

Chapter One: The Slow Dreams of the Dead

On my fifteenth day in the oubliette, the dead started to talk to me. They were difficult to understand, at first. The skull on the floor in front of me stirred, its jaw moved, and it made a sound. At first there was no sense in that sound. But I was patient.

There was sometimes a ray of light in that place. It came, by deliberate design, from the floor of the Great Hall in the castle above me. I imagined all the others who had been there, staring up at that thin ray and hearing the music and the feet of the dancers when the lord hosted guests. This skull had been one of those who saw the light and heard the dancing. Now it was trying to speak, perhaps for the first time in years.

I found the corner with the damp stone and licked until I had a small mouthful. Then I took the skull and let the water run between its teeth. I would have to repeat this many times, whatever thirst it caused me.

“Talk to me,” I said, and the skull’s jaw moved. It made a moaning whisper like the sound of wind in the dead trees.

I licked the stone again, and fed the skull more water. It was trying to speak, through a throat that must be very dry. I was determined to help it. Once again, it moaned.

“Make a sound I can understand,” I said. “There is no other living person down here but me. And I have not heard you dead

talking to each other. So unless you talk to me, this oubliette will stay a silent place.”

But an oubliette is not a silent place. I had screamed when they put me down here, as they all must have. I had shrieked at my captors to pull me out—first constantly, and then sporadically. And then I had stopped screaming. As they all must have.

For a time, I sat down and cradled the skull in my lap and rested. But the empty spaces in my head were too wide, the lacunae were too bewildering, to let me remain motionless for long. I walked over to the water-stone and licked it again, and fed the skull again while my own parched throat burned. If not for that stone, I would already be dead, an ugly death of hallucinations and distortions and confusion. I wasn’t sure how I knew that, but I did. Still, a little water licked from a cold rock could never be more than barely enough at best. If the skull did not speak to me soon, I would have to start drinking again, and give up my efforts for a while.

This time, the skull’s moan was long and almost musical. It shifted tones, perhaps as if it were trying to form words.

“That’s right, that’s right,” I told it, and held it tight against my chest. I was eager for an end to my weeks of being alone with the incomprehensible stretches of blankness in my head.

“I don’t remember anything before they threw me down here,” I told the skull. I had decided to talk to it, to encourage it to speak. “There are things I know—broad things, almost random. I know this is the castle of some House, though whether they are great or little I cannot say. I know this is an oubliette. But who I am, what I am and what I was doing when they captured me—these things are gone. Though, sometimes, I almost feel as if I knew who I was till the moment they pushed me into the hole. Then I fell and landed on these bones. Some of them broke underneath me.”

I laughed. “Sorry about that, I hope I didn’t crack you. There was that iron spike, which I had missed by about a foot—they meant the spike as a mercy, of course, since it gave me a chance to just die. But I still felt lucky to have missed it. Maybe you did too, hmm?”

I paused for a few minutes to give my hoarse voice a chance to recover. Then I went on.

“I spent the first night screaming for them to let me out. I don’t know why. An oubliette is for forgetting about a person. There is no appeal.”

The light from the Hall above me went dark, and I knew that it was night again.

“Then I decided to explore this pit. My cell, if you could call it that. I stretched out my hands and pushed aside the bones until I found the wall. The room is only a few feet square-as you know well enough. There is space enough to lie down, if you pillow your head on a skull. There is no space to stretch out. I found the damp stone by running my hands along the walls. I also found the grooves made by people trying to dig out or drag themselves up. I assume they failed.

“The night after I came here, the lord of the castle held a ball. Perhaps that was at least partly for my benefit. I heard the dancing and the music, and I screamed again, screamed for hours. They ignored me, of course.”

Without the ray of light, I could see just as much with my eyes closed as open. In the dark, the rock mass of the castle weighed on me. I imagined it was my tomb.

“I’m going to sleep now,” I told the skull, “before the blackness makes me crazy. I will talk to you again in the morning.”

Then I fed the skull some water and drank a little for myself. I knew I would lose ground overnight. The skull would be thirstier after a night without drinking. It would be that much further from speaking. But I had no choice.

Not surprisingly, there were nightmares. Strange images, the faces of wise yet hateful men. Scenes of war and famine and torture and crucifixions by the side of a road. A woman cutting a cow’s leg to feed its congealed blood to her baby, who was already dead.

Flames in a pit of plague victims. Stranger things.

I woke up several times in the black of the oubliette, and told myself the nightmares wouldn’t come back when I went to sleep again. I was wrong every time.

“It’s morning,” said the skull. “There’s a bit of sunlight coming down from up there.”

The sound of its voice was unnerving in the darkness, even though I had waited so long to hear it.

“You can speak, then,” I said. “I thought it would take another day of drinking from my mouth.”

“I needed to rest,” it said. “For a long time, I’ve been wandering alone in my thoughts. You called me back from far away when you talked to me.”

