

Greg Egan

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

My retainers keep me on ice. Dry ice. It slows my metabolism, takes the edge off my appetite, slightly. I lie, bound with heavy chains, between two great slabs of it, naked and sweating, trying to sleep through the torment of a summer's day.

They've given me the local fall-out shelter, the very deepest room they could find, as I requested. Yet my senses move easily through the earth and to the surface, out across the lazy, warm suburbs, restless emissaries skimming the sun-soaked streets. If I could rein them in I would, but the instinct that drives them is a force unto itself, a necessary consequence of what I am and the reason I was brought into being.

Being, I have discovered, has certain disadvantages. I intend seeking compensation, just as soon as the time is right.

In the dazzling, clear mornings, in the brilliant, cloudless afternoons, children play in the park, barely half a mile from me. They know I've arrived; part of me comes from each one of their nightmares, and each of their nightmares comes partly from me. It's day time now, though, so under safe blue skies they taunt me with foolish rhymes, mock me with crude imitations, tell each other tales of me which take them almost to the edge of hysterical fear, only to back away, to break free with sudden careless laughter. Oh, their laughter! I could put an end to it so quickly ...

“Oh yeah?” David is nine, he's their leader. He pulls an ugly face in my direction. “Great tough monster! Sure.” I respond instinctively: I reach out, straining, and a furrow forms in the grass, snakes towards his bare feet. Nearly. My burning skin hollows the ice beneath me. Nearly. David watches the ground, unimpressed, arms folded, sneering. *Nearly!* But the contract, one flimsy page on the bottom shelf of the Mayor's grey safe, speaks the final word: No. No loophole, no argument, no uncertainty, no imprecision. I withdraw, there is nothing else I *can* do. This is the source of my agony: all around me is living flesh, flesh that by nature I could joyfully devour in an endless, frantic, ecstatic feast, but I am bound by my signature in blood to take only the smallest pittance, and only in the dead

of night.

For now.

Well, never mind, David. Be patient. All good things take time, my friend.

“No fucking friend of mine!” he says, and spits into the furrow. His brother sneaks up from behind and, with a loud shout, grabs him. They roar at each other, baring their teeth, arms spread wide, fingers curled into imitation claws. I must watch this, impassive. Sand trickles in to fill the useless furrow. I force the tense muscles of my shoulders and back to relax, chanting: be patient, be patient.

Only at night, says the contract. After eleven, to be precise. Decent people are not out after eleven, and decent people should not have to witness what I do.

Andrews is seventeen, and bored. Andrew, I understand. This suburb is a hole, you have my deepest sympathies. What do they expect you to *do* around here? On a warm night like this a young man can grow restless. I know; *your* dreams, too, shaped me slightly (my principal creators did not expect *that*). You need adventure. So keep your eyes open, Andrew, there are opportunities everywhere.

The sign on the chemist's window says no money, no drugs, but you are no fool. The back window's frame is rotting, the nails are loose, it falls apart in your hands. Like cake. Must be your lucky night, tonight.

The cash drawer's empty (oh *shit!*) and you can forget about that safe, but a big, glass candy jar of valium beats a handful of Swiss health bars, doesn't it? There are kids dumb enough to pay for those, down at the primary school.

Only those who break the law, says the contract. A list of statutes is provided, to be precise. Parking offences, breaking the speed limit and cheating on income tax are *not* included; decent people are only human, after all. Breaking and entering is there, though, and stealing, well, that dates right back to the old stone tablets.

No loophole, Andrew. No argument.

Andrew has a flick knife, and a death's head tattoo. He's great in a fight, our Andrew. Knows some karate, once did a little boxing, he has no reason to be afraid. He walks around like he owns the night. Especially when there's nobody around.

So what's that on the wind? Sounds like someone breathing, someone close by. Very even, slow, steady, powerful. Where is the bastard? You can see in all directions, but there's no one in sight. What, then? Do you think it's in your head? That doesn't seem likely.

Andrew stands still for a moment. He wants to figure this out for himself, but I can't help giving him hints, so the lace of his left sand-shoe comes undone. He puts down the jar and crouches to retie it.

