

Five years ago:

“Hey, Seb?” Evanna looked up from her unpacking. Her emerald eyes held some uncertainty. “We’ll be okay here, right?”

Sebastian nodded emphatically and planted a kiss atop her head. “Definitely,” he said. “I’ll make sure of it.” He wore a soft smile on his face as he absentmindedly twirled her dark coffee hair. She smiled back and proceeded to place fresh-cut sunflowers into a crystal vase and set it on the table. “No matter what, okay?” she said, embracing him. He noted a whiff of her vanilla perfume and nodded. “I promise that I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

Present Day:

The man’s face was pallid; his body was rigid with stillness. His eyes were remarkably empty, even for someone who was no longer living. Sebastian Llewellyn looked at this man with a stoic face and a mixture of pity and confusion rising within him. As far as Sebastian knew, this man was the most recent victim of a new-found virus of some sort that was rapidly spreading across North America. Besides the fact that the man was obviously not breathing, there were no other signs of how he died. No discoloration from poison. No little red pricks from needle injections. No spilled blood. No bullets. No knife. This man had a strange, blissful smile on his face. He seemed to have died happily.

A victim of the dream: that was what people called those who had passed on from this new anomaly. This new-found “disease” reminded Sebastian more of a computer virus than one that affected humans. The acclaimed scientists who attempted to study this disease still had no idea how it spread--just that it spread fast. Once one was infected, there were no signs that this person would die soon. One thing in common with all of the victims was that they died in their sleep. Every single one of them died in their sleep with a look of content. Sebastian found this strange. Most humans do not willingly die.

The media had started to realize the appalling devastation caused by this disease. News concerning the illness began to go viral across the Internet; although many believed that the disease was all just a scam by the government to scare the citizens into buying some magical product that would save them. Sebastian, at the young age of twenty-three, had already been through college and graduate school. He was extremely sharp for his age, and had become a successful private investigator. This case had intrigued him, so he had taken it. So far, however,

even this young prodigy had a limited amount of information. This disease was fatal. Almost everyone who had contracted was fated for death. Survivors were practically unheard of, but Sebastian sought to find them.

“I... I just couldn’t wake him!” the deceased man’s tearful wife cried desperately. “All of a sudden, his breathing just stopped... and... and by the time that I called nine-one-one, he was already... already...!” She broke down into sobs.

“I understand,” Sebastian replied gravely “Thank you for your cooperation.” He exited the room as the paramedics hauled the corpse out the door. Sebastian stepped into the fresh air and looked up at the cloudy sky. It was early spring, and rain showers sprinkled throughout the day. A moderate wind blew Sebastian’s dark hair back as he walked down the sidewalk to his next destination. He took out the small picture of he kept in his pocket and glanced at it with a wistful look before looking around him again. Already, the effects of the disease could be seen upon the country. Along the streets, there were abandoned shops, and a fear of human contact. A visible increase on the consumption of caffeine products could be seen on the market. People were afraid to sleep.

“My name is Sebastian Llewellyn. I’m currently investigating this disease, which I’ve dubbed the ‘Binding Phantasm’, because it binds one to death through sleep. Thank you for meeting with me, Ms. Gallagher.” Sebastian extended his hand to briefly shake that of Sera Gallagher. She nodded, but stayed quiet.

“You say that you contracted this disease?” Sebastian’s obsidian eyes glinted with interest as he looked up to meet the eyes of the young girl that he was interviewing.

“Yes,” she replied, nervously smiling.

“But you’re obviously alive,” Sebastian stated.

“Yes,” she repeated. Sebastian patiently waited for her to continue. “I...” she began. “I understand if you don’t believe me, I mean, a lot of people are claiming this for attention from the media.”

“I’m open to ideas right now,” Sebastian countered with a shrug. “I’m genuinely curious to your story. I take it that you remember the dream?”

Sera took this as her cue and began. “I remember everything with detail. I was standing in a meadow with high grasses, weeds, and wildflowers growing together. There was a strong wind.

