are better than nothing, especially when the darkness feels heavier with each step.

“Not quite one.”

I pull back a smile. “Ouch.”

She elbows me, and it’s a sharp elbow too. “Oh, wind yer neck in.”

“What is this Irish fixation with necks?” I demand.

“It’s just a sayin’.”

“I wonder where it came from. Maybe a way of trying to stop a fight—look after your neck, you know, as a metaphor for life. . . .”

Maureen snorts, her fingers shifting in mine. “Sure and we’re gettin’ philosophical now.”

Tangled Threads

“Unless you had a better conversation topic,” I say defensively.

“I can sing,” she says. “If you’re going to act like the twins.”

Probably I should defend myself, but a song actually sounds rather comforting, so I say, “Sure. We’ll go with that.”

“Grand,” she says, and begins:

*In Dublin’s fair city,
Where girls are so pretty,
I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone.
She wheeled her wheel barrow
Through streets broad and narrow,
Crying, “Cockles and mussels!
Alive, alive-o!”*

“All right,” I interrupt. “What’s with the *alive-o* bit? Why not just say *alive*?”

“Shall I stop singin’ till you’ve written a complete analysis?” Maureen inquires. “Or shall I keep goin’?”

“Sorry. You can keep goin’.” I clear my throat. “Going.”

“Grand,” she says breezily, and draws in a long breath before she begins again.

Tangled Threads

*“Alive, alive-o!
Alive, alive-o!”
Crying, “Cockles and mussels,
Alive, alive-o!”*

“Maybe another verse now?” I plead.
She laughs, clear and musical in the dark, and sings:

*She was a fish monger,
And it was no wonder,
For so were her Father and Mother before.
They both wheeled their barrow
Through streets broad and narrow,
Crying, “Cockles and mussels,
Alive, alive-o!”*

*She died of a fever,
And no one could save her,
And that was the end of sweet Molly Malone.
Now her ghost wheels her barrow
Through streets broad and narrow,
Crying, “Cockles and mussels,
Alive, alive-o!”*

Tangled Threads

“Well, that was encouraging,” I remark after a pause.

“Not hardly,” Maureen says, “but that is.”

She points ahead. And then I realize I can see her pointing, and I whirl to face her. There she is—pert nose and freckles and all—but I’m so glad to see anything at all that I’m strongly tempted to hug her. Instead I say, “Light.”

She grins at me, and before she can produce another Irish proverb, I interject,

“Let’s go.”

VII.

Maureen

WE EMERGE INTO THE LIGHT a few minutes later, a cool night forest, and I wonder if I'm yet again manipulating this world. It's too pleasant a forest for a nightmare.

Sure enough, when I wave my hand, dozens of tiny fairies appear, flitting through the trees like living light. Eric's eyes go wide as he watches them, and I laugh and nudge him with my elbow.

"What? You never seen fairies before?"

"No," he manages to whisper.

"Well, they're hidin' in every corner of Ireland." I step forward, green leaves brushing my ankles, and hold out my hand for a fairy. She lights gently on it, sweeping her tiny skirt in a curtsy with a sound like tinkling bells. I look back at Eric and grin.

He comes towards me, his steps so loud I'd scold him if I thought he could do better, and halts with his hands in his pockets. "What are they doing?"

I crouch beside a cluster of fairies, careful not to tread on any. Their wee hands are so swift with their work that it

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takes me a minute to see what they're doing, and then a smile spreads across my face. "They're weavin' dreams."

I look up at Eric; he flinches as a fairy lights on his shoulder. "But we're *in* a dream. And I thought you conjured up the fairies."

"Partly I did. Partly they're in the nature of the place already."

I stand up, brushing my hands on my jeans. Eric's neck is craned back at an awkward angle as he studies the fairy on his shoulder with mingled fascination and concern. "So, you can't make just anything?"

"Manipulate, not make." I tuck back a lock of hair—Mum would have a fit if she could see its state. "So I couldn't get a car in this dream, probably, but horses, yes. Tried pushin' it once, but that dream didn't go too well after."

"I see," Eric says, and attempts to brush the fairy off his shoulder. She giggles and winds her tiny fingers deeper into his t-shirt.

"ey, c'mere," I tell the fairy, holding out my hand. She glances at Eric one last time, batting her golden eyelashes, before she flits to me. I laugh. "Think she fancies you, Eric."

Red stains his cheeks in the soft golden light. "She's tiny!"

"And since when did size ever stop true love, hmm?"

Tangled Threads

He folds his arms, looking cross. "I thought all the stories of humans and fairies falling in love ended tragically."

"Can't be denied," I say, and make a wry face at the fairy. She sticks out her tiny tongue in response. "Well, come on, Gunderson, we've got a cottage to find."

"A what?"

I laugh, let the fairy go, and grab his hand. Together we run through the forest, through the sweet cool air, till we reach a little stone cottage that's been nestled beneath a grove of oaks for approximately five minutes. I open the door and duck through.

"Well, I was hopin' for a little bigger, but this'll do," I remark, spinning back to the door.

Eric grunts as he crouches to get through, and promptly smacks his head when he stands. "Sure. I'll just sit down over here. On this . . . footstool."

"Sorry," I say, rattling around at the stove. "But doesn't hot food sound good?"

"You can't eat in a dream," he says crossly, rubbing a bump on his forehead.

"Sure you can," I say, and turn around with a bowl of stew.

"That was . . . fast."

I grin at him. "Dreams are convenient that way."

Tangled Threads

He shrugs, takes it, and whispers grace before he begins to eat.

I perch comfortably on the table with my own stew. “What’s with the prayin’ anyway? It doesn’t matter in a dream.”

