

Dream Magic: Awakenings

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

A mage turns dream into vision.

- Awakenings, Dreamer's Handbook

Eric was running. *Not this nightmare again*, he thought.

He was gazing ahead, his eyes seeing only the path where his next two or three steps would land. The surroundings were nothing but a colorless blur he was running through. His mind worked frenetically to see not what was ahead, but what was behind: two goblins half his height trying to catch up to him. Eric could very clearly see in his mind the dark green skin and the multitude of those pointy, crooked teeth. They were swinging small clubs made from hard wood, the smoothness of which was most likely forged by a lot of clobbering action. Eric could not stop envisioning the jagged teeth and burnished weapons, since he was constantly hearing a grinding and munching "rawbrawrwrblr" sound coming from behind - a sound similar to that of a hungry dog attacking a bare bone.

I hate this nightmare. I hate it hate it hate it! This is the sixth time already.

Eric tried to increase his pace, reasoning that short goblin legs should be no match for an energetic, young boy. When he sprinted ahead, the ground became muddy and his rapid steps sluggish. The rambling sound became more distant just for a moment, then returned with the same intensity. With a feeling of resignation, Eric resumed his normal pace and the ground was solid again.

This is my dream! I should be able to dream whatever I want, not these stupid nightmares...

Still running forward, Eric tried to push the thoughts of failure out of his mind. There was a kind of calming rhythm to making one step after the other, but the grinding sound intruded each time he tried to let the pace soothe his feelings. The dread he was hearing was also the dread he was feeling. His whole body was tense, but the knot in his stomach was the worst.

Why can't I do something?!

A new feeling was growing alongside the fear: anger. Eric was angry not at the goblins, but at himself. *I'm weak, I'm pitiful*. He felt the anger stir up inside him, displacing some of the fear. He instinctively knew that this is something he could use, and tried to intensify it.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrgh!"

He let out his anger in what seemed to be part shout, part scream, and part battle cry. His anger propelled him forward; he didn't even feel his steps but seemed to float ahead with haste. He kept going in this half-conscious state as long as he could.

The moment the cloud of anger receded from his mind, the fear came back more powerful than before: his stomach tightened and he bent over as if a powerful force punched him. Eric misplaced a step and fell.

Get up get up get up, they're going to get you, faster faster faster-

What little sense of balance he had, abandoned him. His mind was in a state of panic; his heart raced arrhythmically and cold sweat was all he could sense. Trapped in the nightmare, he continued to stumble forward.

Running seemingly forever with the smell of sweat and fear in one's nose would weary anyone, and it was getting to Eric too. He was tired of running and tired of being in a state of fear. The path he was following led across a shallow riverbed, where he absent-mindedly hopped through the stepping stones.

Not long after passing the river, exhaustion finally overpowered the fear: Eric stumbled a few more steps and put his hands on his knees to prevent himself from collapsing. His lungs burned with each struggling breath, and when he noticed this particular pain, he became aware of all the aching muscles in his body. He kept breathing: in-out-in-out-in-out, until his breathing settled into a more relaxed rhythm. He rolled down and stretched out on his back.

Abruptly, he remembered the reason he was running all night and lifted his head to see where the goblins are. He saw two small shapes in the distance, jumping up and down on the riverbank. *Haha, they don't like water.* He closed his eyes, let his head slump back down and succumbed to fatigue. *The grass feels so nice...*

* * *

It felt good to just lie there, body and mind thoroughly exhausted. It was the kind of rest that invigorated from deep within one's soul. Memories of the nightmare faded away into the distance.

When Eric opened his eyes, he noticed how warm the sunshine felt on his face. He grabbed a chunk of grassy earth just to experience the sensation of touch. The leaves of the trees around him never seemed more vivid and full of life - he could see the hue and motion of every single leaf. *Now this is what a dream should be like!* It felt as if the sun

shined happiness to earth and nature responded in kind, with Eric in the middle of this magical motion. He quietly enjoyed being part of this experience for a small eternity.

"Hello there."