The sky was filled with clouds, but the sun still peaked through a little. It was a beautiful place, yet completely fantastical now that I think about it.”

“Is this place familiar to you?”

“It reminds me of a wild meadow that was behind my house when I lived in Wales.”

“Were you alone?”

“No,” Sera shook her head. “This is where... this is where the dream starts to become nonsensical. She was there.” Sebastian looked up from his notes at this point. “She?” he questioned.

“There was a girl. She had hair the color of snow, although she seemed young. Her skin was almost as pale. She had crimson eyes that cried tears of the same color. Doesn’t that sound scary?” Sera looked at Sebastian, searching for a reaction. Sebastian stayed impassive. “Yes,” he agreed. “Yes, yes it does.”

“But I wasn’t scared,” Sera said. “I wasn’t scared at all, because she... she sort of morphed until she looked like...”

The dark-haired man’s silence was taken by the girl as a sign to continue. “She looked like my mother.” Sera wondered when Sebastian would stop listening to her nonsensical story. Yet, she was so sure of what she saw. Or rather, she was sure of what she dreamed of. “The image that the white haired girl transformed into was so convincing. Inside the dream, I was so happy that I started crying. You see, my mother died six years ago when I was thirteen. Naturally, I ran up to her and I hugged her. She beamed at me, and said that it would be alright now. I just had to follow her, and we’d be together again. She promised that we’d be happy.” A solitary tear fell from Sera’s flushed cheek and dripped onto her hands, which were now clenched into fists to keep from crying. Her knuckles were bone white. “I wanted to follow her. I wanted to go with her. I took her hand and she began leading me to the edge of the meadow where a dense forest began. A distinct line separated the trees from the meadow. Something seemed wrong just then. My mother was afraid of places like forests because she had no sense of direction. I was just about to step in when I realized that this couldn’t be possible. My real mother would never lead me here. I began to here a distant shouting then. A familiar voice was yelling my name, and I felt a burning on my skin all of a sudden. Startled, I let go of my mother’s hand. She vanished, and then I woke up.”

Sebastian's brows were knitted with contemplation. "What I'd really like to know here," he said slowly, "Is how you knew that you had been infected with that disease. Your dream could have been a normal nightmare."

"The burning I felt was my older brother throwing coffee on me in actuality. He said that he couldn't wake me up no matter what. He had been shouting at me for awhile, apparently. But I only heard him at the end. To him, it looked like I reached the R.E.M. state where one dreams as soon as I fell asleep."

"You heard him only at the end?" Sebastian pursued, pausing in his writing once more.

"Yes, only at the end."

"Alright," he said, taking down a final note. "You've provided me with something to work with. Thank you."

The next few weeks followed with similar interviews with many different personalities. It took a great deal of time, much more than Sebastian anticipated. First, he had to find those who claimed to have been exposed to the Binding Phantasm, and then he had to weed out all the liars. Some victims were shaken by the fact that they had narrowly escaped death while others boasted of it. Their stories varied in the amount of detail, location, and how well the dreamer remembered it, but a few things were consistent through the tales.

Nearly all of the interviewees had described a girl very much like the one that Sera had seen, and every time, the girl had changed her appearance to fit a parent, a lover, a child, or a sibling. These people that she took the form of had almost nothing in common. They were not of the same age, height, hometown, or family status, but Sebastian noted sharply that they were all unreachable in some way, usually because of death. Some had recently passed away while others had been dead for years. Either way, the dreamer's emotions for their deceased were strong enough to cause the dreamer to nearly walk to their own death. What scared Sebastian the most was that this was all done so willingly by the oblivious dreamer. He noted that all the people infected by this disease began dreaming immediately when they fell asleep and were impossible to wake up, but like Sera's case, there were some that began to react more to reality once they showed doubt to the mysterious girl that kept on reappearing.