“Everything matters,” he says wearily, lowering his spoon from his mouth. “Dream or not.”

I cock an eyebrow. “So y’mean I was wrong the time I dreamed I was a thief, or ate all the sweets I could?”

Eric sighs and sets down his spoon. “Look, I’m not an ethics expert or anything. I’m just saying, I don’t think something being imaginary is enough reason to abandon all morality. The choices we make are still real, even if everything else isn’t. What we do still changes the kind of people we are, even if it’s only imaginary.”

I look down at my soup, feeling truly contemplative for the first time this whole dream. Guess he’s probably right—but it’s not the same, what we do in a story or in a dream.

In real life, you’ve got to do things you don’t want—get up and go to work every bloomin’ day, and that’s just for a start. And now even in my dreams, I got to do what I don’t want?

Anger blazes through me—for once in my life I *am* going to do just exactly what I want—and I set down my soup

Tangled Threads

and go to crouch beside Eric. “You mean this is only imaginary?”

He blinks, confused, but before he can ask what I mean, I grab his face between my hands and kiss him.

Almost immediately, he jerks back, face flaming and eyes flashing. He jumps to his feet, smacks his head on the ceiling, and groans. I’m already beginning to regret it, but I can’t let him know that—and I arch my eyebrows saucily.

“You should never have done that!” Eric snaps, clutching his head with one hand and waving the other in the air.

I tilt my head to one side, trying to ignore the uncomfortable heat in my chest that tells me the same time. “Sure now, and tell me you’ve never kissed someone in a dream.”

“Well, I’m real.”

I roll my eyes. “Obviously. Dream people are far easier to get along with.”

He doesn’t speak, just stares down at me, with an expression deeper than anger. It takes me a moment to recognize it as betrayal. I turn back to the stove, guilt churning in my stomach.

Tangled Threads

“Look, Eric, I’m sorry if it bothered you. I was just tryin’ to make a point. Dreams aren’t the same as real life, y’know?”

“Of course not,” he says crossly, “but that doesn’t mean they don’t matter.”

I toss my hair. “Well, try an’ get some sleep then. We’ll be off again in the morning.”

Eric sets aside his bowl with an angry clink. “We don’t have time for sleep. And we don’t actually need it. Dream-bodies can take a lot.”

“Right, but you still got your wakin’ brain that thinks it’s tired. And land sakes, this is a *dream*. What you think is what’s real.”

“It’s fine,” he says, starting to rise, but he stops before he smacks his head again. “I’ll just tell my brain it’s wrong, that’s all.”

“Yer just too bloomin’ *logical*, Eric Gunderson. You’ll never convince yer brain o’ something like that. So *sleep*.”

“Fine,” Eric says, going to one of the cots that have been against the wall for approximately twenty-eight seconds. “But promise me you won’t go anywhere while I’m sleeping.”

“O’ *course* not.” I come over to him, pull up the covers to his chin. “You just rest an’ let your ribs do their healin’.”

Tangled Threads

* * *

The first snore I hear, I'm out the door. The fairies are still in the grove, but their lights are dimmer now—it's getting on dawn. I stand for a moment and watch them against the gray sky, then fold my arms against the chill and trudge into the woods. If nothing else, I want to know where we are.

White branches tangle in my hair as I go, and I pull up the hood of my jumper against the tree's fingers. My breath pools in the air in front of me, misty and cool, so dense it's hard to see where I'm going. But eventually I come out of the woods into a pale meadow, and stand with my hands on my hips, looking around.

Far ahead of us, I can see the pinnacle of a jagged black mountain, its sides glinting like metal. I try to remember the name of that stone—onyx, maybe, or obsidian.

“Well,” I mutter, “either way we're gonna have a grand time gettin' up that thing.”

Far above the mountain peak is the tear in the sky—a blue sky now instead of black, but still the same tangle of colors: cerulean, crimson, ombre, verulean. . . . The patch is oddly beautiful—or would be if not for the warped threads—and I gaze at it for a moment, my breath turning the air white.

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Blue for laughter, Dad used to say when he tickled me and told me I had Mum's eyes. And her red locks for love. Sean's carrot head for courage, and Irish green for home and family.

None of those sounds particularly useful at the moment. Maybe a plane or at least a flying eagle or something. Not that I'm fond of heights.

A bird's cry rips through the air above me, and my head jerks up to see a magnificent beast circling above me—the head and wings of an eagle, the body of a lion.

“Ey there, mate!” I call. “Give me a lift, hmm?”

The griffin settles onto the ground before me, golden eyes studying me over its hooked beak. Then, as if it approves of me, it lowers its head.

I grin and scramble on.

Cool air whips through my hair as we lift into the sky. Generally I don't like heights, but with the golden bulk of the griffin beneath me, it's not so bad.

In fact, I rather like it.

My stomach swoops as we dive and then settle into a quiet glide. I glance at the rip in the sky, but it suddenly seems almost irrelevant. It's a grand night, and I mean to enjoy it.

The dream world is missing stars, and I exhale in another puff of white, sending bits of my breath into the sky,

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all aglow with light. I laugh at the sight—like something out of a fairy tale—but stop when movement catches my eye.

High in the rip of the sky, the tangled threads shimmer and shift.

I wet my lips, tangling my fingers in the griffin's warm feathers and hunching my shoulders against the doubts suddenly washing over me. Can't be me that's doing this—it was tangled before I ever touched this dream.

Still, I'd best try again, just to be sure.

This time a snowy wind whips around us, and I laugh with delight at the snowflakes in my hair. But my laughter goes sour in my mouth as the threads shimmer, golden flecks flying off of them as they pull themselves into a tighter knot.