Eric turned his head, and saw a young woman with an open smile and long blond hair. He got to his feet and said "Hi."

"I'm Annie. What's your name?"

"My name is Eric. Nice to meet you," he said formally.

"Very nice to meet you too, Eric. Is this your first time here?"

"I guess so... Where are we?"

"Wonderful, welcome to Dream Camp! Well, technically, these are the training grounds of Dream Camp. I see you have already attuned to some of the deep magic here - nicely done! Anytime you fall asleep, just remember the feeling of magic and you'll be able to dream here."

"Thank you." Eric looked around, but he didn't see a camp anywhere. He wasn't feeling particularly magical, either. A thought hit him, and he said it out loud: "Hey! How do you know I'm dreaming? Isn't this supposed to be my dream?"

Annie smiled warmly at him. She pointed down the path and offered Eric her hand. "Come, everyone is at the Playground. We can talk along the way."

Eric pondered for a moment, and took her hand. She was taller than him; her scent reminded him of a big sister he never had. A feeling of loneliness passed over him at the thought, but that moment went away as quickly as it came. "Okay, let's go."

"Dreams would be boring if we were the only ones dreaming them," Annie explained as they went. "Sometimes we want to dream our own dreams, but sometimes we wish to share them with others. Dream Camp is a place where we can master the magic of dreams together. When I was your age, I spent most of my dreamtime here with friends, playing and learning. Now that I'm grown up, I realized I like it here the most, so I came back to play and learn some more," Annie grinned. "I also try to help out youngsters such as yourself."

Annie paused for a moment. "Let me show you something. Ready?"

Eric shrugged, then nodded. The next step they took seemed like a hundred, and he felt a bit dizzy. "What was that?"

"It's called teleportation magic. The fastest way to get someplace is to just be there! Don't you agree?" Annie laughed heartily. "Walking is better only if you want to enjoy the scenery."

Eric recovered from his vertigo and looked around. The sunshine, leaves and grass had the same vivid brilliance, but the arrangement of trees was different from a moment ago. *Awesome!*

"How did you do that?"

"Easy peasy," Annie said proudly, "you just have to practice a lot." She pointed to the left of the path. "Tell me, what do you see over there?"

Eric glanced to where she was pointing, but his vision was clouded. "Sorry, something must have gotten into my eyes." He rubbed his eyes, produced a tissue from his pocket and tugged at the corners of his eyes until he could see clearly.

There was a wooden table under a big tree, with two benches on the wider sides. An old man with a long white beard was sitting on the table, a big hammer in his hand, occasionally banging on what seemed to be a clunky, old-fashioned television set. It seemed to Eric the image was caught between multiple channels and showing lot of static.

"Isn't he too old to be a repairman?"

Annie had an amused expression. "Why? What do you see?"

"A bearded old guy with a broken tv and a hammer. Why do you ask?"

"Repairman, huh?" Annie smirked. "That's Master Joe. He's not a repairman, well, not quite. And you're never too old for anything!" She continued walking along the path.

"He's responsible for all this," Annie waved around with her hand, "all the trees, all the sunshine, and he makes sure there are no nightmares or accidents in Dream Camp. You can discuss with him whose dream this actually is, but he'll say something like 'everyone dreams everyone' and then go on talking for hours." Annie scratched her head. "Honestly, I don't always understand what he says, but Master Joe is a great person. When he's working, like now, I'm not sure what he's doing either, but our minds fill in the blanks in a way to make at least a little bit of sense, you know? Minds are tricky that way." She nodded to herself.

"So, he's like a janitor?"

Annie burst out laughing. *She does that a lot*, Eric noted. He thought Annie was a little crazy, but there was a kind of warmth to her and he didn't mind this kind of crazy.

"Well, I wouldn't call him that, but I believe he would like that title." Annie pointed a little to the right of the path. "The Playground is that way, not far from here. Should we teleport or walk all the way?"

Yeehaw, real magic! Eric was determined to pay more attention this time.

"Teleport! Please."

