

Chapter One

A Dreaming Boy

The white sky should have seemed strange, but it wasn't. The idea that something could be strange was impossible, so Mal didn't question the empty sky, or the white ground, or the clashing sounds breaking over the otherwise eerie silence – all of which should have seemed peculiar.

Mal was lost.

He was surrounded by countless bubbles that floated throughout the endless space. Each bubble was the size of a car, covered in a skin thin enough to see that each was filled with brightly glowing clouds of varying whites and light greys. Despite the hundreds of bubbles around him, not one of them touched. They swayed like seaweed in the ocean, an invisible force keeping them apart. This would typically have seemed strange, but, like the rest of the world, it did not.

Bending down, Mal could see that under each bubble was a root connecting it to the white ground. The roots pulsed red, in their own time, like heartbeats.

Walking with an unusual conviction, Mal headed towards the strange sounds in the distance. At first, he couldn't quite place what he was hearing, but the closer he got, the more familiar it was, it sounded like swords clashing in battle.

Mal imagined two titans, duelling with lightning weapons, spiralling through the sky like superheroes. Usually, his imagination left him disappointed, but after weaving between the cloud-filled bubbles, Mal saw two figures in the distance fighting with glowing swords. Mal's breath was taken away – or it would have been if he was breathing.

The two swordsmen twirled through the air, bouncing off the cloud bubbles, slashing and hacking at each other. Both wore large dark cloaks but wielded different weapons; one fought with a green broadsword and the other a red katana. Both swords glowed brightly, all the way from their points down through to their hilts. The katana and sword splashed their red and green lights onto the mens' dark cloaks and the white bubbles that surrounded them.

Staying hidden behind the cloud bubbles, Mal crept closer. The man with the green sword was larger than the other, and he attacked ferociously – his sword nothing but a blur of emerald as it sliced through the air. The thinner and shorter of the cloaked men flipped backwards and spun out of the way, narrowly avoiding the deadly strikes.

The swordsmen shouted at each other, but all Mal heard were muffled echoes. He edged forward as he tried to pick up a phrase or a word, but he heard something else: a soft, deep growl.

Mal turned on the spot, looking around for the source of the sound, but all he could see was the ever-white of the world and the faint red pulses of the bubbles' roots.

Mal poked his head out from the bubble he was hiding behind to watch the swordsmen once more.

He heard the growl again – louder, hungrier. Mal pulled himself back and slowly turned around. His heart started beating faster as he searched for the source of the growl, which was definitely getting closer.

Mal stepped back without thinking, pushing his back up against the cloudy bubble. When he touched it, he felt it drawing him in, like a warm bed on a cold morning. It took all of Mal's energy not to fall into the bubble. He threw himself forward, falling onto his hands and knees.

The ground was white as snow, but it felt warm under his fingers. Mal kept looking from side to side, frantically searching for where the growl was coming from, but he still couldn't see anything.

Slowly, he stood. The growling stopped getting louder, then stopped altogether. The only thing Mal could hear was the crashing of blades and the muffled shouting of the two cloaked swordsmen, somewhere behind him.

Then something made his skin crawl. Hot air pushed against the back of his neck. Mal wanted to run or scream, but he froze, statue-like, with the hot and heavy breath of *something* against his neck.

Only a few moments passed, but it felt like a lifetime before Mal convinced himself to move. He slowly turned around and saw a dark silhouette emerging from the bubble. It took him a second to realise he was face-to-face with a monster. A real, true, larger-than-life monster.

It had a spider-like head, with large, venom-dripping fangs. Its front two legs reached out from the bubble, and the tips of each were sharp as a dagger. Slowly a third leg appeared, as the monster moved closer to Mal. Even though it was eyeless, Mal could feel the monster glaring at him – hungrily. It was completely black, except for the sharp, bright, red crystal on its head, which looked like it had been stabbed into the monster's skull.

The monster's steamy breath slapped Mal in the face, as more of its spider body and legs appeared from the bubble. Mal kept walking backwards, but the spider was taller than he was and kept its face close until it stood in the white world.

The monster snapped its jaws, and let Mal sink deeper into terror, feeding off it. As it circled Mal, the beast left a dark stain on the white ground from each of its eight legs, which oozed the same black slime that covered its skin. With a ghastly roar, the monster scurried

faster around Mal, then launched itself at him. Mal dropped to the ground and rolled under the nearest cloud bubble.

As he reached the other side, Mal leapt to his feet. He looked around for the monster, but it was gone; vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

Mal felt his heart racing in his chest as he ever-so-cautiously stepped backwards. His eyes stayed fixed on the spot where he had last seen the giant spider, and he patted down his body to make sure he wasn't hurt.