So it's me who's doing this.

Even if I don't know how.

VIII.

Eric

I JERK AWAKE to the sight of Maureen's pale face, hovering over me like the moon in the sky. Something itches my jaw, and it takes me a moment to realize it's the end of her ponytail.

"What?" I sit up, suppressing a groan at the pain shooting through my ribs.

"It's *my* fault," she says, eyes brimming with tears. "I'm the one ruinin' it."

Maybe it's just that I'm half asleep, but she makes even less sense than usual. "From the beginning? Please?"

Maureen snuffles, wiping her nose on her sweatshirt sleeve. "I went out, and—"

"You *went out*?"

She lifts an eyebrow with a shadow of her usual bravado. "Sure an' I did."

"You *promised* me—"

"Bah," she says. "Yer shattered. And you weren't goin' to sleep unless I promised."

I scowl at her. "That doesn't exactly improve the lie."

"Ah, wind in yer—"

Tangled Threads

“And don’t tell me to wind in my neck!” I throw off the covers and stand, ignoring the pain in my side. “You were *wrong*, Maureen.”

She flicks back her hair. “Ah, quit yer givin’ out. Yer as bad as Mum.”

“Then you have a better mum than you deserve.” I fold my arms, drawing in breath in a futile effort to calm myself. “I’m just tryin’—*trying*—to say, if we’re going to work together, we have to be able to trust each other. And that means no more lies.”

Uncomfortably, Maureen shrugs. “Ah, it was only a bit of a joke. . . .”

“It’s no joke. What if I’d woken up and gone to look for you and we’d been separated?” The ache in my chest isn’t just from my broken ribs now, and I wrestle to subdue my emotions. “Look, you need to be careful. This isn’t a game.”

“course not,” she says lightly, touching my jaw. It reminds me that she kissed me before—or was that just a dream, a dream within a dream? Either way, I step back as she says softly, “It’s a dream, you eejit.”

“No, it’s not,” I snap. “It’s a Nightmare.”

“Ah, come on, now.” She steps closer, pinning me against the wall as she grins up at me, eyes glinting above her freckled, upturned nose. “Can’t you have a bit o’ fun?”

Tangled Threads

“No, Maureen. I’m not a child anymore.” My voice is quiet now, but the earth beneath us shivers at my words. Fear grips me, sharper than in the darkness before, but I repeat: “I’m not a child. Not if that’s what childhood means—fun and laughter when disaster is about to strike?”

“Eric,” Maureen says, her tone suddenly serious, “when do we need fun and laughter more?”

Maybe she’s right, but just now I don’t care. “Fine, then. You can think I’m boring and responsible if you want, but I’m going to see this through to the end. And if that means I need to be an adult, then I will be an adult.”

The ground growls beneath me. Maureen looks down uncomfortably. “Sure an’ you can be an adult if that’s what yer wantin’,” she says. “Me, I think I’ll still be a kid when I’m a gran. An’ here you are acting the granddad while yer still a kid.”

My anger has faded now—all that’s left is a quiet, half disappointed resignation. I miss the childhood she still wears like a fairy’s wings—fragile and unspeakably beautiful. But it’s too late for me now. I think I gave up on childhood a long time ago. I just haven’t admitted it till now.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “I guess you’re right. I *am* an adult.”

Tangled Threads

The ground splits beneath me as the world flashes blinding white.

* * *

I jerk upright in bed, breathless and sweaty. Slowly, I pull in air, calming my drumming pulse. *Just a dream. It's over now.*

But nothing is ever just a dream.

Trembling and not liking to admit it, I slip out of bed, tugging on a bathrobe over my pajamas. The terrycloth is comfortingly tattered, and my pulse is almost back to normal by the time I crack open my door, spilling light across my bedroom carpet.

Dad's office light is still on, and I pad silently by—he only works late when he's on deadline, and I know better than to disturb him.

I come into the kitchen and ease open a cabinet, groping for a glass. My fingers are still clumsy with sleep, and I cup it with both hands so I don't drop it.

The clear sound of water streaming into the glass does something to wake me, but I still lean against the fridge, yawning, as I watch the cup fill. Something twinges in my side—a bruised rib, maybe? Memories from my dreams brush against the edge of my mind, but I shoo them away. It never

Tangled Threads

does any good to remember dreams. Not when all of mine turn to nightmares.

The sound of typing from the office abruptly stops, and I sigh and cross the kitchen to switch on the water heater. If Dad's stuck, he'll want tea. But when he appears in the kitchen, shirt untucked and hair unruly above his collar, he doesn't even glance at the water heater. Instead he stares at me, makes a garbled exclamation, and tackles me in a hug so rough my water goes flying onto my robe.

"Nice to see you too," I gasp, patting his shoulder before I step back. "Work goin' all right?" I pause. Correct myself. "*Going* all right?"

Dad steps back, lifting my chin in his hand so he can study my face. "Are you all right, Eric?"

"Yes. . . ?"

"Thank God," he whispers, and hugs me again.

"I was just sleeping," I mumble against his shoulder.

He steps back, expression troubled. "You don't remember your dream?"

"Uhh . . . no?"

For a moment, he's silent. Then he says, "Come into the living room, Eric. We need to have a talk."

Tangled Threads

IX.

Maureen

MY BREATH CATCHES in my throat as I stare at the spot where Eric used to be. As swiftly as it appears, the seam in the floor melds back together, and I realize I'm holding my breath.

None o' that, girl, I scold myself, and draw in air, filling my lungs to the bottom and then releasing my breath in a slow exhale.

So. Eric's gone.

