

The Lost Dreamers

Part One: Twilight Horror

by Nate French

As a young boy, Gregory Gry dreamed of making a name for himself in the Clover Club card room. His step-father, a reckless gambler with a taste for the bottle, would take young Gregory to the Club on an almost nightly basis, where the boy would wander the room and attempt to talk to the gruff men who were more interested in the booze, the waitresses, and the money at stake. Quickly bored by the conversation, Gregory would simply pull up a chair at the loudest table and watch the game unfold.

Such was his youth, and as the years passed Gregory's knack for the game grew by leaps and bounds. Long before he was ever dealt his first hand, the boy was able to stare a man down and discern the meaning behind his bets.

As his father's love of bootleg whiskey overtook his love of cards, Gregory, then seventeen, began to make his way to the Clover Club on his own. To the bouncers and dealers and serving-girls he was as familiar as the paintings on the walls, and there was no trouble in taking over his father's seat. The thrill of the cards, the money at stake, and the unspoken sense of illicit danger were seductive enough on their own, but it was the flirtatious gaze of a young woman that made it impossible for Gregory to stay away.

Katherine Price was her name, but in the Club she was Twila. A year or two older than Gregory, she was the rebellious daughter of a retired detective who was drawn in by the glamour of the Club. Throughout the night she would mingle with the gamblers, but her attention would always come back to a young, clean-cut man, hardly more than a boy, who had an uncanny feel for the game. More and more frequently, she would find herself at his table, watching him play, smiling with a vicarious thrill every time he took in a pot.

Gregory and Twila became friends. His winnings accumulated, and she convinced him to rent a room above the Club. Eventually, Twila became a fixture in Gregory's life, moving into his apartment and rarely leaving his side. For a short, fleeting moment, all seemed well in the world of Gregory Gry.

Charming and flirtatious in public, Twila-Katherine Price was brooding and mysterious in private. An art student at the nearby Miskatonic University, she was obsessively working on a painting she would never let anyone see. She did not offer an explanation for the secrecy and—perhaps to his credit—Gregory did not ask.

Days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months, and Twila continued to work intently upon the mysterious painting, never seeming to move any closer to completion, and never seeming to notice the amount of time her task consumed. Gregory continued to excel in the Clover Club card room, but Twila grew more and more reclusive, rarely coming down to watch him play. Instead, she would paint, and, when she was not painting, it seemed that

all she wanted to do was sleep, or complain about how tired she was. Gone was the lovely spark in her eye that had once so attracted Gregory Gry.

One night, Gregory woke at a dark hour to find Twila painting by candlelight in her usual corner of their room. Startled by the scene, he rose from the bed and took a step toward her, but she drew a shielding curtain across her easel, stepped in front of his path, and turned him back to bed.

"Twila, dear, are you OK?" he asked. "You've been so tired, and now you're up painting..."

"I want to go back," she said, sitting down next to him on the bed and putting a hand on his shoulder. "I want to go back. I can't stand it anymore."

"Go back? You mean to your father's?" he asked. "Are you unhappy?"

"No. Not there. Of course not. That's the last place I'd want to go." Her gaze wandered over to the painting in the corner of the room, and then darted back to Gregory's face. "We need to get a cat. They're not happy with me, and I don't know if they can come up the stairs as easily as I can descend..."

"Twila, what are you saying? Is someone in the Club upset with you? I... why a cat? You're not making any sense."

"You wouldn't understand. You've never been there. You haven't seen."

"I still don't—"

"The Dreamlands, Gregory! I go there, every night. Sometimes, this

world... I wish I never came back." Her eyes were once again alight. "You didn't really think I was tired all the time, did you? It's just... I wanted so much to dream..." She stared again at the painting in the corner.

"Twila? I still don't get it. You're telling me that these dreams are—"

"They're not just dreams! It's a real place, called the Dreamlands. Imagine a vision, but more intense, and when you wake up it's like coming down from a rush, and all your sensations are just a shadow of what you know they could be... you'll see, Gregory." She smiled, a cold, distant smile. "Then you'll understand."

