Waking
up in a
dream
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James strolled happily along Camberwell New Road. At this time of year, there were many sunny days, as there were today. The street was lined with two- and three-story buildings, offering a clear view of the blue sky, which he greatly enjoyed. The midday sun played with the colors of the facades and peeked through the windows. He stopped at a small café where he had arranged to meet his friend, Richard. After ordering fries and tea, James began eating without waiting for his friend, who was clearly running late.

"Hello!" James heard, and looked up to see a large man in a formal business suit sitting at the desk right in front of him. The man stared at James with a piercing gaze, his gaze fixed on him.

"Hello, this place is occupied," James replied.

"Perhaps. But your friend won't be coming," the man replied.

"Are you sure about that?" James asked with wicked irony.

"Exactly."

"How could you know this? Who are you?"

"First, let me congratulate you on the completion of your scientific work. And let me tell you that you are a great scientist."

"You're exaggerating. What kind of work?" James feigned surprise.

"Please don't be modest. The mouse did grow a tail, didn't it?" the stranger smiled.

"But how do you know?"

"You have done a great job."

"I wasn’t working alone," James noted.

"You made the main contribution, admit it,” the unknown man insisted.

James quietly studied the stranger. He was dressed in clearly very expensive clothes, judging by the quality: a dark blue suit and a dark maroon shirt. Even while sitting, his majestic posture and athletic build were evident. His regular features, dark hair, and subtle smile lent him a certain air of mystery and put James on edge, though overall, the stranger was a personable presence.

"I think if you don’t introduce yourself, that’s where we’ll end this conversation,” James said with a tight smile.

"My name is Shadow Lucas. I represent my interests, and I'm here to help you."

"Are you sure I need your help?"

"I think you'll decide for yourself. I'm only free to make you an offer, but you have the right to determine your own path."

"What is the gist of your proposal, Mr. Lucas?" James frowned.

"I know about your talent, your scientific research, your great discovery."

" And just how do you know that? The report to the Academic Council won't be until next week. It's classified information right now."

"There will be no report," Lucas remarked coldly.

"What do you mean it won't happen? The academic council has been convened, people will come..."

"Do you really think they'll let you publish your discovery? You're a smart man! What have you invented? Olympian nectar?"

"We have found a way to regenerate tissue by recreating cells using the information contained in DNA."

"So you decided to extend a person's life by several thousand years, and you thought that no one would object, and you would be allowed to do it?"

" I'm interested who could stop us from doing this and how?" James raised his eyebrows.

"No one can allow you to do that," Lucas answered indifferently.

Suddenly, James saw something plop down on a woman sitting three tables away. It was something… something unimaginable: dirty in color and hideously shaped. A feeling of unreality descended on James. As if noticing his confusion, Lucas drew a short line in the air with two splayed fingers, as if crossing something out. The thing perched on the woman's back instantly vanished.

"Sorry, I had to change your perception to make our conversation easier. But I went a bit overboard; it's not only humans who make mistakes."

"I get it – it's a dream! I should have guessed it straight away," James exclaimed.

"In a sense, yes, it is a dream, and in this dream you see what is actually happening to you."

"It’s not just humans that do this…” James muttered. "Are you human?”

"No."

"An alien?"

"Well, if an alien is a humanoid creature that emerged from bacteria on a distant planet through long-term mutations, then I'm not an alien. Although I didn't originate here."

"That's already something."

"You, of course, don’t believe the crazy idea that protozoa appeared as a result of a lightning strike, and then from them, after long transformations and an intermediate form in the form of a monkey, man arose?"

"How can I believe this? It's just a hypothesis."

"Most of your fellow scientists regard it as a theory."

"Why did you start talking about this?"

"In order to understand how best to answer your question, Mr. Taylor."

"Okay, if this is real, what was that monstrosity on that woman? And where did it go?" James asked nervously.

"It hasn't disappeared, you just stopped perceiving it. This is a loose creature, with a primitive semblance of consciousness. You call it a larva," Lucas answered calmly.

"What was it doing on this woman’s shoulders?"

"It was harvesting energy. It's an energy vampire and the cause of her mental disorder."

"Why?!"

"All this is due to the mistakes of her ancestors."

"Mistakes?!"

"Sin."

"But if this isn't a dream, then you're a more perfect being than a human. And if you're not... I'm starting to guess who you are. Are you one of those rebels?"

"A rebel among the rebels."

"I'm aware of how dangerous it is to deal with you. I'm not my own worst enemy. Sorry," – James shook his head.

The other man, however, smiled kindly:

"There's a car parked across the road. There are two people in it, one of them named Bill, and that's how he'll introduce himself to you today."

"Where and why I will meet him?"

"He will be waiting for you today, in your house, right in your apartment."

"It's very interesting, like in the movies. Where did he get the keys to my apartment?"

"Now you'll understand. This man will offer you a move to an underground city for scientists. This city is located at a depth of three hundred meters, and the working conditions there are excellent."

"In an underground bunker?!" James exclaimed.

"There are really good working conditions there, but as you understand it, it’s like confinement."

