

# **The Big Sleep**

*Dreamwalkers*

*(sample)*

*by Meaghan Gray*

MEAGHAN GRAY

*the*  
**big**  
*sleep*



BOOK ONE: DREAMWALKERS

# Dawn

The beginning of the end came on an auspicious morning. The Sun shone low and bright, breaking through the early morning fog. The horizon was cut in half by a shining silver shuttle marked with twelve-foot-high letters: *Mayflower II*. Several men gathered on a platform that was attached to the ship.

"This is terrifying," Lafayette muttered, his eyes trained downward through the grated flooring he stood upon and on the ground far below.

Several hundred feet in the air, Wilson smacked Lafayette hard on the back and laughed. "A pilot scared of heights. Whoever heard of that?"

Lafayette steadied himself under the Commander's friendly thump. "It's not the heights I'm afraid of," he said as he gazed down again. "It's the falling."

"But look," Commander Wilson took his hand from Lafayette's shoulder and waved at the crowd of people gathered in the distance below, "they'd catch you."

Lafayette's complexion regained some of its color as he gazed at the crowd. He could make out a sign that read Lafayette #1. A smile played across his lips.

Wilson nodded. "There you go."

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Three men strapped into the cockpit with Wilson and Lafayette: Peterson, the biologist, a sandy-haired young man with olive skin; Trelevan, the geologist, a squirrely-looking academic type with glasses too large for his face, and Black, the engineer, a stoic brute.

The men had spent some time together in training, but they had yet to come to know each other as brothers. That was for the journey ahead.

"Ready?" Wilson's said to the crew.

"These steel walls are all the comfort I need." Excitement was rising inside Lafayette. Despite his petty fears, he had the heart of an adventurer.

"They're titanium," muttered Black from between the two scientists.

"OK, here we go," Lafayette announced. The shuttle rumbled to life and a disembodied voice rang out around them, counting down their release from gravity's embrace.

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"My God," whispered Lafayette. "It's beautiful."

Releasing the constraints around him, Trelevan pulled himself up next to Lafayette and Wilson at the panoramic window. Before them sat the magnificent blue and green globe, covered in swirling white clouds and surrounded by blackness.

"Goodbye." Trelevan waved.

"See you in ten years." Peterson yawned, still strapped into his seat.

"Ten years," Wilson echoed. "Damn."

Lafayette sighed, thinking of his daughter. She was only eight and he'd left her with his mother for the duration of his mission. "It's for the future of humanity." He nodded, as if assuring himself. "If not us, who?"

"There are plenty of other scientists and pilots and commanders for the military to choose from," Peterson said, scoffing. "They only chose us because..."

"Because we're the best." Wilson slammed his fist down as he spoke, silencing the room.

"Hey, where's Black?" Lafayette asked after a few uncomfortable moments.

"I think he went to the engine room," Trelevan said. "I don't think we'll be seeing much of him this decade."

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"How are we doing, sir?" Trelevan asked Wilson over breakfast.

"Christ, Trelevan. When are you going to start calling me Wilson? We're in space. It's informal."

Trelevan laughed nervously. "Right. Wilson. So, how are we doing?"

"With what?" Wilson said though a mouthful of food.

Trelevan licked his lips frantically and scratched his head in frustration. He had no patience for men whom he considered to be stupid. "With the mission."

"Well," Wilson smacked his lips then wiped his face with the back of his hand, "we're on our way."

Trelevan shook his head and stood up from the table. "Enjoy your breakfast, Wilson."

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Lafayette took in the beauty before him. Twinkling white stars swayed in his vision as he fiddled with the ship's controls, making her dance.

"Holding course?" Peterson's voice came from behind him, dripping with sarcasm.

"Sorry." Lafayette chuckled. The scientists on the crew didn't seem too fond of his and Wilson's antics. They were of a different breed. All structure and formula, no fun. "What can I do for you?" He turned away from the controls.

Peterson pushed his thick hair out of his eyes. It floated back in front of them again. "You're seriously affecting the work we're trying to do in the laboratory." He looked to Lafayette like the sort of boy his daughter might one day try to date. He shuddered at that thought.

"I've been wondering," Lafayette said as he stood up and began stretching. "What kind of work are you guys doing in there? We haven't gotten to the planet. You have nothing to work with yet."

Peterson rolled his eyes. "Just do your job, OK?" He turned and pulled himself out of the room.

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Black sat hunched over a small table in the engine room. He was eating his usual lunch of a peanut butter sandwich and grape juice. He'd been having the same lunch every day since he was eleven years old. He had to give up nearly a fifth of his salary to get the space program to package and send them up with him, but it was worth it.