She nodded, lifted her right hand and made a waving motion from front to back. This time Eric braced for vertigo and resisted the dizziness. A field with plenty of playful contraptions zoomed into view almost at once. He saw dozens... no, hundreds of boys and girls of all ages; everyone running, hopping, swinging, pushing, pulling, jumping, climbing, talking, yelling... or even hovering above ground while training what seemed to be a kind of martial art. Most of the playground equipment was made out of wood, but some of it was grown out of living trees. Treehouses, too, were everywhere; tiny to large, all shapes and sizes. There were so many kids, but when he focused on one of them or a group, the space between seemed to grow larger - it didn't feel crowded at all. When he stopped focusing, the racket became more pronounced once again. Eric rubbed on his eyes, pondering the idea that he might be dreaming a dream within a dream.

"Cool, huh? Just try to ignore the noise. Let me find someone to show you around." Annie thought for a moment, then raised two fingers to the mouth and blew a mighty, high-pitched whistle. "I think it's best if you see for yourself what this place is like. We can talk later about any questions you might have."

A point approached from the distance - it seemed to bring half of all the noise coming from the Playground with it. *A dog!* Eric saw a big dog with white and curly fur approaching rapidly. Two kids were riding on the dog's back, yelling and screaming at the top of their lungs. The yelling stopped only when the riders arrived and dismounted from the dog.

"Hi teacher! Hi! Hi teacher!"

Annie smiled and made a welcoming gesture. "Boys, this is Eric. Eric, this is Duke," she patted the dog, "and the two mischief-makers are Kyle and Lyle."

Kyle and Lyle both had shiny black hair and beady eyes. They were several years younger than Eric; maybe around kindergarten age.

"Are you guys twins?" Eric asked.

"No, just brothers. We look more alike here than in real life," said the one on the left as he stretched himself upright, "but I'm the older one!"

"Kyle is saying that only because I'm the handsome one!" Lyle turned his head sideways to show off his short ponytail.

Kyle rolled his eyes and patted Lyle on the head. Lyle promptly patted him back, and the two started throwing light, but fast punches towards one another.

"Boys! Boys. I have a mission for you." When the jabs stopped, she continued. "I need someone to show Eric around and help him find a few friends. Are you up to the task?"

Kyle nodded. "Sure. Do we get stickers?"

"Yes-yes, stickers please Annie teacher!" Lyle interjected at once.

"All right. You'll get a sticker each, but you'll have to do an excellent job!"

Kyle and Lyle nodded vigorously in agreement.

Annie reached into her pocket, took out two stickers and handed them over. "I almost forgot," she searched her pocket, took out a book and offered it to Eric. "This is for you."

Eric took the book and examined it. The leathery cover felt pleasant to the touch. The words 'Dreamer's Handbook' were written with big letters on the front cover.

"Thank you. What is this?"

"Well, it's a book. A good one. You can look things up if you don't understand something, or you can just read it from beginning to end if you're the studious kind. Just keep it on yourself; you never know when it comes in handy. You can make it fit into any small pocket - Kyle and Lyle will show you how if needed. Are you all ready to go?"

They nodded.

Annie patted Duke, "Take good care of them, okay?"

Duke inclined his head slightly and closed his eyes for a moment longer than usual.

"Off you go! Have fun!"

The three of them slowly climbed on top of Duke. The dog grew to the size of a small horse, alleviating Eric's worries for its well-being. Eric waved goodbye to Annie, and firmly grabbed onto the white fur as Duke started running towards the Playground.

Chapter 2 - Sphere Magic

Circles are symbols of wholeness and boundary, but on their own they're too perfectly symmetric to exist in any awareness. Squares are symbols of distance and form, but on their own they are quickly stripped of any meaning by infinities and divided singularities.

The study of circles is zen, and the study of squares is mathematics. Physicists square circles and call them quantum strings, whereas magi circle squares and call it magic.

Imagination in motion gives form to magic - and sphere magic is the most basic tool in a mage's arsenal.

- Key Abstractions of Theoretical Magic,
Dreamer's Handbook

"Stop dragging me."