Sebastian closed his eyes as he ascended up the elevator. He held his small picture of Evanna and it calmed him. Another fortnight had slipped by, and he was making progress on collecting his information, but he was not fast enough. He knew about the disease now, and how it worked, but he still did not know how to stop it. What made the survivors realize something wrong with the dream and wake themselves? Why couldn't the other people contaminated with this Binding Phantasm do so? The world was slowly sinking into a hellish state now. Panic filled the streets and alleyways; it crept up on the very nature of humankind. Humans are scared of the unknown. More and more people splurged on an abundance of food and locked themselves up in their homes in fear of contamination. They wore masks on their faces just in case the disease could somehow recognize them and target them, which honestly wouldn't surprise Sebastian if it could, considering that the Binding Phantasm was able to specify the weakness of each individual person.

The entire continent was crumbling, especially on the east coast where Sebastian lived. Sebastian's bright mind whirred into a series of calculations. How many were dead now? He guessed about fifty-one million and no higher than fifty-four had contracted the Binding Phantasm. It had only been a month, and it had caused nearly seven times the number of deaths that cancer causes in a year in about an eighth of the time. Now, as he silently watched the news reporter, he learned that there had been signs of the disease in Europe as well, and the death rate had just reached over fifty-two million reported cases with fewer than two million survivors. The startled detective's mind automatically calculated a three to four percent survival rate and his light eyes widened. He needed to move faster. Although he was not the sort for collaboration, he had sought other renowned investigators, but even the ones that had been the most arrogant and shown the most haughtiness had now shrunken back into pusillanimity. It occurred to him now that he could die any day now. Sebastian did not quite know how to react to this. He was determined to stop the Binding Phantasm, as it was quite likely that he was one of the very few, or perhaps the sole human being that was determined to end this illness by any means, including his life. Sebastian lay down and mentally went through the many stories that he had heard. He realized that he could find as many survivors as he wanted and hear thousands more accounts on their dreams, but unless he actually met this girl that reappeared in every dream, he would be stuck in the dark of never actually experiencing such an event.

Hours later, the sleuth's azure eyes opened just in time to hear his television set tell him that there was a new insanity going around. The fear of sleeping had grown so high that people were fighting it by pumping their veins full of caffeinated drinks to the point where they dropped dead from exhaustion or killed themselves from it. Sebastian found a bitter irony in this Catch-22 situation. Either way, death claimed his victims.

It was a strange place that Sebastian stood in now. It seemed to be a cavern of ice, yet many strange plants grew, and the sun shone down into the cavern and bounced off the walls, creating the effect of being in a crystal. Next, Sebastian stood in an endless field of marigolds within a circle of sycamore trees. It began thundering, and Sebastian seemed to fall through the circle to the rooftop of a house. This looked vaguely familiar to Sebastian. I know this place, he thought. This is—

There came a series of flashes. Another flash led another surrounding. This continued until Sebastian was dizzy. He recognized some of the locations, but others were completely foreign to him. The last location he landed was in on a hill of grass. The moon was a thin crescent high above him, and below it was a single star. Dark, rolling purple clouds threatened to shroud the sky. He lay on the greenery absentmindedly staring at heavens with confusion until he managed to stumble onto his feet. A few feet in front of him stood the vermilion-eyed girl with the silvery hair and pale skin. She had a startled expression. "Y-you..." Her voice had a sing-song quality and she spoke with a lilt. "I cannot find a form to take for you. Do you not have anyone that you yearn for?"

Sebastian didn't answer; he was too startled. "Who are you?" he asked at last. "Why are you doing this?"

"What am I doing?" She looked puzzled.

"Are you here to kill me?"

"W-what?" the pale-haired girl asked. Sebastian immediately retracted. "Who are you?" he repeated.

"I'm a spirit, I guess," the girl said. "I'm looking for someone." Sebastian was confused, but he decided to play along. "Who?" He replied dutifully.

"That's the thing," she bit her lip. "My contract with Death stated that I would give up my memories and blindly search through dreams to find this person. I can only hope that I'll recognize him when I see him."

