

## A Girl's First Dream

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As the sun set over the distant ocean, its fading light fell across the chipped stucco of a small brown building not far from a short dirt road. A single flickering lamp illuminated the road, and another cast a yellow glow over the small parking lot outside the building. A glowing sign reading “Tony’s” hung above the double glass doors leading inside, the “o” much darker than the other letters, just as it had been for years.

Inside, however, it was brightly lit and crowded. Nearly every table was filled, and the smell of various Italian dishes wafted from the kitchens, through the slowly turning ceiling fans, and down onto the guests below. The mood was cheerful, and laughter filled the room. Most of the customers inside were familiar with the owner, and as a result, had gotten to know each other quite well, too. The restaurant had a small-town vibe that was missing from much of the rest of the city, and everyone loved it there.

The trio sitting at a table near the middle of the room was no exception. A tall man sat on one side of the table, and a

woman and a young girl sat on the other. The man sat slightly hunched as though suffering from back pain, and he appeared slightly frail, but he was not old. Though not in the best of health, he still had a strong voice that could quiet any room; himself a teacher, this was quite useful.

The woman, by contrast, looked much younger. She had fair skin, long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. The girl next to her was very young, but at the age of five, she sat comfortably in her seat, the look of maturity and intelligence in her eyes unlike most other children her age. She shared the same hair and eyes as her mother, but had the beginnings of her father's intimidating gaze. She seemed slightly uneasy with all the people around, especially when boisterous laughter boomed from nearby—she very much did not enjoy crowds—so she shrunk back slightly in her seat. Her mother seemed to notice, and put an arm around her.

“I know you don't like these get-togethers, but forgive us tonight, dear. Everything you've done lately is worth this celebration!”

“She's absolutely right, Ashley,” the man said. “Not yet six years old and already graduating elementary school. We knew you were smart, but I've never seen the like in anyone else.”

“Your father and I are so proud of you, dear,” the woman continued, giving her daughter a bright smile.

“I wouldn't mind so much if you didn't tell everyone else!” the girl protested, her face turning pink. “Was it necessary for the whole restaurant to know?”

“You know everyone here is happy for you,” her father replied gently. “They've been here for every birthday and special event for you, and they want to see you succeed.”

“Besides, after we finish embarrassing you here, we're going

to get you your favorite ice cream,” her mother added, drawing a reluctant smile from the girl.

Taking this to mean they had succeeded in bribing their daughter at least temporarily, the father stood up, raising his glass. As those at the other tables noticed, they fell silent.

“Tonight I would simply like to congratulate my daughter,” he said, his strong voice reaching every corner of the room. “Earlier this afternoon, she walked with the students of her elementary school, not as a new student, but as a fellow graduate.”

At this, applause came from all around, and Ashley sunk deeper into her seat, her face now bright red.

“She has requested a year off to pursue studies of her own at home, to which my wife and I have delightedly obliged. However, at this point I am not sure if there are any books left in our library she has not read.” A few people laughed, and Ashley looked very determinedly into her lap to avoid the stares. “This of course means that, if all goes according to her plan, she will be the youngest person ever to enroll in our nearby middle school at the age of seven.”

Noticing her daughter’s obvious discomfort, the mother looked up at her husband and silently motioned for him to hurry. With a wink, the husband turned back to the rest of the restaurant.

“To Ashley! May she continue to learn, to grow, and to succeed, and may we, as her proud parents, be there every step of the way.”

More applause echoed from around the room, and as Ashley’s father took a drink, the rest of the room did too. He sat back down and smiled as his daughter looked away from him, frowning.

“It’s all right. We’ll be off now,” he said, then turned to a

short and balding man who was standing close to them. “We’ll need our bill now, Tony.”

“You kiddin’ me?” the man chortled. “You eat on the house tonight. This kid is makin’ me look good!” As the customers at the nearby table laughed, he turned back to Ashley and continued, “But really, congratulations. I’ve never met anyone like you before, so keep up the work, eh? One day I might be working for you!”

“Th-thank you,” Ashley stammered quietly, looking into her drink.

She quickly followed her parents as they stood up, and as they walked out the door, Tony gave them another wave.

“Have a great night, folks! See you soon!”

Despite the excitement of the day and the earliness of the hour, Ashley still found herself exhausted, and before they had made it home, she had fallen asleep on her mother’s arm in the car. She found herself being shaken gently awake as they pulled into the driveway, and she rubbed her eyes, fighting off her disorientation.

“Go get ready for bed and I’ll be up in a moment, all right?” her father said, and she nodded, walking sleepily down the hall to her room as her mother turned on the lights inside. She looked longingly at her bed as she got dressed in her night clothes, but she didn’t want to skip her father’s story telling. Despite all the stories she had read already, there was something about his stories that seemed more... real.

Soon enough, her father walked into the room a few minutes later, helped his daughter into her tall bed, and tucked her in.

“What is your story tonight?” she asked earnestly.

“I have quite a unique tale for you tonight, though it’s a short one,” he replied with an almost mischievous grin, sitting

at the foot of the bed. "In this story I will be giving you the basics, but you'll be coming up with the rest."

Ashley groaned. She never liked it when her father played these games.

"I know, I know, but I'm sure you'll love this one," he said with a chuckle. "Now tell me, how much do you know about dreams?" Ashley shook her head, but her father persisted. "At least give me a guess."

"Well... dreams are like... well, you imagine stuff all day, so at night is when your brain gets to imagine things for itself, right?"

The man nodded.

"That is one take on it. However, not much is known about dreams. In fact, scientists don't yet know the purpose or cause for dreams at all! They're still trying to figure it out."