The sky was full of stars and the starlight weaved its calm and delicate magic. In a much less delicate way, Kyle and Lyle were gripping Eric's hands and dragging him towards a nearby campfire.

"You're too slow! We're not dragging you - you are holding us back!"

Eric opened his mouth to point out the fault in their reasoning, but he closed it without saying anything and resigned to his fate. *There's no point in arguing with people who can out-yell you.* Despite his current predicament, Eric was grateful: true to their word, the boys showed him the many nooks and crannies of the Playground - and they did so at breakneck speed. It was much fun.

"We're here!"

The fire burned with steady red and yellow flames. Two girls were sitting close to each other on the circular bench around the fire: the dark-haired girl was slightly taller than the smiling redhead. As far as Eric could tell, both were about his age.

Kyle dropped his backpack on the bench and gestured for Eric to sit. He cleared his throat in a grandiose manner.

"Dear Lucy, Eric and Rose! Lyle and I have decided that from now on, you three are best friends!"

As Kyle paused for dramatic impact, Eric looked for telltale expressions: the black-haired girl had a mild look of disapproval, while the red-haired girl's eyes sparkled just a

bit more. Neither of them said anything, and Eric chuckled. *They too know not to argue with these two forces of nature!*

Kyle continued, "To celebrate this magnificent occasion, we have bacon!"

"Really? Where did you get bacon from?" Lyle asked, whispering.

"Yes, really. From Joe. Got some bread too. Maybe we should give him some stickers in exchange," Kyle whispered back.

Lyle nodded. "Let's get sticks for the bacon."

As soon as the brothers departed on their quest to gather pointy sticks of wood, the red-haired girl's smile turned into laughter. It quickly infected the other two and they all burst out laughing.

"Unbelievable!" The dark-haired girl was shaking her head and laughing at the same time.

"The little devils are so hilarious!" The red-haired girl wiped a tear from her face. "Eric, it is very nice to meet you. My name is Rose, and this is Lucy. It's delightful to have new best friends," she chuckled.

"Hello, indeed," replied Eric with a shy smile. He spent a heartbeat searching for other words to say. "Have you been in Dream Camp for long?"

"Not too long," Rose said. "I was here first, and the two of us met at the Playground few days ago."

Lucy nodded.

"Most of the kids there are younger than us," Rose continued. "The deeper you go into the Playground, the younger they are. It's fun to play with toddlers; their dreams are shiny and they're so awed by everything... but... it gets boring after a while."

"Quite boring," Lucy affirmed.

"When we met, we decided to team up and look for something more interesting to do... How about you? When did you get here?" Rose asked.

"Recently, I think. I was in a nightmare being chased, and then..." Eric was interrupted by a loud chanting noise.

"Ba-con! Ba-con! Ba-con! Ba-con!"

The brothers returned with a huge pile of pruned and sharpened sticks. "Turns out there was already a bundle just over there," Lyle said with a mixture of triumph and sheepishness. "Let's eat bacon! Ba-con! Ba-con! Ba-con!"

Lucy smiled and Rose rolled her eyes.

Bacon trumps conversation. Eric realized that some facts of life just have to be accepted at face value and joined in on the chanting.

* * *

Things simmered down considerably after the food disappeared completely into the bellies of the bacon fellowship. Kyle and Lyle were mucking around with their stickers, and the others were able to maintain a conversation without being interrupted by too many loud noises.

"Classes?! What do you mean, 'classes'?"

Eric felt his sense of balance tip unpleasantly. *I spend my days in school; I don't want to spend my nights dreaming about them too!* Eric didn't exactly hate school: his grades were good and he loved learning together with friends. However, what he didn't like was memorizing things he would happily forget the next day - that was just meaningless and boring. *Dreaming about school is a special kind of nightmare altogether.*

"Don't worry, you don't have to attend. We sure don't..." Lyle said without looking up.

"It's true," Lucy said. "There are classes, but there's no school: no grades, no requirement to attend, and anyone can start a class if they have something to offer. Let me just check..."