There was nothing more terrifying to Mal than a spider. He could handle heights, needles, speaking in front of the class, and everything else that most people were afraid of, but spiders...no way. Nothing had ever scared him more.

Then, as if out of thin air, another black creature appeared. It was different from the spider; this one looked like a tiger on the prowl, slinking towards Mal on its four muscular legs. It had no face, eyes or nose, just a large mouth full of sharp teeth and a glowing red crystal atop its feline head.

The cat-like creature stopped to snarl. It wasn't as playful as the spider, and it pounced. Mal dived and rolled to the side, avoiding the monster as it flew over where he had just been. Before he even found his feet, the beast attacked again. Mal could taste the creature's foul, hot breath against his face as it pinned him down. The tiger-like monster was heavier than it looked and its claws dug into Mal's chest. It growled and pushed its ugly black head into Mal's throat. It didn't bite, just held Mal down. Mal only had a moment to wonder why.

From behind a cloud bubble on Mal's left, crept the giant spider.

It scurried towards Mal, soaking up his fear. The tiger climbed off Mal's chest and waited next to him as the spider came closer. There was no escape.

Mal closed his eyes. He didn't want to die.

It grew dark as the spider lunged at him, but Mal didn't feel anything. He heard a loud ripping. But there was no pain.

Hesitantly, Mal opened his eyes, wondering which arm or leg had been torn from his body, whether his skin would go cold, and how excruciating the pain would be when it kicked in. But all of his limbs were still where his limbs should be. He was still in one piece. The spider, however, was not.

It had been split almost clean in half.

The red crystal atop its head was cracked, and it flickered feebly in Mal's face. The spider let out a long, high-pitched screech as the crystal faded to light pink. Its wet, oily skin dried out, and the monster became a lifeless shell. For a moment, nothing happened, then the spider exploded into a cloud of black ash.

Mal looked up as the ash fell onto and around him. He saw a glowing green blade where the spider had been and, at its end, one of the swordsmen.

"Dad?" Mal asked, noticing his father's face under the hood.

"Run, Mal!" his father yelled. "Run!"

Mal didn't move – he couldn't. He just stared up at his father's familiar face, with his brown and grey beard and bright green eyes. He looked at the man he'd known his whole life and wondered if he had never really known him at all. His father couldn't wield a sword or slay monsters.

Mal was lifted to his feet and shoved across the white floor by his father. The black tiger-like creature growled angrily and circled its new and bigger prey. Mal's father stood patiently, his broadsword in hand. But it just paced, glaring maliciously at the man. Mal

wondered what it was waiting for, then between two bubbles behind his father, he saw another monster ready to strike: a man-sized snake.

“Dad!” Mal shouted out as the snake threw itself at his father. “Behind you!”

Before his son’s words even reached him, Mal’s father quickly and effortlessly stepped to the side, avoiding the lunging monster. He slashed his sword effortlessly through the red crystal that was lodged into its head, and the black snake collapsed onto the ground. Its crystal flashed weakly before the red faded completely. The snake died in the same way the spider had – drying out, then exploding into ash.

By the time Mal’s father had turned back around, the tiger-like monster had gone, leaving nothing behind except the stains of black paw prints on the white ground.

“Get it!” Mal said, but his father hurried over and knelt beside him instead.

“I have more important things to do than chase Nightmares around all night,” his father grimaced as he pulled back his hood from his face. “Now I need you to listen carefully to what I’m about to say.”

Mal shook his head, taking in the strange bubbles surrounding him. “Just tell me what’s happening, Dad.”

“No,” his father said as he took a deep breath. “There’s no time. Just listen: to find the eye, look at the promise that turned a bird to winter.”

“I don’t understand,” Mal protested.

“I don’t expect you to, nor will you remember any of this...at least not for a while. But one day, you will. One day you’ll remember.”

“Why tell me if I won’t remember? I don’t get it, Dad,” Mal pleaded, the strangeness of it all finally dawning on him.

“I never wanted you to fall into this world. I wanted you to have a normal childhood. Know that,” his father said, scratching his beard as he glanced around at the endless white. “And know that this world you’re slipping into is more dangerous than you can even imagine.” His gaze returned to his son. “It’s a world where fear fuels the enemy. So do not be scared, Mal. Never be scared.”

Over his father’s shoulder, Mal saw the other hooded swordsman approaching them. The small man’s bright red katana glowed in his hand.

“Watch out!” Mal warned, as his father laid his hands on his son’s chest.

Somehow Mal felt himself being pulled into the ground.

“Dad!” he tried again. “Behind you!”

There was a pressure on his chest, and Mal fell. His father’s face vanished in an instant, and Mal was surrounded by darkness. He begged himself to not forget. Don’t forget. Don’t forget. Don’t...