The ground, it seems, is breathing.

Andrew frowns. He's not happy about this. He puts one ear against the footpath, then pulls his head away, startled by the sound's proximity. Under that slab of paving, he could swear.

A gas leak! Fuck it, of course. A gas leak, or something like that. Something mechanical. An explanation. Pipes, water, gas, pumps, shit, who knows? Yeah. There's a whole world of machinery just below the street, enough machinery to explain anything. But it felt pretty strange for a while there, didn't it?

He picks up the jar. The paving slab vibrates. He plants a foot on it, to suggest that it stays put, but it does not heed his weight. I toss it gently into the air, knocking him aside into somebody's ugly letter box.

The contract is singing to me now. Ah, blessed, beautiful document! I hear you. Did I ever truly resent you? Surely not! For to kill with you as my accomplice, even once, is sweeter by far than the grossest bloodbath I can dream of, without your steady voice, your calm authority, your proud mask of justice. Forgive me! In the daylight I am a different creature, irritable and weak. Now we are in harmony, now we are in blissful accord. Our purposes are one. Sing on!

Andrew comes forward cautiously, sniffing for gas, a little uneasy but determined to view the comprehensible cause. A deep, black hole. He squats beside it, leans over, strains his eyes but makes out nothing.

I inhale.

Mrs Bold has come to see me. She is Chairman of the local Citizens Against Crime, those twelve fine men and women from whose dreams (chiefly, but not exclusively) I was formed. They've just passed a motion congratulating me (and hence themselves) on a successful first month. Burglaries, says Mrs Bold, have plummeted.

“The initial contract, you understand, is only for three months, but I'm almost certain we'll want to extend it. There's a clause allowing for that,

one month at a time.”

“Both parties willing.”

“Of course. We were all of us determined that the contract be scrupulously fair. You mustn't think of yourself as our slave.”

“I don't.”

“You're our business associate. We all agreed from the start that that was the proper relationship. But you do like it here, don't you?”

“Very much.”

“We can't increase the payment, you know. Six thousand a month, well, we've really had to scrape to manage that much. Worth every cent, of course, but ... ”

That's a massive lie, of course: six thousand is the very least they could bring themselves to pay me. Anything less would have left them wondering if they really owned me. The money helps them trust me, the money makes it all familiar: they're used to buying people. If they'd got me for free, they'd never sleep at night. These are fine people, understand.

“Relax, Mrs Bold. I won't ask for another penny. And I expect to be here for a very long time.”

“Oh, that's wonderful. Come the end of the year I'll be talking to the insurance companies about dropping the outrageous premiums. You've no idea how hard it's been for the small retailers.” She is ten feet from the doorway of my room, peering in through the fog of condensed humidity. With the dry ice and chains she can see very little of me, but this meagre view is enough to engender wicked thoughts. Who can blame her? I'm straight out of her dreams, after all. *Would you indeed, Mrs Bold?* I wonder. She feels two strong hands caressing her gently. Three strong hands. Four, five, six. Such manly hands, except the nails are rather long. And sharp. “Do you really have to stay in there? Trussed up like that?” Her voice is even, quite a feat. “We're having celebratory drinks at my house tomorrow, and you'd be very welcome.”

“You're so kind, Mrs Bold, but for now I do have to stay here. Like this. Some other time, I promise.”

She shakes the hands away. I could insist, but I'm such a gentleman. “Some other time, then.”

“Goodbye, Mrs Bold.”

“Goodbye. Keep up the good work. Oh, I nearly forgot! I have a little gift.” She pulls a brown-wrapped shape from her shopping bag. “Do you

like lamb?”

“You're too generous!”

“Not me. Mr Simmons, the butcher, thought you might like it. He's a lovely old man. He used to lose so much stock before you started work, not to mention the vandalism. Where shall I put it?”

“Hold it towards me from where you are now. Stretch out your arms.”