Grand. Just grand.

"C'mon, Maureen," I mutter, pressing my hands to my head and pacing across the pathetically small cottage. "Don't go panickin' now. . . . You got a dream to save here."

There's a screech outside, warm but urgent, and I grin.

"And you got a griffin on yer side, girl. That's not so bad."

* * *

Tangled Threads

Ten minutes later, Fluffy the Griffin and I are soaring toward the rip in the sky. It's actually rather grand, aside from the fact that the closer we get, the more nightmarish the world becomes.

Thunder crackles in the sky, and I brace myself as the sleet comes pelting down. It cuts through my jeans and sweatshirt till I'm soaked and shivering. And just when I think I can't possibly feel more miserable, a screech cuts through the sky—not Fluffy's warm golden one, but a cold metallic cry. Vicious and hungry.

I don't want to look up, but I do.

Just in time to see what I think is a harpy rake my face with her claws.

I jerk forward, clinging to Fluffy as twin lines of pain sear across my back, burning hot despite the sleet. Fluffy shoots forward, tail lashing, and for a moment I think we might outrun the harpies.

But then another looms in front of me, tattered gray garments flapping wildly in the wind as she dives—Fluffy screeches—I scream. . . .

And her claws knock me off his back and we go tumbling down in a blur of pain and fear.

* * *

Tangled Threads

The ground is hard.

I guess that shouldn't surprise me, but every inch of me hurts as I hit the ground, the harpy a few feet away. Teeth clenched, I scramble to my feet, imagining a sword in my hand as I fix my eyes on the harpy. The next minute I feel the leather hilt in my hand, hard and sturdy, and I relax, lifting the blade.

Thunder growls, and high above me, the threads pull into a deeper tangle.

"Just try an' get me," I taunt the harpy.

She picks herself up and gives a furious screech before she lifts into the air and charges.

A shield appears on my arm as she dives, deflecting her claws, but the black rocks shudder beneath me, and I lose my footing.

I skid a few feet down the slope and land on my hip, shield sprawling to the side and sword trapped beneath me. But harpies don't play fair, and she dives again, claws sinking into my shoulders and lifting me into the air for a few feet, then dropping me again.

Grand.

My sword is out of reach, and so I raise my shield to cover my head and chest, hoping she'll give up on me now.

But I'm in a nightmare.

Tangled Threads

No such luck.

Pain rakes my legs, and I kick blindly, eyes closed beneath the shield. My hiking boot makes satisfying contact with flesh, and I grin—but too soon.

Claws close around the edge of the shield, and slowly, the rim of metal starts to rise.

“*No!*” I shriek, and pull it back down. But the harpy is too strong for me, even without me bleeding into the ground, and the shield lifts with a wrench that I suspect breaks my wrist.

Well then.

I lift my less injured arm to guard my face as the harpy dives again, but already I know it’s no use.

I’m going to die.

And then I’m going to wake up.

And no one will be left to mend the nightmare.

X.

Eric

I SIT IN THE LIVING ROOM ALONE, waiting for Dad to finish with his tea. When he comes out, he's carrying two steaming mugs, and I accept one even though I don't like tea.

"Thanks."

He attempts a grin. "It's cocoa, Eric."

"Oh," I say, and smile. "Well, thanks again."

For a moment, Dad's silent, studying me over the rim of his mug. Then he says, "Do you remember our conversation yesterday?"

"The . . . which conversation?"

Wait.

Memories are filling my mind, no longer dormant from sleep, and I jerk upright on the couch.

"The Lady was . . . real? I thought I dreamed it."

"No," he says quietly, staring into his tea. "That was real. Do you remember any of your dream now?"

I nod, but my mind is too busy trying to fit together the pieces: the broken dream, the Lady who needed me to keep Maureen on track—great job I did of that. And underneath it all, I remember the nightmares I've had nearly

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every night since Mom and Lizzy died. The way I thought maybe this would cure them, and I could have happier days in dreams if not in reality.

Finally I exhale, hands curling around my untouched cocoa. “Yeah. It’s fuzzy, but . . . Maureen and I got very close to the tangle. The closer we got, the more nightmarish things became. So we never quite got there, and then she ran away when we were supposed to stay together, and I got frustrated and she accused me of being a boring adult, and I said that she was right if being a child meant just doing whatever you want.” I sigh, throat burning with mingled frustration and shame. “And so the dream kicked me out because I said I was an adult.”

I expect Dad to be mad, or at least disappointed, but when he leans forward, his eyes hold only empathy. “Eric, I don’t know that the Lady is right.”

I lift my eyebrows and take my first swig of cocoa—hot and rich. “She’s the Dream Weaver, though.”

“Yes,” he says, smiling. “But you told me yourself she’s not human. And so she can’t be expected to understand what humanity is. Adults *can* dream. Your mom taught me that.”

He gestures at the painting on the wall—the one he left up even though it makes me want to cry every time I look at it: a unicorn standing in the middle of a moonlit glade, a

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young girl reaching to touch its nose. That little girl was modeled off of Lizzy—I still remember how excited she was to put on her white Easter dress, don her crown of fairy lights. . . . Even now, I don't like to look at it. But I do, and for once, I don't find myself fighting back tears.

I find myself smiling.

“You're never too old to dream,” Dad says softly. When I glance at him, he's studying the painting too. “It's not the same as when you're a child—your dreams change. But they're always still there, ready in the back of your mind when you need them.”

Now tears sting my eyes—I must be more tired than I thought—and I look back at my cocoa, blinking. “All right, well . . . how does that help?”