"Good ol' peanut butter," he mumbled through his sticky mouth. "You always know what to expect."

Black sipped on his juice and considered visiting with the rest of the crew. "Perhaps some other time," he said out loud. "They are a bit rambunctious."

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"Those two..." Trelevan said to Peterson as they watched Lafayette and Wilson bounce off the walls, dueling with bits of copper pipe.

"Are incompetent," Peterson offered, twirling a fork casually in his fingers. "They don't understand the mission at all. They think we're crusaders or something. The project is unrealistic. We're just killing time and wasting money until the inevitable."

Trelevan adjusted his collar. "The inevitable?"

"End times, my friend." Peterson snickered. "Our race is doomed."

"You're too young to be so jaded, Peterson." Trelevan frowned at his companion. "There is a chance that this mission could be a success."

Peterson slammed the fork down and stared into Trelevan's eyes. "You don't think some planet appearing out of nowhere—like magic, just at the moment we need it—is a bit suspect? And even if you don't. Say we get half of the population to this planet. Then what? Both planets continue on as humanity always has: all-consuming. Even if we can manage it, we're only spreading out and prolonging our doom."

Trelevan pitied Peterson. No argument would convince the boy that humanity was worth fighting for. One day he would understand.

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"I can see it now," Lafayette called through the ship. "All of it."

The other men, except for Black, rushed to the helm. Before them hung blue and green and gold. Deep grey and bright white clouds surrounded the luscious colors. The window was nearly filled by the massive planet.

"There it is, boys." Wilson grinned and pounded his fist into his palm. "Planet Dawn."

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Wilson stood tall and proud before the other men. Flashing lights on the control panel formed a halo around his broad head.

"The time has come for our descent onto Dawn. We've each been working and training for years to get to this point. Now we're here. I cannot tell you what an honor it has been for me to serve with you men. The time we spend on Dawn will—"

"Bullshit," Peterson muttered.

Wilson's eyes flashed. "Speak up, Peterson," he said, nearly shouting.

"Bullshit," Peterson repeated, rising from his seat. "It's been an honor? Really, sir, an honor to spend five years holed up in a metal tube with four other pathetic heroes? I don't know where you find honor in that."

"Peterson, chill," Lafayette said.

"Of course. Now you're involved." Peterson turned on Lafayette. "Big man's little lackey. When are you planning on flying us off course? You've done enough wrong in your life already. Don't think I haven't heard you and Wilson talking about your little brat back home."

Before anyone could react, Lafayette was across the room and at Peterson's throat.

"Enough!" Trelevan nearly shrieked.

Lafayette loosened his grip. Peterson gasped.

"We can't be like this." Trelevan's voice wavered. "We've got a mission."

Peterson guffawed. "You too, now?" He shook off Lafayette and walked a circle around Trelevan. "You, the man who mocked these two for hours? Is the sight of Dawn pulling at your heart-strings, doctor—?"

Peterson crumpled to the floor and Black returned his fist to his pocket.

He shook his head. "You were saying, commander?" Black looked at Wilson.

Wilson held back an unprofessionally wide smile, instead simply nodded at Black. "As I was saying, it has been an honor to serve with you men. Our time on Dawn will have an impact on humanity - forever. Are you prepared to do your duty?"

The men nodded in unison, then exchanged salutes.

Wilson surveyed the room "I suppose it's time, then. Lafayette?"

"Yes, commander?"

"Begin our descent."

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A cool breeze came from the east, bringing with it a scent reminiscent of cherry blossoms and morning dew. Wilson threw his shoes into the air and stuck his toes into the soft grass.

The crew filed off the ship and onto the ground, taking in the landscape of Dawn. Before them lay a meadow, calm and inviting. The foliage was rich and bright, composed of delicate leaves. Wispy white flowers littered the grass, creating a floral fog at their feet.

"I'm taking a nap," Wilson announced, settling down on a bed of something that looked like heather.

"A little unorthodox to sleep upon our arrival," Trelevan yawned. "But I think I'll join you."

Each of them followed suit, finding a comfortable spot to rest in the meadow. They drifted off, some forever.

# The Little Sleep

Days passed and none of the crew stirred. On the outside, they were peaceful. On the inside, each man was fighting a war that he would be hard-pressed to win.

"Hello?" Peterson called out. He was surrounded by a blackness deeper than space. "Is anybody there?"

"Hello, Toby." A disembodied voice cut through the darkness, a familiar voice.