Lying still, ten feet away, I burst the brown paper into four segments which flutter to the floor. Mrs Bold blinks but does not flinch. The red, wet flesh is disgustingly cold, but I'm far too polite to refuse any offering. A stream of meat flows from the joint, through the doorway, to vanish in the mist around my head. I spin the bone, pivoted on her palms, working around it several times until it is clean and white, then I tip it from her grip so that it points towards me, and I suck out the marrow in a single, quick spurt.

Mrs Bold sighs deeply, then shakes her head, smiling. “I wish my husband ate like that! He's become a vegetarian, you know. I keep telling him it's *unnatural*, but he pays no attention. Red meat has had such a bad name lately, with all those stupid scientists scaremongering, saying it causes this and that, but I personally can't see how any one can live without it and feel that they're having a balanced diet. We were *meant* to eat it, that's just the way people are.”

“You're absolutely right. Please thank Mr Simmons for me.”

“I shall. And thank *you* again, for what you're doing for this community.”

“My pleasure.”

Mrs Bold dreams of me. Me? His face is like a film star's! There are a few factual touches, though: we writhe on a plain of ice, and I am draped in chains. It's a strange kind of feedback, to see your dreams made flesh, and then to dream of what you saw. Can she really believe that the solid, sweating creature in the fall-out shelter is no more and no less than the insubstantial lover who knows her every wish? In her dream I am a noble protector, keeping her and her daughters safe from rapists, her son safe from pushers, her domestic appliances safe from thieves; and yes, I do these things, but if she knew why she'd run screaming from her bed. In her dream I bite her, but my teeth don't break the skin. I scratch her, but only as much as she needs to enjoy me. I could shape this dream into a nightmare, but why telegraph the truth? I could wake her in a sweat of

blood, but why let the sheep know it's headed for slaughter? Let her believe that I'm content to keep the wolves at bay.

David's still awake, reading. I rustle his curtain but he doesn't look up. He makes a rude sign, though, aimed with precision. A curious child. He can't have seen the contract, he can't *know* that I can't yet harm him, so why does he treat me with nonchalant contempt? Does he lack imagination? Does he fancy himself brave? I can't tell.

Street lamps go off at eleven now; they used to stay on all night, but that's no longer necessary. Most windows are dark; behind one a man dreams he's punching his boss, again and again, brutal, unflinching, insistent, with the rhythm of a factory process, a glassy eyed jogger, or some other machine. His wife thinks she's cutting up the children; the act appals her, and she's hunting desperately for a logical flaw or surreal piece of furniture to prove that the violence will be consequence-free. She's still hunting. The children have other things to worry about: they're dreaming of a creature eight feet tall, with talons and teeth as long and sharp as carving knives, hungry as a wild fire and stronger than steel. It lives deep in the ground, but it has very, very, very long arms. When they're good the creature may not touch them, but if they do just *one* thing wrong ...

I love this suburb. I honestly do. How could I not, born as I was from its sleeping soul? These are my people. As I rise up through the heavy night heat, and more and more of my domain flows into sight, I am moved almost to tears by the beauty of all that I see and sense. Part of me says: sentimental fool! But the choking feeling will not subside. Some of my creators have lived here all their lives, and a fraction of their pride and contentment flows in my veins.

A lone car roars on home. A blue police van is parked outside a brothel; inside, handcuffs and guns are supplied by the management: they look real, they feel real, but no one gets hurt. One cop's been here twice a week for three years, the other's been dragged along to have his problem cured: squeezing the trigger makes him wince, even at target practice. From tonight he'll never flinch again. The woman thinks: I'd like to take a trip. Very soon. To somewhere cold. My life smells of men's sweat.

I hear a husband and wife screaming at each other. It echoes for blocks, with dogs and babies joining in. I steer away, it's not my kind of brawl.

Linda has a spray can. Hi Linda, like your hair-cut. Do you *know* how much that poster cost? What do you mean, sexist pornography? The people who designed it are creative geniuses, haven't you heard them say so? Besides, what do you call those posters of torn-shirted actors and

tight-trousered rock stars all over your bedroom walls? And how would you like it if the agency sent thugs around to spray *your* walls with nasty slogans? You don't force *your* images on the public? They'll have to read your words, won't they? Answering? Debating? Redressing the imbalance? Cut it out, Linda, come down to earth. No, lower. Lower still.