"So you're saying you'd rather spend your time asleep, dreaming about these, these Dreamlands, than being awake and alive and... I thought we were happy. I thought we were in love. Do you really want to run away from everything we have, because of a dream?"

"I didn't say that, Gregory. And I don't have to make that choice. You can come with me, instead."

To be continued in the second *The Dreamlands Asylum Pack: In Memory of Day*.

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The Lost Dreamers

Part Two: In Memory of Day

by Nate French

Falling asleep was easier said than done. Gregory Gry sat up, awake in bed, next to the slumbering form of Twila-Katherine Price. She had said she would wait for him on the other side, but he didn't grasp what she meant. Earlier that night he had agreed, mostly to humor Twila, to make the attempt to cross over into her Dreamlands. She had explained that all he had to do was fall asleep next to her with the desire to go to the Dreamlands in mind, but sleep would not come.

His mind raced. Was Twila mad at him about something? He didn't really believe that anything was going to happen once he fell asleep, but he couldn't even get to that point. Did she really want to leave him? Was she seeing someone else, when he was down in the card room?

He looked at Twila, and gently stroked her long dark hair. The edge of her mouth was curled into the beginnings of a smile. He wanted to wake her, talk things over, find out what was wrong. No. That would make things worse. He needed to fall asleep, to go along with her story this night, and in the sanity of dawn suggest a visit to the doctor...

He looked at the easel in the corner of the room, tempted to throw back the curtain and see what in the seven hells it could be she was painting. He stifled the urge, and leaned back on his pillow.

His eyes closed. His mind wandered. How long had he been awake? The owners of the Clover Club were trying to talk him into helping them set up a scam with one of the dealers, to cheat the Club's unsuspecting patrons. Maybe Twila had caught wind of this, and that was why she'd been so withdrawn. But that was crazy. Gregory believed in the integrity of the game, and wouldn't even give the scam a second thought. If anything, though, Twila might be even more upset if she discovered he had turned down a shot at some easy cash...

Gregory stood up, and paced the room. Something didn't seem right. He had the sense that someone was just outside the door, waiting, listening... With a lunge he whipped open the door, and leapt into the hall.

No one was there.

Embarrassed, Gregory turned back into the bedroom. Something wasn't right. Why couldn't he sleep? Someone was whispering. Twila? It seemed to be coming from... He glanced about the room, and felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The painting was gone.

In its place, he saw an ornate marble staircase, leading down through an opening in the wall. Was he really awake? This had to be a dream... It seemed that the whispering was coming from somewhere down the staircase, carried to his ears on a cool, gentle breeze. He crossed the room, craning his neck to see where the stairs lead.

Turned away from him, several steps away, he saw a dark-haired woman in a black dress. "Twila?" She turned, smiling. Yes. He glanced at the now empty bed. Was this the dream she was talking about? His heart was pounding, and he could not remember ever feeling more awake. He began his descent.

A lush, rich carpet caressed the bottom of his bare feet. An earthy, cavernous smell drifted up the stairway, and he heard a faint laughing from far below. The stairs wound gently to the left as he descended, and when he reached Twila, she jumped into his arms, and kissed him with a passion he had forgotten.

"Are we awake?" he asked. "Is this real?"

"Does it matter? Come on..." she took his hand, leading him down the stairs.

"Where are we? Is this the Dreamlands?" he asked as they descended.

"It's not really the Dreamlands yet, just the periphery. We're going to pass through the Cavern of Flame, at the bottom of these stairs, and then descend seven hundred more steps. Then, we'll be in the Dreamlands..."

"The Cavern of what?"

"Behold," she said, leading him around a final bend in the staircase and into a vast stone cavern with a pillar of flame in its center, extending from the floor to the ceiling. "The Cavern of Flame."

Across the cavern, Gregory could see the top of another mist-shrouded staircase, twisting down and out of sight. Two cloaked, hooded figures stood watchfully at the top of this staircase. Twila let go of Gregory's hand and danced across the chamber, narrowly avoiding the roaring pillar of fire in the room's center. As she moved, Twila turned, and beckoned for Gregory to follow. He stepped out onto the dry stone floor, which was warm beneath his bare feet, and walked slowly across the chamber, close to the cave wall, giving the flaming pillar a wide berth. As he approached, one of the cloaked figures at the top of the stairwell spoke.