Lucy pulled out her copy of the Dreamer's Handbook and flipped a few pages. "Yes, it's here in the introduction: no tests either except for the three nightmare classes. If you pass the final test you may visit the Outpost or go on missions to help others battle their nightmares."

Battling nightmares? Now that was more like it! That was a thought that spoke to Eric's warrior spirit and made his blood boil! The not-too-distant memory of running from jagged goblin teeth was still a sore spot; a thorn in his side...

"Look!"

Kyle brushed away his stickers and held up his handbook. A big sticker with the words 'assistant teacher' dominated the back cover. "We got it from Mr. Smith for helping with the advanced nightmare class!"

He flipped through the back pages of the book, showing off a multitude of affixed stickers, many of them labeled 'mischief'. Even lines of text from the last chapter have fallen prey to the invasion of stickers.

Lucy nodded. "Assistant teacher, impressive!"

"Are all the adults here teachers?" Eric asked.

Rose shrugged, and Lucy looked to Kyle.

"No," Kyle said, "but, those who aren't... I think something is wrong with them."

"Like that ghost we saw, right?" Lyle asked.

Kyle nodded reluctantly. "Adult students occasionally attend some of the classes, and those adults talk and behave like normal adults do. Rarely, we see adults who are just walking around and not paying attention to anything - it's like they don't believe they're really here or something."

Lyle jumped up with an excited expression and pointed at Lucy. "I remember! Joe said they have been Lucy-ed!"

Kyle frowned. "He said 'lucid', it's a word. He said those adults aren't lucid enough. They just walk around and then they're gone." He shook his head. "Poor adults, something must be really wrong with them."

"I see," Eric said.

Adults often act like they know everything, but Eric had a growing suspicion that they don't really know all that much. *They just pretend to know.* Many times when he asked a question, he was told the question is stupid and to shut up. In the beginning, he thought it was his fault for asking stupid questions, but sometimes other adults did give answers that made sense and then the questions didn't look stupid at all. *So why tell me to shut up? Even if I'm stupid, how should I get smarter without asking questions?*

Eric's contemplative mood was broken by Rose.

"You know... I already went to one class," Rose said.

"Really? How come you didn't tell me?" Lucy asked.

Rose shrugged. "It didn't come up and you didn't ask."

Lucy and Eric looked at her attentively, encouraging her to continue the story.

"Well, it was sphere magic class. The teacher talked on and on... it was interesting, but I forgot most of what he said. I know sphere magic is the most rudimental of all magic - once you shape a magic sphere you can make fireballs and whatnot out of it."

"I remember reading about this..." Lucy consulted her book. "Got it! Page 23. 'Sphere magic forms the basis of all of the following magical techniques or disciplines, but is not limited to them: fire, water, air, earth magic and all secondary as well as tertiary elemental magic (e.g. storm or lava magic), portal magic, focus magic, elementary healing, basic conjuration, time travel, protective magic, transformation and transmutation...' Wow, the list goes on for more than half a page." Lucy looked up from the book. "Sorry, please continue."

Sounds exciting, Eric thought. Kyle gave a long yawn.

"Yeah, that," Rose confirmed. "Anyway, here's how I understand it."

Rose picked a twig out of the fire. "This point is imagination," she pointed to the smoldering tip, "and this is movement." She waved the twig around fast, and short, fiery, curving lines became visible. "When you move imagination very fast, you give shape to magic." This time she waved the twig very fast in a circular motion, and a seemingly unmoving fiery circle appeared. Rose continued with that motion for a while, after which she put the twig down. "My arm is getting tired, but I hope you get the idea. A circle is a basic stable shape and so is a sphere."

Kyle and Lyle grabbed sticks of their own and began mimicking the motion. Lucy and Eric nodded reluctantly.

"It's not that hard, but so far I've succeeded in creating a magic sphere only for a short while. Do you want to see it?" Rose asked.

"Of course! Yes! Sure!" They answered at once.

"All right."