"Dad?" He turned to see his father's thick frame, his face draped in shadow. Portraits of roosters, statues of hens, and plates decorated with various poultry surrounded him. He was sitting in the kitchen of his childhood home.

"We need to talk." Peterson's father was stern.

Peterson stepped out of the darkness and into the kitchen. "Yes, Dad?"

Peterson's father stood several feet taller than his son and draped in shadow. "Have you cleaned your room?"

Heat rose up Peterson's neck and face. His father had asked him to tidy up his room the last time that they spoke. "Sorry, Daddy." Peterson blushed, averting his eyes from his father's piercing gaze.

A high-pitched cackle burst forth from the looming figure. Peterson looked up as the light caught his father's face. It was horribly mangled. Bloody tire tracks adorned his left cheek, while the right side of his face was completely flattened. "You should have listened to your father."

A childlike shriek came from Peterson's lips. He made to run, but found his legs too short to carry him. He toppled over and frantically crawled on stubby limbs.

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Cool, white light carried Wilson upward. He felt calm and peaceful in the radiance. Before him lay a world of colorful clouds sprinkled with stardust, swirling and dancing while he hung in the air, watching.

"Wilson?" said an official-looking man, hovering in the clouds.

"Yep." Wilson lazily nodded from atop his beam of light, content to be among the stars.

A great flash and a thunderous clap surrounded him. The beautiful light that carried him disappeared. He fell down, down, down through the heavens, landing with a thud on the hard earth. But this was not Wilson's home, nor was it Dawn. The ground was ragged and red, stained with blood and ash. Somehow, he knew that there was no life anywhere. The nightmare landscape stretched endlessly around him.

"Commander Wilson?" He spun to find himself facing the official looking man from the clouds. The man wore military attire and looked something like his father, something like the current president, and mostly like Wilson himself.

Wilson nodded at the man.

"Pleased to finally meet you." The man smiled warmly.

Wilson forced himself to his feet. "You've heard of me?"

The man's smile grew wider. "Of course I have. I made you, after all."

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Black was on the ground, surrounded by thousands of children clawing and kicking at every part of him.

"Black's got a fat mom," a boy said, laughing.

"Did you hear? He's got eleven toes," shrieked another.

Black made to swipe at the young boys, pulling them off of his body. But every time he removed a child, another would take its place.

"He likes boys." A boy smacked his face and giggled.

"None of those things are true!" Black screamed at the children.

They laughed and jeered. "He's fat and old."

Black rolled onto his side, trying to protect his internal organs. He could feel pops and pains inside his body as the cast of *The Little Rascals* attacked him. He felt small hands grasping at his wrists and ankles. The legion of children were separating and congregating at either end of him. "Stop!" he shouted as they began to pull. Thousands of little feet pitter-pattered on the pavement as they rushed away from each other. The sound of bones breaking and Black screeching joined the orchestra. Then, with one final crunch, all was silent.

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A giant plume of smoke emitted from the bottom of the *Mayflower II* as it settled. Out of the haze rose Lafayette. He wore a jumpsuit and a smile.

"Daddy!" came the bright and cheerful voice of Lenore Lafayette.

Lafayette opened his arms wide and took his daughter into a tight hug. "I missed you."

She kissed his cheek and whispered, "I missed you more."

"You've grown up, my love." Lafayette squeezed his daughter tighter in his arms. He could feel her chest compress as he pulled her in. Emotion overwhelmed him.

"Daddy," she gasped, "I can't breathe."

"Oh, sweetheart," he whispered, pulling her closer still.

"Dadd—" Lenore choked on her words, coughing and sputtering.

Blood came up with saliva as she tried to make room in her throat for air. Lafayette giggled and stroked Lenore's hair. "Pretty girl," he said. "My little girl." A bubble of red spit formed on her lips.

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Trelevan was stiff and still, as he so rarely was in waking life. His arms were outstretched in either direction with his left one swinging in a slow, tedious circle. Sixteen corpses lay at his feet, all wearing his nervous smile.

"I remember this," he said. "Wait, I remember this..."

He gazed at the bodies before him and searched his mind. He came to a night thirteen years ago. He and his ex-wife had been having some sort of argument and she'd stormed off. Trelevan had taken solace in a plate of hot wings and ice cream. His nightmares were awful that night.

"This is a dream," Trelevan shouted at the corpses, laughing with relief. His arms fell to his side and the corpses disappeared. "All right." He chuckled. "Let's have some fun."

Trelevan took a hop, skip, and a jump and launched into the air, flying free like so many birds had done back at home.