“Where were you, then? In the land of the dead?”

“There is no such place, as far as I know. I fell asleep, and into dreams. They never ended. In time, they stretched out. They became slow.”

“What do you mean?”

“The thoughts and the images...they revealed themselves in every detail, every absorbing detail. No thought resolved itself. I was lost out there. I don’t know how long I’ve been dead, but for all I know I could have spent a hundred years dreaming about one image or one moment in time. The feel of a woman’s flesh, or the taste of ale, or the dirt under my fingernails when I tried to dig my way out of here.”

“So that’s death?”

“That was my death. And it will be again. And even this could be another slow dream”

“Does it seem slow?”

“I am not sure. Everything confuses me, now.”

I thought about the gaps and I knew what he meant. I shuddered.

“Don’t go to sleep in the oubliette,” the skull warned me. “Don’t go to sleep unless you have to. You will die in your sleep. You will slip into dreams. The slow dreams of the dead.”

I woke up. It was still black, it was not morning, and the skull had not yet spoken. I screamed, hoping someone would hear me and lose sleep on my account. But it hurt my throat, and I stopped.

The cold gripped my head like a tight rope. I retched, but of course my empty stomach brought up nothing. I knew I would never get back to sleep that night, but I couldn’t just lie there and think about all the things I couldn’t remember, all the things I didn’t know. I stumbled forward and caught myself on the wall, on my knees in the empty ocean of the dark. I visited the damp stone, first for myself, and then for the skull. I carried this second mouthful of water back, and found the skull by running my hands along the

floor. I picked it up and fed it the water. Then I climbed over the bones to the far corner, steadied myself on the spike, and urinated. I pushed some bones over the spot to cover up the stench. Then I heard the bones clatter behind me, where I had thought I was alone.

I wheeled around, but I froze at that instant. There was a black-and-white striped cobra, on top of the bones, watching me, swaying. Its body moved like a worm. Its tongue licked the air. Its eyes were like dark blue pools with no bottom, reflecting a sky filled with stars.

I woke up. There was a faint light of early morning from the castle above me. Someone was lighting torches in another part of the stronghold, preparing a meal, cleaning, going about their day, or so I assumed.

Pain tore into my stomach. I felt the tiny, sharp teeth of an imaginary animal gnawing at me from within. For some time, I fantasized about food, about the meal they would be sharing together up in the great hall, about the breads and the soups and the duck or pheasant, and the fruit...

I threw myself forward, and caught myself on the wall. I took a taste of water from the stone, and brought another taste to the skull. I turned around and pissed in the corner and covered it with bones. Then I talked to the skull once more.

"I think I dreamed about you last night," I told him.
"Something about the dreams of the dead."

This time, he wailed. His cry echoed from the walls, as my screams had done. After a few seconds, I realized I was wailing with him, and made myself stop.

"There is no meat left on any of these bones," I told him when he was done. "If there was, I would have eaten it days ago. The worms have taken it, or the rats have taken it-though I have seen no rats. There is nothing. So I am the first person to be thrown into this pit in some time. You must speak to me. I am alone."

There was no sound from him at all.

"A few nights ago, I dreamed I was in a burning building. Perhaps an inn. Someone was pounding on my door. He was screaming for me to wake up. He was screaming that we needed to get the children out. I jumped out the window and ran away, while the children shrieked like panicked animals from behind the blazing walls."

I wrapped my arms around myself, shuddering. “Even *that*-is better for me than the blank spaces, the missing story, the mental desert I see when I look back to any time before the oubliette.”

The skull moaned again, and again I thought he was trying to form words.

“All I have is images,” I said. “Brief pictures. Scenes of suffering.”

He made another sound, a long sound like a phrase of speech, and I could almost make out the words. Almost.

“You must want more water,” I suggested, and for at least a few hours I alternated between swallowing and letting water run down his dry mouth. Actually, there was more spit than water. And not much of either at any one time.

Meanwhile, the life of the castle went on. I heard feet and voices and crashes of things dropping, and phrases of music. I didn’t bother to scream. The ray of light changed. I realized it was afternoon, and I hadn’t marked the day. I pulled a leg-bone from the pile and stacked it in one corner with the other fifteen. My sixteenth day in the oubliette. My sixteenth day with no food.

“I would have eaten the others, if I could,” said the skull. It startled me half-way to my feet.

“You can talk!” I cried, and picked him up.

“Yes, and I can hear you, too,” said the skull. “The first voice I have heard in a very long time.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I do not know. I cannot think clearly anymore. The water drips for hundreds of years, and I listen to it. The wind blows, and I listen to that for another century. Or for a moment. I no longer know.”

“Slow dreams,” I mumbled.

“That’s a strange way to put it,” he said.

“I’m so glad you’re talking,” I said to him. “I was starting to think I would die before it happened.”

“Don’t worry, you have all the time in the world. Starvation is a long death.”