"State your name, and your desire within the Dreamlands."

"Uh, Gregory Gry, and... I've never been there before. I'd like to see it."

"Inadequate. What is your dream?" The hooded figure held up one of its arms, blocking Gregory's path. The column of fire flickered behind him.

"Uh..." Gregory looked at Twila. She was waiting at the top of the stairs. "I think we should go back. Twila—" he reached out, over the arm of the guardian, but she skipped beyond his reach. He tried to follow, but the other hooded figure grabbed hold of him, and Twila turned her back. He stared after her, helpless, and then she was gone.

To be continued in the third *The Dreamlands Asylum Pack: In the Dread of Night*.

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Part Three: In the Dread of Night

by Nate French

Gregory Gry woke alone in his bed. Throwing the sheets back, he jumped up and surveyed the room. Sunlight was creeping in through a crack in the curtains. Twila's painting was back (was it ever really gone?) in its customary place, and there was no sign of the marble staircase. Just a dream, he thought. Just a dream. But where's Twila?

Gregory went to the washroom, and splashed some cold water on his face. He rubbed his eyes and looked in the mirror. He didn't get enough sleep last night, and it showed. He would be off his game today, but what else was he going to do? Turning, he noticed one of Twila's little black dresses hanging from a hook on the door, and he felt a heavy sense of loss creeping from his chest to the pit of his stomach. What else was he going to do, indeed.

Gregory's day at the card tables was short. He wanted to distract himself with the game, but the room seemed empty, the pots were small, and the dealers who could usually be counted on to keep things engaging seemed too tired to care. Even when he took down the one sizable pot he played, the thrill was not there. At one point, he found himself on the verge of telling the strange tale to the rest of his table, catching himself at the last moment. Who would believe him?

Unable to keep his mind from dwelling on whether Twila was really gone, Gregory had lost his initial stake before the end of the morning, and he decided that it would be in his best interest to sit out the afternoon. Instead, he took a walk through an abandoned section of the city.

That evening, Gregory nibbled at a cold, tasteless sandwich, alone. The food made him think of better days, and better meals. With little appetite, he pushed his chair away from the table, and paced throughout his apartment. Yesterday's newspaper lay abandoned on a chair. Gregory picked it up and skimmed the headlines. It was going to be a long night.

Sitting down on his bed, Gregory tried to distract himself with the newspaper. He couldn't focus. He couldn't keep himself from staring at the covered painting in the corner of the room. He imagined Twila standing in front of the easel, intent on her work... At one point, he rose, and walked over to the corner,

tempted by the urge to pull back the cover and see...

He forced his hand to stop, and went to the kitchen and made himself a drink. Returning to the bedroom, he set the glass next to the small self-portrait that Twila had done for him when they first met. As he sipped at his drink, his gaze lingered on her face, and she seemed to be staring back at him with pity in her eyes. He shuddered, and turned off light, hoping to dream.

The night was long, and lonesome, but the dream would not come.

Days passed. Twila did not return, but her memory lingered. Long, empty days were spent in the card room, days in which breaking even could be called a success. Longer, emptier nights were spent waiting for sleep. The most innocuous items haunted him with memories... a hairbrush, a towel, her favorite drinking glass. But of all the items that reminded Gregory of Twila, the one that disturbed him the most was the covered painting in the corner of the bedroom. With each passing day, Gregory became more and more certain that it held some clue as to where Twila had gone, and how he might once again find her. The temptation to draw back the cover and see the painting once and for all was strong, and tempered only by his sense that he should respect Twila's memory by upholding her wish that no one see the painting until it was complete. Thus, Gregory's mind was locked in an internal struggle.

Until one night, when he woke with a start. Twila had visited him in a dream. He could still hear her voice, echoing in his head. "If you

want to come to me, Gregory, the painting holds the key..."

He climbed out of bed, and paced about the room, coming to a stop near the painting. Was it really her, or was his mind trying to trick itself into stealing a look at the painting? He didn't know, but he was about to find out.