If you refuse, you will simply be eliminated.

" … simply be eliminated …"

"They'll liquidate you. And it doesn't matter how. They might send you there by force, after wiping your memory first."

"Who will send me and on what grounds?"

"Why do you need to know this? The main thing is the result. And it will be as I said."

"No one has the right to send me anywhere!" James declared loudly and insistently.

"Agreed. It's a shame that won't stop them. Do you really think that those who wield real power will consider your rights when their interests are at stake? So the essence of my proposal is that I will help you avoid this fate. If you agree, Mr. James Taylor, we will leave here together, and your pursuers will never find you. You will move to another country, under a different name, and in a few years you will be able to pursue scientific work. But, of course, you should forget about your discovery. Although you can do this unofficially, keeping your work secret and not divulging your discoveries. I will ensure your safety. That is the essence of my proposal."

"What in return?"

"Nothing. Free of charge. And it definitely has to be free of charge!"

"What is your interest?"

"By doing you a favor, I'm giving myself the opportunity to hope. The opportunity to count on the fact that I can, someday, return. Return to where I once came from."

"So, not entirely free?" James clarified.

"Yes, but absolutely free of charge for you."

"If you are who I think you are, then you must know a great deal about how things work. But can you answer my questions?"

"With pleasure, James; I am at your service."

James lost all sense of time; he didn't even notice how long their conversation lasted. He asked questions, and listened intently to his companion's answers, with genuine interest. The conversation felt remarkably candid, and Lucas’s responses aligned with James’s own views and convictions. He learned who was flying the "saucers," who had built the underground city for the chosen few, and why along, with much more. James found himself beginning to trust the man he was speaking with.

"What do you think of my proposal, James?" Lucas smiled.

"A very interesting proposal. How much time do I have to think about this issue?" James smiled, looking the stranger straight in the face.

"Until our conversation ends."

"And then what?"

"Then you will forget about our meeting, as if it never happened."

"But that's not enough... I need at least..."

"Do you want to check if I'm telling the truth?"

"Well, generally speaking, yes."

"When you leave here with me, you'll remain a free man, with free will. And you can return to London whenever you want," Lucas promised confidentially.

"And my relatives?"

"You'll have to forget about them for a while. You won't see them for a long time, and you won't be able to correspond with them for their safety. But if you don't accept my offer, you'll never see them again. I strongly recommend that you don't verify my words, but simply trust me. What will you choose?" Lucas asked Shadow firmly.

"Have you come to ruin my life?"

"I'm here to help you."

"But you want to take away from me everything I hold dear. Everything I've worked towards for many years."

"No, not everything. You will retain your life and freedom."

"Why do I need this without everything else? Everything that fills my life?"

"You'll answer that question yourself very soon. If you accept my offer. Do you accept my offer?"

"Or maybe you could just wake me up, and I'll go about my normal business and live my normal life?" James's voice held a note of pleading.

"Now you are surrounded by a more real reality than the illusion in which you exist while going about your usual business."

"Just wake me up and that's it! I can't give you an answer now anyway, because you can't be here!"

"If I can't be here, then why don't you accept my offer? What are you risking?" Lucas asked, smiling softly.

"Do you want me to leave with you right now? Let's at least do it after the report at the academic council."

"There will be no report. Why haven't you understood yet?"

"Well, let's say there won't be a report."

"Without "let's say", it simply won't happen.

"Anyway, let's do it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow will be too late."

"It's too early today!" James said, throwing up his hands and leaning back in his chair.

"James, do you want to check if: I am a hallucination, or a figment of your imagination?"

"Yeah, that too. And I still need to finish up some chores and finally go home to get my things."

"What's up? We'll come to your place, but not today."

"Listen, Mr. Lucas, I can't go anywhere with you today! It just defies common sense!"

"What is "this""?

"All of this. What does it have to do with you? Do you realize that all of this sounds completely phantasmagoric?! I don't know who you are... In any case, I'm not going to run like a hare across a field, away from some vaguely defined pursuers."

"Mr. James Taylor, you have made your choice. A worthy choice. Farewell..."

James sat at the table, where the food was almost untouched. He began to eat his dinner leisurely. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had just been arguing with someone about something. James even turned and glanced at the diners. "But where's Ricci?" he thought. "Why didn't he come? Why isn't he answering his phone? It's already late." He glanced at his watch automatically, and suddenly it seemed to him that it was slow. Comparing the time with the clock on the wall, James realized that his watch was twenty-five minutes slow.

"A good brand of watch, a new battery. What's wrong?" he thought. "Well, soon I'll be able to afford a better brand." After checking the time with the man at the next table, James adjusted his watch and began drinking tea.

Stepping outside, James took a deep breath of the warm summer air and set off toward home at a leisurely pace. The sun was already setting toward a rosy sunset, and he enjoyed the magnificent play of colors. "This evening is just like Nice," he thought. "When will I be there again? Soon." James leisurely approached his home, pondering, dreaming, and anticipating his imminent triumph.

Entering the apartment and turning on the light, James heard from the room: "Mr. Taylor, don't be afraid, my name is Billy."