Hair gel gives me heartburn. I must remember that.

Bruno, Pete and Colin have a way with locked cars.

Alarms are no problem. So fast, so simple; I'm deeply impressed. But the engine's making too much noise, boys, you're waking honest workers who need their eight hours' sleep.

It's exhilarating, though, I have to admit that: squealing around every corner, zooming down the wrong side of the road. Part of the thrill, of course, is the risk of getting caught.

They screech to a halt near an all-night liquor store. The cashier takes their money, but that's his business; selling alcohol to minors is not on my list. On the way back, Pete drops a dollar coin between the bars of a storm water drain. The cashier has his radio up very loud, and his eyes are on his magazine. Bruno vomits as he runs, while Pete and Collin's bones crackle and crunch their way through the grille.

Bruno heads, incredibly, for the police station. Deep down, he feels that he is good. A little wild, that's all, a rebel, a minor non-conformist in the honourable tradition. He messes around with other people's property, he drinks illegally, he drives illegally, he screws girls as young as himself, illegally, but he has a heart of gold, and he'd never hurt a fly (except in self-defence). Half this country's heroes have been twice as bad as him. The archetype (he begs me) is no law-abiding puritan goody-goody.

Put a sock in it, Bruno. This is Mrs Bold and friends talking: it's just your kind of thoughtless hooliganism that's sapping this nation's strength. Don't try invoking Ned Kelly with *us!* In any case (Bruno knew this was coming), we're *third* generation Australians, and you're only *second*, so we'll judge the archetypes, thank you very much!

The sergeant on duty might have seen a boy's skeleton run one step out of its flesh before collapsing, but I doubt it. With the light so strong inside, so weak outside, he probably saw nothing but his own reflection.

David's still up. Disgraceful child! I belch in his room with the stench of fresh blood; he raises one eyebrow then farts, louder and more foul.

Mrs Bold is still dreaming. I watch myself as she imagines me: so handsome, so powerful, bulging with ludicrous muscles yet gentle as a

kitten. She whispers in “my” ear: Never leave me! Unable to resist, I touch her, very briefly, with a hand she's never felt before: the hand that brought me Linda, the hand that brought me Pete.

The long, cold tongue of a venomous snake darts from the tip of her dream-lover's over-sized cock. She wakes with a shout, bent double with revulsion, but the dream is already forgotten. I blow her a kiss and depart.

It's been a good night.

David knows that something's up. He's the smartest kid for a hundred miles, but it will do him no good. When the contract expires there'll be nothing to hold me.

A clause *allowing for* an extension! Both parties willing! Ah, the folly of amateur lawyers! What do they think will happen when I choose *not* to take up the option? The contract, the only force they have, is silent. They dreamed it into being together with me, a magical covenant that I literally cannot disobey, but they stuffed up the details, they failed with the fine print. I suppose it's difficult to dream with precision, to concentrate on clauses while your mind is awash with equal parts of lust and revenge. Well, I'm not going to magically dissolve into dream-stuff. I'll be staying right here, in this comfortable basement, but without the chains, without the dry ice. I'll be done with the feverish torture of abstinence, when the contract expires.

David sits in the sunshine, talking with his friends.

“What will we do when the monster breaks loose?”

“Hide!”

“He can find us anywhere.”

“Get on a plane. He couldn't reach us on a plane.”

“Who's got that much money?”

Nobody.

“We have to kill him. Kill him *before* he can get us.”

“How?”

How indeed, little David? With a sling-shot? With your puny little fists? Be warned: trespass is a serious crime, so is attempted murder, and I have very little patience with criminals.

“I'll think of a way.” He stares up into the blue sky. “Hey, monster!”

