

## Chapter Thirty-One

Once again, Laurel's physical shifting into the Dreamtime has immediate effects. The largest series of hurricanes ever seen strikes the eastern seaboard of the United States that night -- abruptly, without any warning whatsoever, devastating literally dozens of cities, leaving hundreds dead and thousands more homeless. The National Weather Service can offer no explanations; one minute, there were calm seas, and the next, "nature itself seemed to just go haywire," in the words of one official. Meanwhile, a deadly series of tornadoes rips across eastern Europe, and although no reliable reports are immediately available concerning the extent of the damage, experts predict loss of life is likely "exceedingly high." Canada awakes that morning to discover the largest glacier ever seen by modern eyes -- covering the entire northern third of the country. Whoever was living there before is most certainly not living there now. And all across central Africa, an enormous thunderstorm has developed -- the largest of its kind ever seen on the continent.

Meanwhile, in the Sahara Desert, witnesses report the explosive growth of some kind of strange green vegetation -- entirely foreign to the area, and apparently, as one botanist puts it, "foreign to the entire damn planet." The flowers on these creeping plants are described as "staggeringly beautiful," "thoroughly aromatic," and "almost hallucinogenic, as though just by staring at the colors your mind enters an altered state." And in China, construction on a series of enormous dams on the Yangtze River is suddenly halted, due to, as one U.N. official describes the situation, "widespread dinosaur attacks." Finally -- and most ominously -- an incredible series of earthquakes throughout North and South Korea wreaks havoc upon the entire population and the ecology of the area, most notably due to several unstoppable nuclear reactor leaks which will very soon send clouds of radiation wafting across the region.

"Has nature gone mad?" is the resounding cry, on television news broadcasts and in newspapers and on street corners around the world. There are no immediate answers, unfortunately. Doomsayers, believers in Nostradamus, criers of Judgment Day and hellfire and terrible perdition, end of the world proponents of all stripes and colors find themselves joined

at the front line of interrogation -- the people of Earth, those who are in a position to ask, want answers, and the scientists of the globe are unable to provide them. It is a sudden, tenuous moment in human history. And yet, political analysts in the West predict that, should the situation grow starker, the possibility of Serious Terrorism -- along the lines of literal acts of war -- will grow, as the perception of weakness within Western countries will encourage attack. Standing armies of the world are on alert.

There is a sensation akin to moving through a shimmering wall of plasma, and then Laurel and Scotto are in the Dreamtime.

Specifically, they are standing atop Laurel's favorite tower, the highest tower in the castle, from where they can see the entire castle spread out over several square miles, almost an enormous city of sorts contained within these walls -- and also, where the top floor used to be, Tanner Mildew's hangar where construction of the space ship continues apace. Laurel's entire nervous system is practically on fire; the transition from one reality to another has left her filled with energy and awareness. "Man," she says to herself, "I could really get used to doing that."

Scotto, meanwhile, could not be more stunned if he were struck soundly about the head and shoulders with a brick.

"It's all real," he whispers. "Everything I was writing about...."

"Spare me," Laurel snaps. "Listen, jerk, next time you write a story, you better call it 'Happy Ending for Everybody' and then you better just find another career, got it?"

Moments later, they are moving rapidly down the tower steps, onto the hangar floor. Dawson and Tanner are in conference with a group of engineers, and Laurel nods to them as she passes; Dawson takes notice of Laurel's new guest, the author named Scotto, and regards him with a particularly baleful stare, which Scotto can hardly return. And then they are inside the castle proper, moving down corridors filled with amazing artifacts from innumerable civilizations across countless dimensions, past chambers and antechambers filled with every kind of weirdness you haven't ever bothered imagining, down more and more stairways, across great halls and little halls, around corner after corner, until finally, at long last, they come to a small room with a simple wooden door, the kind of door you'd find in any suburban home and certainly not within a castle of

these dimensions. Laurel slowly swings the door open and escorts Scotto inside.

They are in a small bedroom, a girl's bedroom by the looks of it, with a bunk bed against the far wall, dressers, toys, and so on; and it only takes Scotto a few moments to realize he recognizes this room. It is Laurel and Melody's bedroom, or the dream facsimile thereof. The window next to the bunk bed is open, and a slight breeze blows through the room. Laurel motions for them to sit, and they do, in a pool of light which comes through the window from the moon, or else a street light across the way. They sit opposite each other, facing each other, staring straight into each other's eyes as though that alone would suffice for sheer communication. And then,

Laurel turns away. Something is welling up inside her, some vicious unbearable anger, painful and harsh, probably deadly in the long run and certainly cancerous now. She is consumed with rage which wants to be self-righteous and fails, torn apart by an agony which cannot be underestimated. Boiling hot tears begin streaming down her face, as she says,

"There was, first of all, my sister. Impossible to describe how her disappearance affected me. Amazing that I survived, even when my family didn't. Yes, lost my mother and father, too, and only had Gary's assistance for the merest of moments. Melody kidnapped, my mother broken down in a mental hospital somewhere, my father turned into an alcoholic, and Gary a drowning atheist with nothing to live for, not even me. Well, he was drowning in quicksand, it may not have been his fault, I don't know, I wasn't there. Then along came Courtney and Cohen, and I almost had friends again. You can't imagine the pressure I was under. You can't. You don't know. You don't know anything about how I felt, how I'm forced to feel about all this. And Courtney betrayed me, you know. She was never my friend, was she. I was never anything to her. She never cared about me, she just wanted what I had. All about power, not friendship.

"And Cohen...."

She is overcome, at that moment, and Scotto wants nothing more than to somehow comfort her, ha ha. Too much space separates them now, and will ever after separate them.