He rises, crossing to me and resting a hand on my head. I'm really too tall for it now, but I don't mind it. “Put your cocoa in the fridge for later, son. And then go back to bed and dream.”

“I don't think that's how it works.” I set aside the cocoa, my stomach suddenly sour. “And besides, how can I get back in the right dream?”

“Maureen needs you, Eric. At least go try.”

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I close my eyes against the rush of dream-memories—Maureen’s tears as we fell, the horrible darkness closing around us, the pain of broken ribs grating with every step. . .

But I can’t help but also remember the fairies in the dusky forest. How Mom and Lizzy would have loved that. . . .

“All right,” I whisper. “Where’s the melatonin?”

* * *

I open my eyes to find myself crouched on a jagged mountainside, hugging my knees. The air is hot and sultry, and I lift my t-shirt to shield my lungs from some of it. For once, I’d take a face mask. Though at this rate, a gas mask might do more good.

Eventually I drop the t-shirt and rise, scanning the mountainside for any sign of Maureen. I’m close to the tear now, too close—I can’t see the sky, but the nightmarish fear in the air tells me that much.

Maureen is nowhere to be seen, and I’m struggling to calm myself when I see three birds circling in the air. No, not birds—they’re disturbingly humanoid. Harpies?

“All right,” I mutter, “well, I’ll just leave you to your circling and get on with saving the world.”

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But I make it exactly four steps before it occurs to me that I should at least go find out exactly what they're circling.

So, grumbling to myself, I turn and trudge back down the mountain.

When I crest a ridge and can see the valley below, I stop. Beneath the harpies sprawls a motionless human figure, her small face white against the backdrop of her hair.

I swallow. Then I start to run.

"Hey!" I yell at the harpies. "You oversized crows! Get out of here!"

The largest of the three screeches angrily and dives, scoring my scalp with her claws. Warm blood trickles down my neck, but I ignore it, sprinting the last yards to Maureen.

Just a dream. Going to be all right.

"Maureen," I gasp, falling to my knees beside her. Pain sears across my back, but I only lean forward to shelter her body from the attack. Her shoulders are torn, and her face is mottled with a combination of bruises and claw marks. "Maureen," I whisper again. The soft rise of her chest is almost imperceptible. . . .

A set of oversized claws dig into my shoulders—so that's how she got those marks—and I twist in the air as I'm lifted, beating uselessly at the harpy's scaly ankles with my fists. Boy, could I use some reinforcements right now. . . .

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As if in answer to my thought, a warm golden cry splits the air, and the harpies and I look up to see a magnificent beast flying through the air—tawny and sleek. For a moment I can't remember the creature's name—how Lizzy would scold me—but then it comes to me.

“Hey! Griffin! Over here—I could use a little help!”

The griffin cries out again, and two of the harpies scatter as it dives. The third, still gripping my shoulders, tries to lift into the air, each wing beat digging her claws deeper. But with my added weight, she can't lift more than a few feet. . . .

The griffin swoops closer, and I wince as I anticipate its next move.

“Hey, Griff, I don't really know—”

It ignores me and tackles the harpy.

I go rolling in a mad tangle of feathers and claws and rugged mountainside.

Something kicks me out into the open—the griffin, I hope—and I rise with shredded shirt and more scrapes and bruises than intact skin.

But now is not the time to worry about that, and I run for Maureen, lifting her head in my hands.

“Hey—you're all right now—I've got you. . . .
Maureen. . . .”

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The faintest of smiles quirks her lips, and she exhales.

I wait.

She doesn't breathe in.

Silence. Then I release a cry of mingled grief and anger and lower my head in despair.

Every inch of my body hurts. My only ally is dead. And I still have a mission to complete.

It takes every bit of my willpower to stand up. Every bit to turn towards the rip in the sky. Every bit to take the first trembling step.

Behind me, a silvery laugh echoes over the mountainside.

Every muscle stiffens as I whirl around. My eyes widen at the glowing figure standing before me.

Maureen?

XI.

Maureen

I GRIN AT ERIC'S LOOK of shock. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"Yeah," he mumbles, expression dazed. "I think I have."

"Ah, come on." I start to take his hand, but my fingers pass through his. He jumps back, eyes wide.

"Maybe no touching?" he suggests.

"What? Are you afraid of ghosts?"

"Ghosts aren't *real*," he snaps. "It's theologically impossible. This is just the product of my imagination."

"Harpies aren't real," I point out. "Or griffins. And technically this is *all* the product of your imagination."

"Whatever," he says, raking a hand through his hair before turning back to face me. "And also, did I mention this is theologically unacceptable?"

"Ah, wind yer neck in." I try to toss my hair, but given its weightless state, it just lifts into the air before settling back onto my shoulders. "It's just a dream. I'm not really dead. Now c'mon—speaking of dreams, we got one to fix."

A dream that's broken because of me. I swallow hard.

Tangled Threads

Despite my bright words, sourness settles into my stomach. I wrecked this world. It's up to me to fix it—ghost or not.

Though just how I'm supposed to repair a weaving when my hands go straight through Eric, I'm not sure.

“Are you able to give us wings again?” Eric asks.

I blink and return to the present. “Ah—sure, let me try.”

I wave my hand, and nothing happens. Then I crane my head back and see two translucent wings sprouting from my back. “ey, look at that! I'm an angel now.”

“This is getting more heretical by the moment,” Eric mutters.

I roll my eyes. “You can ride Fluffy.”

“Umm—Fluffy?”

I grin and give a shrill whistle.

The griffin settles on the rocky slope beside me, preening its golden feathers with a blood-crusting beak. I know the harpies are enemies—and that they're not even real—but my stomach still rolls. Not that ghosts can throw up.