We're gonna get you! Chop you into pieces and eat you for dinner! Yum, yum, you're delicious!" The ritual phrases are just for the little kids, who squeal with delight at the audacity of such table-turning. Behind the word sounds, behind his stare, David is planning something very carefully. His mind is in a blind spot, I can't tell what he's up to, but *forget it*, David, whatever it is. I can see your future, and it's a big red stain, swarming with flies.

"Hey monster! If you don't like it, come and get me! Come and get me now!" The youngest cover their eyes, not knowing if they want to giggle or scream. "Come on, you dirty coward! Come and chew me in half, if you can!" He jumps to his feet, dances around like a wounded gorilla. "That's how you look, that's how you walk! You're ugly and you're sick and you're a filthy fucking coward! If you don't come out and face me, then everything I say about you is true, and every one will know it!"

I write in the sand: NEXT THURSDAY. MIDNIGHT.

A little girl screams, and her brother starts crying. This is no longer fun, is it? Tell Mummy how that nasty David frightened you.

David bellows: "Now! Come here now!"

I deepen the letters, then fill them with the blood of innocent burrowing creatures. David scuffs over the words with one foot, then fills his lungs and roars like a lunatic: "NOW!"

I throw half a ton of sand skywards, and it rains down into their hair and eyes. Children scatter, but David stands his ground. He kneels on the sand, talks to me in a whisper:

"What are you afraid of?"

I whisper back: "Nothing, child."

"Don't you want to kill me? That's what you keep saying."

"Don't fret, child, I'll kill you soon."

"Kill me now. If you can."

"You can wait, David. When the time comes it will be worth all the waiting. But tell your mother to buy herself a new scrubbing brush, there'll be an awful lot of cleaning up to do."

"Why should I wait? What are *you* waiting for? Are you feeling *weak* today? Are you feeling ill? Is it too much effort, a little thing like killing me?"

This child is becoming an irritation.

“The time must be right.”

He laughs out loud, then pushes his hands into the sand. “Bullshit! You're afraid of me!” There's nobody in sight, he has the park to himself now; if he's acting, he's acting for me alone. Perhaps he is insane. He buries his arms half-way to his elbows, and I can sense him reaching for me; he imagines his arms growing longer and longer, tunnelling through the ground, seeking me out. “Come on! Grab me! I dare you to try it! Fucking coward!” For a while I am silent, relaxed. I will ignore him. Why waste my time exchanging threats with an infant? I notice that I've broken my chains in several places, and burnt a deep hollow in the dry ice around me. It suddenly strikes me as pathetic, to need such paraphernalia simply in order to fast. Why couldn't those incompetent dreamers achieve what they claimed to be aiming for: a dispassionate executioner, a calm, efficient tradesman? I know why: I come from deeper dreams than they would ever willingly acknowledge; my motives are their motives, exposed, with a vengeance. Well, six more days will bring the end of all fasting. Only six more days. My breathing, usually so measured, is ragged, uncertain.

In David's mind, his hands have reached this room.

“Don't you want to eat me? Monster? Aren't you hungry today?”

With hard, sharp claws I grab his hands, and, half a mile away, he feels my touch. The faintest tremor passes through his arms, but he doesn't pull back. He closes his hands on the claws he feels in the sand, he grips them with all his irrelevant strength.

“OK, monster. I've got you now. Come up and fight.”

He strains for ten seconds with no effect. I slam him down into the loose yellow sand, armpit deep, and blood trickles from his nose.

The agony of infraction burns through my guts, while the hunger brought on by the smell of his blood grips every muscle in my body and commands me to kill him. I bellow with frustration. My chains snap completely and I rampage through the basement, snapping furniture and bashing holes in the walls. The contract calmly sears a hole in my abdomen. I didn't mean to harm him! It was an accident! We were playing, I misjudged my strength, I was a little bit too rough ... and I long to tear the sweet flesh from his face while he screams out for mercy. The burly thugs they employ as my minders cower in a corner while I squeeze out the light bulbs and tear wiring from the ceiling.

David whispers: “Can't you taste my blood? It's here on the sand beside me.”

“David, I swear to you, you will be first. Thursday on the stroke of midnight, you will be *first*.”

“Can't you smell it? Can't you taste it?”