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Lafayette held Lenore in his arms, sitting on the hard pavement. He whispered to her about the coldness of space, the loneliness. She lay quiet. For hours, Lafayette waxed on about his adventures.

After a time, Lenore began to stir. Her little body trembled in Lafayette's muscular arms. Tiny hands reached up towards his face and a smile traced her bloodied lips. A low growl escaped her. She bared her teeth and snapped at Lafayette's throat.

"Sweetheart," he held his daughter at arm's length, "no biting."

Lenore's eyes bulged, looking as though they would pop from their sockets. Her arms and legs flailed wildly, if helplessly, in the air. She clawed relentlessly at Lafayette's hands, but to no avail. Finally, she submitted to defeat.

"Good girl." Lafayette grinned and brought her back into his arms for another hug.

She snapped again. A red stream erupted from his neck. Lafayette, in shock, brought a hand up to his throat, releasing his grip as she unleashed her fury. Feral, uncontrollable, the little girl tore her daddy apart.

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Peterson hid under an old pizza box in the garage. He had propped it up to form a tent-like barrier around his pudgy baby body.

"Goo. Goo gah," he said out loud, scratching his bald head with a short arm and pudgy fingers.

"Toby? Son?" Peterson's father's voice carried in from the hallway. The door to the garage was ajar; Peterson could not reach door handles in his current state.

He watched as a foot emerged from around the corner, followed by another. The two feet paced the garage back and forth. Peterson trembled where he sat, scouring his mind for memories of his father. He found none. Stern and authoritative images of Trelevan and Wilson came to him.

"Toby?" The feet stopped in front of the pizza box, bringing with them an enormous hand. The hand wrapped its fingers around Peterson's short, kicking leg and began to pull him up.

"Wahhh!" Peterson let out a piercing cry.

Surprised by the sound, the hand released Peterson's leg several feet up over the garage's cold concrete floor. With a quiet thud, Peterson's soft skull hit the ground.

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Wilson guffawed and slapped God on the back. "God, eh?" Chortling, he withdrew his hand and wiped tears from his eyes.

"Yes." God continued to smile.

"Well." Wilson quieted. He watched God for a moment. A light that emitted the same calmness as the beam that had carried Wilson hung around God like an aura. "All right." God began to walk into the desolate wasteland around them and Wilson followed suit.

"Life," God began, "is not easy. Is it, Wilson?"

"No, sir. It's not," Wilson agreed.

"We all make mistakes, don't we?"

"Yes, sir."

They came to a large black gate that led into a dismal courtyard. Blackened creatures dragged their limbs as they approached the gate from the other side to heckle Wilson and his companion.

"And you've made your fair share." The smile faded from God's luminescent face. "Haven't you?"

"Yes, sir." Wilson shrunk back, guilt overcoming him. "I'm sorry about that."

God shrugged as the ebony gate opened wide. "We all have our pride."

Several hundred ragged demons limped and scampered out of the gate. Wilson looked at where God had been standing and found his glorious visage replaced by a beady-eyed, panting wolf-boy. The

monsters overwhelmed the commander, prodding him with hot iron rods and pushing him toward the mouth of the gate.

"No!" Wilson protested. The smell of decay overwhelmed him. A demon reached up and cut a slit into Wilson's chest with its long, sharp fingernails. "Won't be needing this anymore." The beast cackled as it removed Wilson's still-beating heart. White hot pain seared through Wilson as his voice silenced.

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Trelevan soared over rooftops and swooped down to carve his wake in the lake. He formed loop-the-loops and figure eights in the sky. Over an open field, a small grey speck caught his eye. Though he suspected that it was just a boulder, left by time or imagination in the pasture, he felt compelled to investigate.

He flew a large circle around the field and descended on the west side, into a patch of willows. He took cover under the canopy and observed the grey lump from afar.

"What are you?" Trelevan wondered out loud, nearing the edge of the trees. He focused hard on the blurry outline in the distance and the edges became clear.

After a time, Trelevan found that he could adjust his eyes well enough to make out the shape of a hunched over, human-like creature. Trelevan froze. He was a smart man, a strong man, but not an especially brave one. This creature was like nothing he'd seen in his dreams or nightmares before. Gathering all the courage that he could muster, Trelevan considered the value of his life: his mission.

He stepped out from beneath the willow canopy and planted his feet on the rough, yellowing field. As Trelevan advanced, the figure straightened. The closer he got, the more he could discern. The body of the creature was skinny and draped in thin folds of papery grey skin. When Trelevan was a few yards from the back of the drooping creature, it spoke.