Gregory Gry closed his eyes, and pulled back the cover on the painting of Twila-Katherine Price.

To be continued in the fourth *The Dreamlands Asylum Pack: Search for the Silver Key*.

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The Lost Dreamers

Part Four: Search for the Silver Key

by Nate French

“The painting holds the key,” Twila had told him in his dream, and she had not lied. Gregory took this as confirmation that it was, in some sense, really her.

In the foreground of the painting, he saw a bald man in his late fifties with a short, thick goatee, smiling to reveal a golden tooth. Despite his apparent age, the man was still in fantastic shape, with a thick neck and wiry but powerful arms. Hanging from a chain around his neck was a large, tarnished silver key covered with mysterious arabesques. Gregory knew the man, and recognized him at once as Twila’s father, John Henry Price.

The gleaming marble staircase painted into the background put to rest any lingering doubts Gregory had about the authenticity of Twila’s appearance in his dream. For a brief second, he even thought he saw her image on the steps, speaking to him. “*Find the Key, Gregory. Find the key.*” He rubbed his eyes, and looked again at the painting.

Twila was gone, if ever there at all. Gregory Gry set out at once for Price Manor.

* * *

A child of privilege, Twila was given everything she wanted growing up. Ironically, this had caused her to develop a rather low opinion of her father who, she felt, was trying to buy her love and respect. Gregory Gry had a different view altogether of John Henry Price: the man was eccentric, borderline insane, and needed to be handled with care.

“Like I’ve said many times, Gregory, I’m thrilled and amazed that Katie has fallen in with a man such as yourself. When she left home, you could only imagine the torment I felt, wondering what kind of scoundrel she would find.” As he said this, he loaded a bullet into one of his prized ivory-studded pistols, taking aim at a target across the expansive and well-tended lawn. “When you came to me and introduced yourself, explaining the situation,

I knew you would take care of her, and treat her with respect.” He fired, and the distant target, apparently a potted plant, exploded. “I knew I wouldn’t have to kill you.”

“That possibility, sir, was precisely why I first came to see you. She had quite a bit to say about you, and I needed to confront the truth for myself.” Gregory was not quite as humble and upstanding as Twila’s father believed, but his experience at the card tables had taught him the value of appearing to be the person others desired you to be.

“Yes, yes, I know all about the truth, son.” John Henry Price smiled, and for a second Gregory Gry wondered just how well the ex-Agency detective knew him. So he said nothing, and waited for Twila’s father to continue. “Rumor has it she left you.” A strange light gleamed in the old detective’s eye, and then he began to chuckle. “Oh yes, indeed, she has. I can see it on your face. Apparently we have something in common!” He slapped Gregory on the shoulder, and Gregory winced. The man was even stronger than he appeared. “This is cause for a drink!” He turned to the manor, and beckoned for Gregory to follow.

Inside, over a glass of brandy, the conversation continued. “Do you know, son, where she has gone? Do we need to kill someone?”

“No, I don’t think that’s the problem. I think we—or more precisely, I—have to track her down. But I need your help.”

“Of course you do, son, of course you do. Tell me what you need, and you will have it. My dear Katie...” He looked Gregory in the eye, and sipped from his glass.

“Have you ever seen, or heard your daughter mention, a large, elaborate silver key?” Gregory asked.

John Henry Price dropped his glass, and it shattered on the floor.

To be continued in the fifth *The Dreamlands Asylum Pack: Sleep of the Dead*.

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The Lost Dreamers

Part Five: Sleep of the Dead

by Nate French

“No.” John Henry Price shook his head. “It can’t be. Not again.” Twila’s father was staring out the window, not even registering that he had dropped his glass.

It was the first time Gregory had ever seen the man in a state of agitation.

“Sir? What is it? What does it mean?”

“It’s a long story, and one that I thought was left in the past. An old friend of mine, a man named Randolph Carter, gave Katie the key on her seventeenth birthday.” John Henry Price turned from the window, and glanced briefly at the shards of glass on the floor. “It caused... problems.”

“Problems?”

“Aye, son. Problems. She would disappear from her bed, and show up days later, in the strangest places. The attic. The cellar. Once, we found her outside, sleeping in the fountain. To think, she could have drowned...”