I blast him out of the sandpit, and he lies winded but undamaged on his back on the grass. The patch of bloodied sand is dispersed. David, incredibly, is still muttering taunts. I am tired, weak, crippled; I shut him out of my mind, I curl up on the floor to wait for nightfall.

My keepers, with candles and torches, tiptoe around me, sweeping up the debris, assessing the damage. Six more days. I am immortal, I will live for a billion years, I can live through six more days.

There had better be some crime tonight.

“Hello? Are you there?”

“Come in, Mrs Bold. What an honour.”

“It's after eleven, I'm so sorry, I hope you won't let me interrupt your work.”

“It's perfectly all right, I haven't even started yet.”

“Where are the men? I didn't see a soul on my way in.”

“I sent them home. I know, they're paid a fortune, but it's so close to Christmas, I thought an evening with their families...”

“That was sweet of you.” Standing in the foyer, she can't see me at all tonight. Condensation fills my room completely, and wisps swirl out to tease her. She thinks about walking right in and tearing off her clothes, but who could really face their dreams, awake? She enjoys the tension, though, enjoys half-pretending that she could, in fact, do it.

“I've been meaning to pop in for ages. I can't believe I've left it so late! I was up on the ground floor earlier tonight, but the stupid lifts weren't working and I didn't have my keys to the stairs, so I went and did some shopping. Shopping! You wouldn't believe the crowds! In this heat it's so exhausting. Then when I got home the children were fighting and the dog was being sick on the carpet, it was just one thing after another. So here I am at last.”

“Yes.”

“I'll get to the point. I left a thing here the other day for you to sign, just a little agreement formalising the extension of the contract for another month. I've signed it, and the Mayor's signed it, so as soon as we have your

mark it will all be out of the way, and things can just carry on smoothly without any fuss.”

“I'm not going to sign anything.”

That doesn't perturb her at all.

“What do you want? More money? Better premises?”

“Money has no value for me. And I'll keep this place, I rather like it.”

“Then what do you want?”

“An easing of restrictions. Greater independence. The freedom to express myself.”

“We could extend your hours. Ten until five. No, not until five, it's too light by five. Ten until four?”

“Oh, Mrs Bold, I fear I have a shock for you. You see, I don't wish to stay under your contract at all.”

“But you can't *exist* without the contract.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The contract rules you, it defines you. You can no more break it than I can levitate to the moon or walk on water.”

“I don't intend breaking it. I'm merely going to allow it to lapse. I've decided to go freelance, you see.”

“You'll vanish, you'll evaporate, you'll go right back where you came from.”

“I don't think so. But why argue? In forty minutes, one of us will be right. Or the other. Stay around and see what happens.”

“You can't force me to stay here.”

“I wouldn't dream of it.”

“I could be back in five minutes with some very nasty characters.”

“Don't threaten me, Mrs Bold. I don't like it. Be very careful what you say.”

“Well, what do you plan to do with your new-found freedom?”

“Use your imagination.”

“Harm the very people who've given you life, I suppose. Show your gratitude by attacking your benefactors.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I'll enjoy it. Because it will make me feel warm, deep inside. It will make me feel satisfied. Fulfilled.”

“Then you're no better than the criminals, are you?”

“To hear that tired old cliché slip so glibly from your lips, Mrs Bold, is truly boring. Moral philosophy of every calibre, from the ethereal diversions of theologians and academics, to the banalities spouted by politicians, business leaders, and self-righteous, self-appointed pillars of the community like you, is all the same to me: noise, irrelevant noise. I kill because I like to kill. That's the way you made me. Like it or not, that's the way you are.”

She draws a pistol and fires into the doorway.

I burst her skin and clothing into four segments which flutter to the floor. She runs for the stairs, and for a moment I seriously consider letting her go: the image of a horseless, red Godiva sprinting through the night, waking the neighbourhood with her noises of pain, would be an elegant way to herald my reign. But appetite, my curse and my consolation, my cruel master and my devoted concubine, can never be denied.