Sebastian let this all sink in for a minute. His sky-colored eyes clouded over with thought. “How many dreams have you visited?”

“Too many to count.” She sighed and shook her head. “When I go into the wrong dream, I feel horrible and I try to make up for it by taking the form of someone they miss. I guess when I find the person I’m looking for, I’ll change into my real appearance.”

“You really don’t know what happens when you visit a dream, do you?” The investigator was stunned. “You’ve visited about fifty-two million dreams,” he began. “Which means,” he said slowly, “That you’ve killed about fifty-two million people.” He steadily watched the mysterious girl’s reaction. “Every time you enter a dream, you end up killing the dreamer about ninety-six to ninety-seven percent of the time. Did you know that?”

“N-no,” she said, taken aback. “I... I’ve killed... more than fifty million people?” Tears tricked down her burgundy-colored eyes. “I’ve done such a horrible thing over and over again just because I was searching for one person?”

“I’m afraid so,” Sebastian said with a downcast glance.

“Are you scared of me?” the girl asked. The detective shook his head. “No, I’m not. I was investigating this phenomenon.” He glanced off into the distance. “Do you mind if I ask where we are? That house in the distance looks like the orphanage I grew up in. This isn’t reality, is it?”

“No,” she shook her head, as her eyes focused onto the orphanage. “That place looks familiar to me, too,” she said slowly. “I... I...” her garnet eyes widened. “I left that place with someone as soon as I turned eighteen. It was a horrible place. I think the person I left with is the person that I’m looking for.”

“Do you remember his name?” Sebastian asked with an incredulous expression and his mouth dry.

“No,” she shook her head sadly.

“The thing is, he remembers your name,” The dark-haired man’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Your name is Evanna Ashmore. You died five years ago in a shooting accident. I’m the person that you moved out of the orphanage with.”

Recognition streamed into the girl’s eyes as the dreamscape melted into reality. Evanna’s shockingly white hair darkened to a deep brown and her skin became a light peach. Those scarlet eyes became a brilliant green.

“I had no idea,” Evanna murmured. “I had no idea of the effect what I was doing. I just wanted to see you again.”

“I know,” Sebastian replied. “I know.”

“So that’s why I couldn’t find a form for you. The form you would’ve seen was me, but I didn’t seem to be able to turn back into myself. I was tricked by Death’s contract. If you hadn’t recognized me, then this carnage would have continued.” Evanna sniffled.

They stood in Sebastian’s apartment complex for awhile. “You can’t stay, can you?” He broke the silence sadly. Evanna shook her head. “I wish that I could.” Her voice cracked and tears slipped down her cheeks. She felt a tingling motion in her hand and looked sorrowfully as her small hand slowly became translucent. She could see Sebastian’s hand through hers.

“No matter what,” he vowed. “I’ll always be here for you.” She nodded despairingly. “I just wish—” she started, but then her voice broke.

“Me too,” he agreed. “One day, though. I promise.” With that, Evanna’s figure slowly faded to clear, and then she was gone, leaving only yellow flower petals behind. Everywhere else in Europe and North America, those who had been infected with the Binding Phantasm and were fated to death had the seemingly inevitable removed from them. The disease lifted, and the ropes of the Binding Phantasm were cut. Sebastian stood in the fading light and let the broken glory of his Pyrrhic victory ebb from his cheeks as tears.

Sebastian stood in front of Evanna’s grave, holding a single sunflower in his hand. He gently placed it on top of the cold granite. The past two months felt unreal to him, as if the entire occurrence of the Binding Phantasm was merely a long and horrible dream. The only proof of the terrible disease ever happening was the giant mass of tombstones it left behind, and the petals that Sebastian now kept in a box that did not seem to wilt. In the sky’s act of pathetic fallacy, large droplets of rain fell from the sky and onto the investigator. As the sun broke between the pearl-gray clouds, Sebastian lay down on the grass and was swept into a deep sleep as the beams of light steadily filled the world around him.