Or can they?

You know what, I don't want to find out.

“All right, then,” I say briskly, “Fluffy—Eric. Eric—Fluffy.”

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Eric eyes the griffin's hooked beak. "Hey, umm, Fluffy."

I grin. "C'mon, climb aboard. He's not goin' to eat you. Not likely, at least. Though I'll wager you'd taste better than a ghost."

Eric gives me a look and scrambles onto the griffin.

We lift into the air and soar for the tangle—I find the heights don't bother me much as a ghost, which I guess is one good thing about being dead. But the world around grows darker by the moment, and when I glance at Eric, he looks about ready to fall off Fluffy.

"C'mon," I scold him. "It's just the dark."

He swallows, looking queasier by the moment.

"Are you in nappies again, needin' me to leave on the light in the hall?"

"Look," he snaps, "I didn't make fun of you for being afraid of heights, okay?"

I lift a translucent hand in defense. "'ey, no need to get so worked up. I was only slaggin'."

"Well," he says coldly, "maybe you could just be quiet for once so we can actually get something done."

I glare at him, but hold my tongue. At least, for about five seconds. Then a gust of wind tears us both from the sky, and I scream as I plummet downwards once again.

Tangled Threads

I am truly tired of nightmares by now.

XII.

Eric

THE WORLD GOES DARK, Maureen's scream the only thing anchoring me to reality. Fluffy is gone from beneath me—I can't feel a thing but the wind on my body, can't see, can't. . . .

I crash into the ground, softer than I'd expected, and groan. For a moment, I lie there as light fades softly into the room. Gauze curtains flutter against the window, a row of bright, chunky animals painted on the edge of the thick sill. I draw in my breath in what I tell myself is a gasp, not a sob.

Not again. Please . . . not again.

I know this room. I know this house.

And I realize that means I know this world.

This isn't Maureen's nightmare.

It's mine.

Voices in the hallway send me burrowing beneath the fluffy blankets, curling myself deeper into my pajamas, into a ball as tight and safe as a chubby three-year-old can make. Why can't I escape the memories, even in my sleep? Why do I have to relive it, powerless to change a thing, tasting the fresh pain every night?

Tangled Threads

I cover my ears, but that's not quite enough to block out the sound—and against my will, I relax as I listen.

“. . . going to pick up some cheerios,” Mom is saying in the hallway. “Anything you want?”

Dad chuckles, and my throat aches at the sound. He hasn't laughed like that in fourteen years. . . . “Oh, maybe a dragon, and a unicorn or two, and some fairies while you're at it. . . .”

“Dear,” Mom protests, “I don't tease you for spending your days staring into a glowing screen. And besides, I thought you liked my painting.”

“I do.” Softly, he kisses her. “Be home soon.”

“Of course.”

I don't wait to hear any more—I jump out of bed and pelt across the room, flinging open the door.

“Mommy!”

She looks down at me, laughing as she crouches to my level. “Hey there, Eric-bear. How was your nap?”

“Are you goin' someplace? 'Cause I wanna come wif you.”

“Well,” she says slowly, looking up at Dad, “you haven't had your snack yet.”

“I don't wanna snack.”

“Oh, go ahead and take him,” Dad says.

Tangled Threads

Mom half-sighs, half-laughs, rising. “He’s going to throw a fit in the store if he doesn’t eat after his nap. And I don’t like leaving you all alone.”

“Bring him something for the car,” he says. “And I’ll survive alone for half an hour.”

“Mommy!” Lizzy runs into the hallway, raincoat rustling as she stops. “Oh, can Eric come? We can play Princess Lizzy and the goblins in the car.”

Mom laughs, giving Dad a last kiss as she scoops me up, resting me on her round stomach, and goes to the door. “Of course he can. Who’s going to be the goblin this time?”

“You know,” she says, giggling and swinging open the door.

“Mommy,” I say, patting her cheek to get her attention. “Mommy, when the new bruzzer’s born, then I can be the knight and he will be the doblin.”

She grins at me, rubbing her nose against mine. “And what if the new baby is a girl and wants to be a princess too?”

I consider that, tangling my fingers in her thick auburn hair. “Then I will be the knight and protect them for always.”

“I like that plan,” she whispers, and nuzzles my face before she buckles me into my car seat.

Tangled Threads

Water droplets trickle down the window as Mom pulls from our gravel driveway onto the highway, slick and dark with rain. Thunder rumbles in the distance, and Lizzy giggles, leaning over from behind Mom's seat to press her face against mine.

"Hear that, Eric? That's God's tummy growling."

"Dod doesn't have a tummy," I protest.

"Jesus does. Right, Mommy?"

"Right," she says from in front of Lizzy, but she's frowning. I don't like to see her frown—she doesn't do it very often—and I stretch a soft hand towards her.

"Mommy, why are you sad?"

She doesn't seem to hear me—instead she jerks the wheel hard as a horn blares somewhere ahead of us. Lizzy screams as metal crunches into the front of the car and we go skidding off the road. I'm too frightened to make a sound as the car rolls over and over, till I don't know which way's up and which way's down anymore.

The car settles on its side, Mom sagging against her seatbelt between two white pillows. Lizzy is still crying, and I reach up to pat her cheek.

"s okay, Lizzy. Dod will take care of us."

Another horrible crunch, and my world descends into darkness.

XIII.

Maureen

I JERK UP IN BED, breathing hard and trying to remember where I am. Bridget's soft snore across the hall brings me back to reality, and I run my fingers down my arms—it feels good to have a body again.

But Eric needs me.

The Lady needs me.