At this, his daughter's eyes widened ever-so-slightly, and she had the expression on her face she always did when being presented with a challenge. Her father smiled. He knew she would like it.

"Now, imagine with me if you will, a dream where you could control the world around you and explore anything you wanted."

"That's impossible," Ashley said, frowning. "Whenever I have dreams, I can't do anything. Sometimes I want to run, but I can't."

"Oh, but that's why this is a special dream," he continued intently. "It is not a normal dream at all. It is a dream *world*, one where you can meet other people around the world who are in the same dream with you, one where you can explore the skies and seas, and one where your powers are limited only by your imagination. There are gleaming cities of gold, islands in the sky, and even a city that floats upon the clouds!"

Ashley looked deep in thought, and it took her a moment to respond.

“So you’re saying... it’s like meeting real people, but inside a dream? And I can do anything I want?”

“Exactly! In this world, you can do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t affect anyone else. It does have to be fair, you know.”

Ashley looked slightly disappointed, but still very intrigued.

“What do you call this place?”

“It is called The Dream Sanctum, and it is a place you can only enter if you try very hard, or if you get lucky,” he explained quietly. “When in an ordinary dream, you will see a golden door. Do not run away or turn your back; walk through the door, and you will have found your entrance.”

The girl put her hand to her chin, thinking hard. Her father stood up from the bed, having succeeded in his mission.

“That’s all I get?” the girl pouted, and her father laughed.

“I think you have more than enough material for one night! You have a wonderful imagination, and falling asleep to your own stories can be quite an experience,” he replied, then leaned over to kiss the top of her head. “Who knows? You may have some very interesting dreams tonight.”

He turned to leave the room, and had almost turned out the lights when his daughter spoke up again.

“Dad... where did you come up with this idea?”

“Oh, it just crossed my mind. Good night, dear,” he replied innocently, then turned out the light, smiling at the annoyed groan he heard from behind him.

Ashley turned over in bed, staring out her window at the rising moon. Her mind was racing with the ‘story’ her father had just told her, though as she tried to process it, she realized that she was far too tired to do much thinking at the moment.

Her eyes slowly fluttered closed, the bright moon the last thing she saw.

She opened her eyes to find herself back on the field of her elementary school. It was dark outside, though the lights inside were on. Though she looked hard, she couldn't see anyone else there. Despite this, she was not afraid. She knew she was supposed to be there.

She wandered through the halls of the buildings, aware of her footsteps echoing through them. She knew she had graduated and didn't even attend that school anymore, but she still knew exactly what she was looking for.

However, as she entered her old classroom, she noticed something oddly different about it. All of the desks were pushed to two sides of the room, leaving the center completely clear except for one thing: a large golden door standing within its frame. There was nothing else around it, and Ashley wondered how it didn't fall over at the slightest touch. As she put her hand on the knob, she noticed it felt quite sturdy.

*This seems familiar*, she thought to herself, but she couldn't quite place it. She knew she had seen this door somewhere, but wasn't sure where or when. Nevertheless, she turned the knob and, with some effort, pushed the door open. She held her breath, then exhaled in disappointment as she looked through the frame, which showed nothing but the other side of the classroom. *I was expecting some secret passageway at least.*

With a sigh, she resolutely stepped through the door anyway. However, before her foot had even touched the ground on the other side of the frame, she found herself being suddenly pulled forward with great force. She screamed as she found herself flying at great speed, and she frantically tried to stabilize her movement in case she had to land. No sooner had she managed to stop tumbling than she found herself thrown into a

small, dark room. Moving too fast to land on her feet, she crashed once, twice, then three times, and hit the wall at the end of the room with a *thud*.

Ashley moaned as she got to her feet, then looked around.

*Where... am I?*

The room was empty but for one small cabinet in the corner and a small grimy window that hardly let any light in at all. Deciding not to exit the room just yet, she walked over to the cabinet and cautiously opened the drawer. Inside was a single book, one that looked so old she thought it might crumble if disturbed. Ashley took it out, blew off the dust that coated the cover, and tried to make out the faded text.

*A Histor—*

*Lands of—*

*By K. Win—*

The rest of the letters were too faded to make out, and it wasn't bright enough in the room for her to read anything inside. She sighed, then put the book back in the drawer, shutting it completely.

Suddenly, she froze. She looked around the room, raised her hands in front of her face, and wiggled her fingers for a few moments before the realization hit her. *I'm controlling my dream. I'm controlling it!*

She clapped her hands excitedly, then determinedly strode across the room and opened the door, savoring every action as though she had just learned how to walk again. Her confidence remained even as she stepped outside onto the street, but faltered slightly as she noticed that most of the people in the area were now looking at her.

"You're new here, aren't you?" one of them said, walking over to her. She was a young dark-skinned woman dressed in a kimono-style garb of red and gold. She had fiery red eyes, and



red and purple hair to match. At her side was buckled a sword, and on her feet were simple wooden sandals. Despite her modest appearance and quiet voice, she still seemed intimidating, and Ashley took an instinctive step back.

“Please do not be afraid. I am just here to welcome you, and to offer you any assistance if you require. Who might you be?”

“I... m-my name is...” Ashley froze, her mind a blank. She thought frantically, trying to remember her own name, but she immediately thought of the book she had just picked up in the cabinet just moments before. “K-k win...”

“Kwin?” the young woman offered, and, thankful for the interruption, Ashley nodded hard.

“Yes,” she repeated, and for some reason she felt a surge of confidence as she introduced herself. “Kwin. My name is Kwin.”