“Yes,” Gregory said, “it sounds like it might be related. Do you know about a place called the Dreamlands?”

“Yes, yes. Katie would always claim that was where she would go, and of course Randolph would encourage her. He was always unnaturally fond of the girl, before he disappeared... and then all she would talk about was needing to get back to the Dreamlands to find him. I never would have believed them except for that one night she... she took me there.” John Henry Price shook his head. “The next day, I took the key away from her, and locked it away in the tower. After that, she could no longer stand to look me in the eye, and a few months later, she left home altogether. But damn it all, if I give her the key and let her return to that infernal place.”

“Sir, she has found a way back, somehow, on her own. I need the silver key. I want to save her.”

“Ah, now there it is, son, there it is. The way I see it, two things are possible. On one hand, you’re being honest and you’ve already lost Katie to the Dreamlands, and I’ve no choice but to give you the key and hope you bring her back. On the other hand, and I wouldn’t put this past her, you’ve been sent here by Katie with this story in an attempt to reacquire the key. In which case, she’s just as lost to you as she is to me, only you haven’t realized it yet. Either way, son, I don’t want Katie to see me as the villain any longer. You can have the key.” John Henry Price laughed, and Gregory wondered again just how sane the man might be. “Now, let’s go have a look in the tower...”

He turned and walked out of the room. Gregory followed. They came to a black oaken door at the end of a shadowy hall. John Henry Price pulled a key from his vest pocket and unlocked the door to reveal a rickety looking circular staircase, twisting up and into the tower. “Careful now, son, it might be dangerous.” The man raised his ivory-studded pistol, and gestured for Gregory to lead. “After you.”

Gregory smiled, and took his first step on the wooden stair. It creaked under his weight. There was no hand rail. As he climbed, he found himself moving faster, unable to shake the feeling

that John Henry Price was a little too close behind him with the loaded gun.

At the top of the stair, Gregory stopped on a landing before another black oaken door. “It should be open,” John Henry Price said, and gestured again for Gregory to proceed. The young man pushed open the door, revealing an attic-like storage room crammed with splintering crates, jugs of water, and stacks of moth-eaten clothing. At the far end of the room, near a window, was a small chest with the lid open to reveal its contents: The Silver Key, the same key that Gregory had seen in Twila’s painting.

“Now who opened that?” John Henry Price muttered. “No one’s been up here in...” He paused, and stroked at his chin. “No matter, I s’pose. Go get it, son. No need to stay up here any longer than we must.”



Gregory took a few tentative steps, and then walked briskly across the room. His eyes roamed cautiously about, and he made sure he didn’t touch anything. He wasn’t sure what it was about this room that so unnerved John Henry Price, but he didn’t want to find out. Just before he reached the chest, he heard the man’s voice.

“Hold it! Son, stop. That’s right. Now move away from the key, slowly. No sudden movement.”

Gregory turned away from the key as he backed off, and saw that John Henry Price had the pistol aimed, with both hands, in his general direction. “Sir, I don’t underst-”

A shot rang out, but Gregory Gry was still alive. Turning, he saw a hideous creature had fallen from somewhere above the chest, writhing atop the key. It looked like a cross between a scorpion and snake, but it also had wings and small birdlike feet. John Henry Price moved in, took aim at the thing’s head, and fired his other pistol. The bullet exploded into the beast, and a moment later, it stopped writhing.

“I needed some sort of bait to draw her out,” John Henry Price explained with a shrug. “And I wasn’t sure that a bullet would stop her.” He smiled. “Apparently it did. Now we’d better take the key and get out of here, before something else crawls out of the rafters. You’ve got a girl to find.”

To be concluded in the sixth *The Dreamlands Asylum Pack: Journey to Unknown Kadath*.

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The Lost Dreamers

Part Six: Journey to Unknown Kadath

by Nate French

Gregory Gry returned home with the silver key to find that the painting had changed. No longer did it depict the image of John Henry Price. Rather, it showed a dirty, exhausted image of himself, pausing for breath in a forest he had never before seen.