"Why have you come here, human?" Its voice was layer upon layer of familiarity.

"Where's my crew?" Trelevan asked, surprised by the confidence he felt.

The voice hissed. Laughter? "They are in me now, brother."

"Devil." Trelevan spat, circling the grey monster. As he moved, the creature turned. "Let me see your face."

"No," it said.

Trelevan's own face was red, damp with sweat. His hands and knees shook as he paced small circles around his foe. He was aware that his crew was most likely dead. He thought about Peterson's weak mind and Wilson's undying dedication to himself. There was no way that any of them had discovered that this was a dream.

"That's it." Trelevan laughed. "This is a dream."

Closing his eyes, he imagined Wilson, proud and braced, ready to take on hordes of these beasts; Lafayette, poised at Wilson's side with mindless loyalty; Peterson, wild with passion and urgency; Black, silent and strong. Trelevan opened his eyes to the faces of the crew. He grinned.

"You ready?" He looked at Wilson.

The commander nodded and began making swift and definite hand gestures at the rest of the crew. They flanked the grey creature.

"Face me, demon. I am not alone," Trelevan drew a pistol from his hip and the crew followed suit. The snake-like laugh rang out again.

"You are alone," it said.

Bile rose in Trelevan's throat. The crew was gone.

"You conjure for the first time in my realm and expect to frighten me? Do you not see the world that I have created before you? Have you not experienced my nightmares? I am beyond you. Submit to me now and perhaps I will make your death less painful."

Swallowing hard, Trelevan steadied himself and focused. "Home," he whispered. A small hill began to push its way out of the soil beneath the willows in the west. Slowly, steadily, the hill became a mountain. Huge flat plates of rock formed on its face, towering over Trelevan's head. With a deep gulp, Trelevan brought down the mountain on top of himself and the grey devil. A shriek of pain, then he was buried in heavy stone.

# Dusk

Trelevan sat up and took in the clearing. On beds of alien heather lay his companions, peaceful and serene. If not for their still chests, they might have been dreaming.

A couple of feet away from the crew sat what looked like a crumpled pile of elephant skin. Trelevan rose and approached it. Staring up at him from the ground was a sagging grey face, wrinkled with unnatural lumps. Its mouth was agape and its eyes were hollow, though they still twinkled with a red that once burned with evil life.

As Trelevan gazed down at the corpse, he could feel fatigue setting in. "It's happening again," he said, yawning.

With as much speed as he could muster, Trelevan ran for the shuttle. He boarded quickly and began fiddling with the controls.

"If Lafayette can do it..." he muttered as his eyelids drooped.

With a whir, a buzz, and a bang, the ship came to life. Yellow, red, and green lit up the control panel. Trelevan slammed his fingers down on the green buttons and, after a few moments, the shuttle was in sudden, swift motion.

Trelevan was thrown to the floor by the force. He feebly reached out for the pilot's seat and dragged himself up and into it.

With heavy hands, Trelevan prodded at the controls on a small monitor. He held a silver microphone up to his lips and slurred, "Mission failure. I am returning home. Aliens attacked us in our dreams. Everyone else is dead. I'm going to sleep now. Trelevan..."

He closed his eyes and his breathing slowed.

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Lenore Lafayette was sitting with her grandmother in the kitchen of their house.

"Grandmother?" Since her father's disappearance, Lenore had stopped calling her grandmother 'Grammy'.

"Yes, Lenore?" Grammy Lafayette sipped at a glass of iced tea.

"Shouldn't the *Mayflower II* be returning soon?" Lenore tried to sound casual, but her words were thick with anxiety. The last transmission from the ship had been grim, but Lenore and her grandmother had yet to give up hope.

"You know, I think you're right." Grammy Lafayette placed her hand on Lenore's. "We could watch the skies, if you'd like."

Lenore nodded. She followed her grandmother outside and onto the front porch.

Red and yellow light shone like fire in the sky. From the brightness fell a burning torpedo. As the fiery mass grew closer, Lenore could make out tiny blobs popping off it and onto the ground below.

She watched as one of the blobs rocketed toward the convenience store up the street. It landed without a sound.

Grandmother Lafayette's eyes were wide with horror. As she took in the scene, tears rolled down her cheeks. "So, he really is gone, then."

The two women collapsed into a heap of tears, hugging each other tight. After a brief moment, Lenore hastily wiped her face and stood.

"I'm going to see what that was." Before her grandmother could react, Lenore was off the porch and across the lawn. She ran to the store and wrenched the doors open.

Like a wave, exhaustion overtook her. Lenore fell to the tiled floor and slept.

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