I want to be a kid—want to do just what I want—but that's not who I am anymore. Eric proved that to me, even if he didn't know it.

So I take a deep breath, desperately hope I won't reenter the dream as a ghost, and snuggle back into my pillow.

XIV.

Eric

I OPEN MY EYES to find myself standing in my childhood pantry—myself again, not my three-year-old self—and I step into the bare kitchen to find Dad holding three-year-old me. I’m sobbing on his shoulder, and he is just barely keeping back his own tears.

“I know, buddy. But it just doesn’t make sense to stay here. Since Mom and Lizzy—” His voice catches.

I swallow hard and step away from the two of them, my dad and my inconsolable toddler self, going to the glass door that opens into the back meadow. Lizzy and I played there for hours on end. . . . Without thinking, I slide open the door and run for the grass.

It’s raining again, the cold drops slipping through the rips in my shirt and stinging the cuts zigzagging over my chest and back. I don’t mind it—the pain is an anchor right now, when it feels like my whole world is about to float away.

Hands in my pockets, I trudge deeper into the muddy meadow, the long, rain-beaded grasses swishing against my jeans. From far ahead, I hear laughter—clear and musical—

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and I stop. A girl is twirling through the meadow, slender and strawberry blonde, and the ache in my chest tightens.

For fourteen years, I've searched for her in every dream.

Finally, she's here.

A flash of color in the sky draws my attention, and I glance up to see the rip in the gray clouds growing. Behind the canvas of the sky, the threads tighten almost to the point of breaking. I don't want to know what will happen if they do.

But right now, it doesn't matter as much as finding Lizzy.

I look back at the meadow—and she's gone. Choking back tears, I begin to run again, breath tearing through my chest. *Please. You have to come back. I need you. . . .*

I reach the spot where she stood, hold my breath as I bend to touch a faint golden shimmer on the ground.

It's not just my imagination.

Or maybe it is—but this whole world is.

"Lizzy," I whisper, and will her to appear in front of me.

Nothing happens.

Then a soft hand brushes my shoulder.

I whirl around.

Tangled Threads

Lizzy smiles down at me—Princess Elizabeth, I think, grown up now—and I choke on a sob and fling myself into her arms.

“Whoa there,” she says, laughing. “You’re bigger than you used to be, you know.”

I hold her close, bending my head over hers and breathing in her familiar scent of mingled dirt and sunshine. “I waited so long,” I whisper.

“I know,” she says, her voice suddenly grave, as she strokes the back of my neck. “But it can’t last, Eric.”

I tighten my arms around her, holding her so close I can feel her ribcage against my hands, expanding with her every breath. “It will. It has to. I *need* you, Lizzy.”

Thunder growls above us. She pulls back just enough for me to see her face—still with the one eye barely larger than the other, the faintly uneven eyebrows, the little quirk to her mouth when she smiles, all so achingly familiar. “You’re destroying this dream, Eric.”

“No,” I whisper.

“Yes,” she says gently. “You are. You’re trying to make it something it can never be. It’s not real, you know. You have to wake sometime.”

Tangled Threads

“No, Lizzy.” I cup her cheek in my hand, studying every line of her face as if I’ll never see it again. “I want to come with you.”

She grins—her old impish grin from the photograph above my bed. “I know. And you will someday. But not yet.”

“Lizzy. . . .”

“I love you,” she says, pulling me close and nestling her head on my shoulder. It feels strange being taller than she is, but it also feels right. Like we were always meant to see this day.

“I love you too,” I whisper.

“But I have to go.” Her breath is warm on my neck. “And so do you, Eric. Mend the nightmare back into a dream. And let us go.”

I bow my head over her hair, breathing in its scent. “I don’t want to.”

“I know, Eric-bear. I know.”

But I have to.

The unspoken words hang between us.

Slowly, I step back.

“Tell me you’re happy where you are.”

She grins at me, a smile full of sunshine and summer even as the rain runs down her face, and for a moment I forget

Tangled Threads

she's just my imagination. "Of course I'm happy. It makes fairy tales look boring."

"All right," I whisper. "Then—I'll go. But please . . . don't forget about me."

Her laughter shimmers in the air again. "Oh, Eric, how could I even if I tried?"

And she disappears into a swirl of fog.

Tangled Threads

XV.

Maureen

I SLIP INTO DREAMS to find myself in a foggy meadow behind a snug white house. From behind me comes the sound of choked sobs, and I brush through the grasses, stopping when I see Eric crouched on the ground.

“ey—you all right?”

Hastily, he wipes his face, looking up. I crouch beside him, placing a hand on one of the less injured portions of his back. Not that there are many of those.

“What’s wrong?”

Eric stands, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Let’s go.”

“With you cryin’ on the ground two minutes ago? I don’t think so.”

His cheeks are red, and he turns away. “Look, I was just . . . working through some things. I’m fine. And we don’t have much time. Also—are you alive again?”

I give a nonchalant shrug. “Like you said, we’re runnin’ short on time. Let’s go.”

The world spins around us, and Eric grabs my hand. Even when the blur settles into the black mountainside, he

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doesn't relax his grip. Instead, he turns towards me, eyes serious.

"Maureen . . . you said this was your fault."

My cheeks flush crimson, and my stomach twists again. Looking down, I mumble, "It's 'cause I've been changin' too much. Each time I do somethin', the tangle gets worse."

"No," he says softly. "It's my fault. I've been causing this . . . ever since my mom and sister died."

"*Oh*," I say, and stand in silence for once. None of Mum's proverbs seems to be much help here, and after a moment's hesitation, I step forward and wrap my arms around him. Slowly, he relaxes against me, exhaling with a shudder.