I float her on her back a few feet above the ground, then I tilt her head and force open her jaws. First her tongue and oesophagus, then rich fragments from the walls of the digestive tract, rush from her mouth to mine. We are joined by a glistening cylinder of offal.

When she is empty inside, I come out from my room, and bloody my face and hands gobbling her flesh. It's not the way I normally eat, but I want to look good for David.

David is listening to the radio. Everyone else in the house is asleep. I hear the pips for midnight as I wait at the door of his room, but then he switches off the radio and speaks:

“In my dream, the creature came at midnight. He stood in the doorway, covered in blood from his latest victim.”

The door swings open, and David looks up at me, curious but calm. Why, how, is he so calm? The contract is void, I could tear him apart right now, but I swear he'll show me some fear before dying. I smile down at him in the very worst way I can, and say:

“Run, David! Quick! I'll close my eyes for ten seconds, I promise not to peek. You're a fast runner, you might stay alive for three more minutes.

Ready?"

He shakes his head. "Why should I run? In my dream, you wanted me to run, but I knew it was the wrong thing to do. I wanted to run, but I didn't, I knew it would only make things worse."

"David, you should always run, you should always try, there's always some small chance of escaping."

He shakes his head again. "Not in my dream. If you run, the creature will catch up with you. If you run, you'll slip and break a leg, or you'll reach a blind alley, or you'll turn a corner and the creature will be there, waiting."

"Ah, but this isn't your dream now, David. Maybe you've seen me in your dreams, but now you're wide awake, and I'm *real*, David, and when I kill you, you won't wake up."

"I know that."

"The pain will be real pain, David. Have you thought about that? If you think your dreams have made you ready to face me, then think about the pain."

"Do you know how many times I've dreamed about you?"

"No, tell me."

"A thousand times. At least. Every night for three years, almost."

"I'm honoured. You must be my greatest fan."

"When I was six, you used to scare me. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, screaming and screaming, and Dad would have to come in and lie beside me until I fell asleep again. You never used to catch me, though. I'd always wake up just in time."

"That's not going to happen tonight."

"Let me finish."

"I'm so sorry, please continue."

"After a while, after I'd had the dream about a hundred times, I started to learn things. I learnt not to run. I learnt not to struggle. That changed the dream a lot, took away all the fear. I didn't mind at all, when you caught me. I didn't wake up screaming. The dream went on, and you killed me, and I still didn't mind, I still didn't wake up."

I reach down and grab him by the shoulders, I raise him high into the air. "Are you afraid now, David?" I can feel him trembling, very slightly: he's human after all. But he shows no other signs of fear. I dig my claws

into his back, and the pain brings tears to his eyes. The smell awakens my appetite, and I know the talking will soon be over.

“Ah, you look miserable now, little David. Did you feel those claws in your dreams? I bet you didn't. My teeth are a thousand times sharper, David. And I won't kill you nicely. I won't kill you quickly.”

He's smiling at me, *laughing at me*, even as he grimaces with agony.

“I haven't told you the *best part* yet. You didn't let me finish.”

“Tell me the best part, David. I want to hear the best part before I eat your tongue.”

“Killing me destroyed you, every single time. You can't kill the dreamer and live! When I'm dead, you'll be dead too.”

“Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think stupid talk like that is going to save your life? You're not the only dreamer, David, you're not even one of the twelve. Every one for miles around helped in making me, child, and one less out of all those thousands isn't going to hurt me at all.”

“Believe that if you like.” I squeeze him, and blood pours down his back. I open my jaws, wide as his head. “You'll find out if I'm right or not.” I wanted to torture him, to make it last, but now my hunger has killed all subtlety, and all I can think of is biting him in two. Shutting him up for good, proving him wrong. “One thousand times, big tough monster! Has anyone else dreamed about you *one thousand times*?”

His parents are outside the room, watching, paralysed. He sees them and cries out, “I love you!” and I realise at last that he truly does know he is about to die. I roar with all my strength, with all the frustration of three months in chains and this mad child's mockery, but as I close my jaws I hear him whisper:

“And no one else dreamed of your death, did they?”

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The End