Had Twila been in the room, painting, while he was gone? Was he going insane?

Gregory plunged into bed with the silver key clutched tightly in his grasp. He fell asleep immediately. And almost immediately, he was sitting up, feeling awake. The painting was gone, but the seventy steps of light slumber had returned. Gregory threw back the sheets and rushed down the steps. It was all as he remembered: the marble staircase, the Cavern of Flame, the guardians of the chamber. It felt as if no time had passed since his last visit. With the silver key in hand he walked boldly past the guardian priests, and they nodded a familiar greeting to him as he began his descent down the second marble staircase.

Seven-hundred steps later, he was overwhelmed by his first impression of the Dreamlands.

Sites, colors, sounds... all seemed sharper, more vivid, and more distinct than anything he had ever experienced. He was standing in a clearing in a thick forest where the trees had the colors of autumn but the life of spring, and they seemed to whisper an almost sentient song as their grasping finger-like branches swayed in the breeze. The air had a pleasant smell he could almost feel in his lungs; Gregory recalled a bonfire on a brisk night. An overgrown path lead away from the clearing, into the heart of the forest.

As he walked, it seemed to Gregory that there was a feminine form in a glowing white gown making her way through the forest ahead of him, remaining just on the periphery of his awareness. Occasionally, he caught a glimpse of her bare shoulder, noticed the bounce of her long dark hair, or saw the line of her calf as she danced away and out of sight. He found the belief that she was Twila more convincing with every glimpse, every detail. Try as he might, however, he could not catch up to her. As he struggled to move faster, to close ground between himself and the woman, he had the sense that the forest had come alive around him and that small, scurrying things were moving through the branches above, following him, entertained and amused by his frantic chase. Eventually, the forest grew sparse, and then Gregory found himself running out into a vast prairie of luminescent blue grass. After a dozen or so steps, he realized that the woman was no longer there. Turning back to the forest, he saw her phantom, a wraith-like mist-shrouded form that somewhat resembled Twila Katherine Price, but was not her.

Turning away, Gregory crossed the blue plains, upon which

he saw other ghosts and other dreams. Some resembled Twila, some did not, but they always lead him onward, as if the object of his search were just beyond the horizon. The wild grasses on the plains turned from blue to a deep purple to a majestic red, and the plains turned to hills and the hills turned to a marvelous range of jagged crystalline mountains. One morning, Gregory woke up with the realization that he had almost forgotten his life at the Clover Club. He also realized that even if he had wanted to, he would not be able to retrace his journey and find the way back.

And so Gregory Gry wandered the Dreamlands for what seemed like many years, and he saw many spectacular things. He visited the cities of Ulthar, Baharna, and Celephais, and was greeted warmly by their eccentric, superstitious inhabitants. He saw glowing musical fountains that sang with an otherworldly voice, hanging marble trees that grew from the sides of cliffs, and strange phosphorescent orbs that were too small and too low in the sky to be moons, but too large to be anything else. Once, he even wandered through the lush, murmuring forest in which he had originally seen himself depicted, in Twila's secret painting.

Everywhere he asked about Twila Katherine Price, and the answer was always the same: he would find that which he sought at Unknown Kadath.

"Sometimes I doubt that she even exists," he said one night to another wanderer with whose path his own had crossed. They were sitting beside a campfire, conversing about their dreams. "It's like she was a demon, a ghost sent by the Dreamlands to lure me here until I myself was trapped."

"She exists, at least within your mind. And you are in the Dreamlands. It is not a matter of going to her, but of bringing her to yourself."

Later that night Gregory dreamt of Unknown Kadath, of his arrival at the distant, mysterious castle, and of the woman he was bound to find there: a woman like Twila, as he remembered her, before this all began. She would be convincing, real enough, painting by moonlight atop the mountain fortress, and all would be well... but would it really be her? The ability to breathe life into his dreams, that was the beauty of the Dreamlands...

He woke with a start. The campfire had gone out, and his fellow traveller was gone. "The beauty of the dreamlands?" He asked himself, and a birdsong rang out, almost mockingly, in the distance. "Or the horror?"

Gregory Gry laid down again, and started to dream.



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