"It'll be all right," I whisper against his shoulder.

For a moment, he doesn't move. Then he steps back, face resolute if not quite cheerful. "This isn't your responsibility, Maureen. What happened here is because of me . . . because of my own selfishness. If you want to stay here, I won't blame you."

"Are you the one slaggin' now?" I flash him a smile and take his hand again. "All this way, and you expect me to skip the best part?"

Tangled Threads

Slowly, he smiles. “All right, then. Here—I’ll take us there.”

* * *

The fact that I am flying through the air with nothing beneath me and not even a pair of wings ought to be terrifying. But I’ve survived a lot—falling and darkness and harpies.

Well, I suppose I didn’t survive the harpies, but still. You get my point.

And now, even I’ve got nothing else, Eric’s hand is still around mine.

XVI.

Eric

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I'M EXPECTING the world to look like beyond the shell of the sky, but the reality surprises me—a dim cement warehouse with a catwalk we land on, the tangled threads shimmering within easy reach. I glance around as I release Maureen's hand, wondering if we'll see any of the Dream Weavers, but the only sound is the echo of our own breathing. I guess technically this place still inside the dream since the Lady couldn't come repair it herself.

"Ah, here," Maureen says brightly, and I look at her to see she's reaching for a fistful of knotted threads.

"Careful," I snap, "you'll break them."

She grins at me, teeth flashing in the gloom. Her smile is so elvin it reminds me of Lizzy's, and a pang goes through me. "Don't think these'll be breakin' anytime soon. You feel them."

Hesitantly, I reach out. The threads thrum beneath my touch, more like the strings of an instrument than any fabric I've touched before. "All right," I say. "Where do we start?"

Tangled Threads

Her grin softens to a wondering smile as she strokes a single thread. “Blue for laughter.”

The thread shimmers beneath her touch. Gently, she turns to another.

“Red for love. Orange for courage. And green for home and family.”

Still smiling, she turns to me.

“That’s what Dad always told me, anyway.”

I reach for the threads again, impossibly soft. Golden sparks fly off at my touch, and I wince away. But the sparks don’t burn, just absorb into my skin. “So . . . how do we fix it?”

“Like so,” she says, unknotting a red thread from a blue and weaving them back into place.

Clumsily, I imitate her, but she giggles at my handiwork.

“Sean could do better than that!” she scolds, and unwinds it. “Try again.”

I do, and she gives a quick, contented nod.

“That’ll do. Good job, Gunderson. You learn fast.”

* * *

Tangled Threads

When the weaving is finished, I turn back to study the rip in the sky—but it's gone. The dream is finally whole again, and I exhale as I sit on the edge of the catwalk, my legs dangling over the depths below. Maureen settles a safe distance from the edge, hugging her knees.

“Y’know,” she says, “I’ve been thinkin’.”

I grin, glancing back at her. “Really?”

She rolls her eyes. “Ah, quit slaggin’ me. I was just thinkin’, you made this nightmare, right?”

My stomach twists as tight as the threads we just untangled. “Yeah.”

“Well,” she says with a surprising overtone of shyness, “then I’m guessin’ you’ve made more than one, and you’ll be wantin’ to fix them. And, if you were needin’ any help. . . .”

For a moment, I stare into the darkness beneath. Then I smile, laying back on the catwalk and resting my head in my hands. “Thanks, Maureen. I’d like that.”

XVII.

Maureen

One year later. . . .

THE AIRPORT'S A TANGLE OF ACTIVITY: mothers wrangling children back into stiff plastic seats, businessmen rushing to catch flights, teenagers sprawled in corners blasting music through earbuds. Mum would be appalled by the commotion, but I find myself rather enjoying it.

I scramble up, straightening my jumper and smoothing my jeans when I see him approaching—at least I assume it's him. The hair is right, and the height, but we always look a little different in dreams than in real life. But his grin tells me he's recognized me, and he stops a few feet away, offering his hand.

“You must be Maureen.”

My cheeks heat, so I toss back my hair and take his hand. “Sure and you must be blind not to know me.”

Eric shoves his hands back in his pockets, tilting his head to study me. “You look different in real life.”

I can't resist wrinkling my nose. “Not so pretty as in your dreams?”

Tangled Threads

Again, he grins, but his voice is serious. "Reality rarely is. But I'm coming to find that it's usually more satisfying."

"Back at the philosophy," I mutter, and he grins.

"Come on. My dad is waiting with the car. Can I take your bag?"

"Thanks," I say, and give him a sidelong glance as we start for the door. "You don't look half bad yourself, Eric."

He pauses, turning to me with an expression that makes me remember the time I accused him of acting like a granddad. "I haven't forgotten what happened in the first dream, Maureen."

I look down, studying the pattern of the mostly-clean carpet as I chew on my lip.

Eric hesitates. "I just . . . you live in Dublin, and. . ."

"Y'know," I interrupt, looking up, "I've been lookin' at colleges out here. Seems like I could do it with a scholarship, now Dad's doing better."

Eric's eyebrows go up. "What major are you looking at?"

I grin. "Textile arts."

We both laugh, till he pulls me out of the way for a family to pass, several small children trailing after their mum, and one on his dad's shoulder, rubbing his eyes with a chubby fist.

Tangled Threads

“Well,” Eric says a moment later, halting in front of the automated glass doors, “you never know what might happen in four years.”

“No.” I tilt my head and give him an impish smile. “You don’t.”

“Hey,” a man calls from a car idling at the curb—Eric’s dad by the look of him, “are you two coming? Or would you rather walk home?”

“Come on,” Eric says, grabbing my hand.

I laugh, and we run together into the rain.