Rose stretched her arms and straightened her posture. She lowered her hands into her lap, palms facing upwards one over the other, and took three deep and long breaths.

Kyle and Lyle put down the twigs. They watched Rose attentively, waiting for the magic to appear. Only the crackling of the fire and a faint chirp of crickets could be heard.

Eric rubbed his eyes, but he couldn't yet see anything. As time passed, everyone assumed the relaxed pattern of Rose's breathing. *There!* Eric thought he saw a faint blue light above her palms, but wasn't sure until it expanded into a small blue globe of light.

The watchers held their breath; Lyle even bit on his lip. The sphere turned, rotated and grew a bit more... but after a few heartbeats it turned into magical mist and dissipated.

"Whoa! One more time!" Kyle and Lyle started clapping vigorously, and were joined by Lucy and Eric.

Rose smiled wearily. "Thanks. I don't think I can do it again so soon. It's not hard, but it takes a lot of concentration and I need to train a lot more... Well, you know what? I can teach you and then we could train together if you want."

Fervent nodding was the group's response.

"Okay."

Rose extended her left hand in front of her, palm up, and pointed at it from above with her right hand. "So, just imagine a little blue point at the tip of my finger." She slowly started making a circular motion with her index finger. "Just one little point."

I hope this works, Eric thought.

Lyle clenched his fists and his face contorted a little as he concentrated.

A short, thin line of starlight appeared to follow the tip of Rose's finger. "Great! Now let's do it with more speed!" She waved her finger a bit faster and the blue line strengthened and became longer. "Even more speed!" The end of the line reached its beginning - the line became a glowing circle.

"I'm going to take my hand away now, but you keep concentrating on it." She did, and the small circle of magical energy remained floating above the palm of her left hand. "Okay, this was the easy part, but we're not done yet. Now we'll have to make many more circles and put them together."

"Keep concentrating on this one, but also follow the tip of my finger as we make another circle." Rose moved her left hand a bit to the side, and with her right hand she started pointing away from herself then back in a circular motion. A magical circle appeared obediently as the group got the hang of it. She waited a little, and then gently pushed the new circle onto the old one. "Next one!" The third circle came into view as she was waving from left to right, and then combined it with the other two. "It's starting to look like a sphere, nice work so far!"

After nine more circles, Eric tried to keep blinking down to a minimum - lest the magic goes away if he's not looking. His thoughts and feelings were flowing along the lines of the many circles he was observing. He never concentrated so deeply in his life before.

"Good job!" The surface of the magic sphere became visible as the circles revolved and meshed into one another. The sphere was about the size of a small juicy melon and it

shined and sparkled with magical energy. "We did much better together than I could do alone!"

Rose's praise went unnoticed as no one made a response. She saw their intense expressions and pondered her next move. "Forget this, look there!" Her right arm flung high into the air, pointing somewhere far away.

As their eyes followed her finger, she quietly turned her other hand upside-down and thrust the magical sphere into the fire. Blue energy turned to red; the fire gave a loud crackling sound and flamed up for a moment... then it subsided.

They all just sat there, blinking.

"Hey! Give us our magic ball back!" Lyle was first to regain his senses. "That's not fair! Not fair at all! Why did you do that?!"

Smiling, Rose presented him with her best 'innocent angel' face.

Kyle pulled at Lyle's arm and whispered something in his ear. Lyle protested, but Kyle didn't let go. Slowly, Lyle relaxed and nodded.

Kyle cleared his throat. "You have pranked us, and as a token of recognition we present you this sticker." He poked around in his backpack until he found a sticker, and then gave it to Rose. "Our revenge will come, buahahaha!"

"Thanks, I guess," Rose said.

Eric took a deep breath. As he breathed out, he could feel the tension of concentrating for so long leave his mind and body. He breathed in again, and laughed. He noticed Lucy smiling faintly and scribbling something in her notebook.

Rose was eager to continue. "Now you know what I know. Let's train for real!"

* * *

Eric decided to take a short break. After practicing for hours he was tired, but not as tired to be the first one to admit defeat. *If they can do it, I can do it!* He looked around to see what kind of progress his friends were making.

Lucy steadily juggled a few elongated circles of magical energy - it didn't look like a sphere, but it wasn't prone to disappearing either. Kyle and Lyle each went through the same cycle rapidly over and over again: a small blue sphere appeared, grew, wobbled for a second, then grew a bit more and dispersed. Rose fared best, as she managed to hold a

decent-sized ball for almost eight seconds before losing concentration. She was taking longer breaks between attempts too.

Eric sighed. *Making one is easy, but keeping it from falling apart is damn hard!* Frustration, rather than exhaustion, was his main enemy.

Eric composed himself and gave it yet another try. A magical sphere grew in his hands, withered down to only several light blue circles, became a full sphere for a short moment, wavered, became a sphere again, and disappeared as his concentration ran out. *Again!*

It wasn't long before one of them snapped and gave up - it happened to be Kyle. He held up one of his short-lived spheres and hurled it at Lyle. The sphere dissolved about halfway, but Lyle didn't need any further encouragement: he threw one right back at his brother.

Eric observed the shadowboxing of the fledgling mages for a while, and an idea hit him with full force. *I got it! I got it!* He made a small sphere, and quickly started bouncing it from one hand to the other. The sphere was wobbling, but it did not disappear. "Look! This is working." As his back-and-forth throwing motion became less crude, the trembling steadied as well. *Oh, I'm a genius!*

Eventually the throwing distance diminished, and the magical sphere floated steadily above Eric's hand.

"There!" Eric exclaimed as he lifted his hand. "Just imagine you're rolling around a marble in a bowl!"

"Sphere in sphere, motion in motion," Lucy murmured under her breath as she reached for her notebook.

The others immediately started bouncing from one hand to the other. As soon as Lyle replicated Eric's success he threw the sphere at Kyle, which ruffled his hair slightly.

Eric felt a sense of achievement. *It wasn't a trick; I did real magic.* They cheered each other on, and there was jubilant clamor when all of them succeeded.

The mood became more relaxed and elated for the rest of the evening, but they called it a night soon after. Eric, believing he was on a roll, had the bright idea to combine their spheres and make a huge one.

When they did manage to make a huge ball, it promptly fell into the fire and extinguished it with a shush.

Chapter 3 - Flying

Flying is freedom; it is the experience of movement combined with the ability to choose any vantage point - including one so high as to be free from any particular context or reality and observe it openly from the outside. One can even be free of oneself: sleep is one such mechanism, death another. A mage has more options.

- Movement and Awareness, Dreamer's Handbook

Rose, Lucy and Eric decided to take a class together after all. The sun was high in the sky and the students were sitting at the bottom of a tall cliff. Kyle and Lyle did not come; they claimed to have more pressing business to take care of at the Playground.

"Flying is easy. You don't need talent or even much skill to fly. However, what you do need is big brass buckets of courage."

Annie began her class without much ado and went straight to the point, much like a swift hawk swoops in for the kill. More than a dozen kids attended the class, forming cliques of their own.

"In dreams, the only thing keeping you from flying is your own fear. Behind the fear of flying is the fear of falling, and behind the fear of falling is the fear of being painfully splattered on the ground."

Annie-the-teacher was a bit different than Annie-the-caretaker, and this was the first time Eric encountered this side of her. *She's kind of scary, but she still has that warm smile. Hmmm.*

"That's all the knowledge you need. Do you know how birds learn to fly? They get kicked out of the nest. I won't kick you, but I'll make you go on top of that cliff and see if you have the courage to jump. Don't try to fly yet - just hit the ground."

Did she say hit the... Eric went mentally blank. A shiver ran through his spine. Did she just say what I think she said? It can't be. A few moments later the cold sweat came. Oh my god, it's my first class and I'm going to die! Eric tried to convince himself it was only a misunderstanding.

Lucy's face went pale as it drained of blood. She gulped and said with a flat tone: "She has a point."

Rose did not show any expressions, but her smile disappeared.

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