"Melody's alive somewhere, I found out. She's got plans, I guess. And she doesn't feel like seeing me. *She doesn't feel like seeing me.* What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to feel about *that*? The one person who could make me whole again and she doesn't want to see me. And she calls my dream friends away -- Airee and Sierra are gone now to be with her. But *I* can't go to be with her. Not even if I wanted to. You don't understand any of this, do you? You can't possibly know what it's like. All of this is nothing more than distant abstraction to you, isn't it?

"Because all you do is *write it down*, right? You don't claim any responsibility, do you?"

"Laurel," Scotto says slowly, "I'm sorry about Cohen." And when she does not respond, he continues, "But I'm not responsible for Cohen's death."

"You can't weasel your way out of this, Scotto," Laurel replies. "You've been responsible all along." Rising vitriol in her voice, "And the only reason you're *here* and not *full of bullets in Cedar Falls* is because *I* brought you here, because *I want answers!*"

"What kind of answers?"

"What's Melody planning?"

"I don't know, exactly."

"What do you mean, you don't know exactly?"

"I mean, I don't know!"

"Haven't you been working on the book I asked you to write?"

"I was, until recently."

"What happened recently?"

"I stopped working on it, and I... I sent Melody the draft."

"You WHAT?" She is very near to hauling off and smacking him soundly now, and it is a miracle of self-restraint that keeps her in place. "That was MY book! I fucking *commissioned* it, you weasel!"

"Look, I didn't know when I would ever see you again -- and Melody asked for it. I didn't know it would upset you so much."

"So now she knows absolutely *everything* about what I've been up to in her absence, and I *still* know NOTHING about where she's been and who she is. That's fucking great, that's just fucking excellent."

"I mean, I can *tell* you what was in the book, if you like--"

"How does it end?" she asks suddenly, cutting right to the bone.

"Huh?" he responds.

"How... does... it... END?" she says.

He says nothing, only stares, caught entirely off balance.

"I, uh... I didn't write an ending, Laurel."

There is such a smoldering in her face, he would almost swear her brain itself was on fire.

"Have I mentioned what a complete fucking weasel you are?" she says.

"Uh, not in so many words," he replies. "Look, I sent her the first twenty-nine chapters. That was all I had written when she asked. And I didn't know how it was going to end -- I mean, I *don't* know how it's going to end."

"But I could give you a piece of paper and you could start working on it?" she says coldly.

"Well... I don't know, I mean, the story's been progressing now, and it's probably well ahead of me. There may not be *time* for me to try to catch up."

"Then why don't you take an educated *guess* about what Melody has planned." Pause. "Please, Scotto." There's nothing friendly or forgiving in her face; she wants what she wants, though, and the pressure of her stare is relentless.

"I know," Scotto says, "she is planning some kind of ritual, to call down an alien Mother Ship."

After a long, long silence, Laurel says, "Now why in the hell is she planning to do that?"

"I think," Scotto replies, "she wants to save the world."

Another long silence follows, during which Laurel rises and moves to the window, stares out into the Dreamtime sky, out at the approaching thunderstorm. And then she says,

"Isn't that fucking typical."

"Pardon?"

Turning to him, "If it isn't one arrogant, deluded, messianic bunch of crazy bastards, it's another."

"I'm not sure I see what you're getting at."

"Of course not," she replies. "You're one of them, as far as I'm concerned."

"Wait a minute," he says. "What makes you think I'm deluded?"

"Just shut up," she says. "I'm trying to think."

There is a knock on the door just then, and Laurel shouts, "In!" The door opens, and the ancient figure of Father Time appears, silhouetted in the doorway.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asks quietly.

"No," says Laurel, her voice suddenly changing from its angry timbre to something seemingly more relieved. "If I've ever needed a temporal advisor, it's now."

"Yes," he says, stepping inside the room and closing the door. Noticing the figure on the floor, he appears suddenly startled.

"Don't worry," Laurel says, recognizing his reaction to Scotto. "He's harmless now. He says he isn't writing any more."

"He may have already written more than he should have," Father Time replies.

"Oh, now that's a bit much," Scotto replies.

"I need to know what Melody's doing," Laurel says. "She's definitely doing something. She's definitely got something completely out of this world planned, and I have to know what it is." Pause. "She may very well be dangerous. The Circle may very well have brainwashed her more than she knows."

"I do not suggest tracking her down in the real world," Father Time tells her. "You will both be vulnerable. Somehow she has managed to hide herself from her enemies, but that disguise will disintegrate should the two of you be reunited."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Find her in the Dreamtime, while you still can." Pause. "Before the final battle begins."

"The final battle?" Scotto says.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," Laurel says to Scotto, "that it may have been a really, really stupid idea to make your new novel an 'end of the world' book?"

Scotto says nothing.

"I mean, I know it adds suspense and all--" Laurel continues.

"You people are ridiculous, can I just say that?" Scotto interrupts, getting to his feet. "Don't you take any responsibility for your own actions, or do you really, honestly think it's all my fault?"

A slight pause.

"I really, honestly think it's all your fault," Laurel replies.

"Oh," says Scotto. "Well... perhaps Melody will think differently, hmm?"

There is a slight pause, as Laurel considers the implications. She turns to Father Time and says, "You really think I should confront her? After everything that's happened?" Pause. "She doesn't want to see me, you know."

"On the contrary," Father Time replies, "if I know Melody -- and believe me, I do -- she wants to see you more than anything. But -- she may well be afraid of you, Laurel, afraid of what you'll think of her."

"With good reason," Laurel replies coldly. "It sounds to me like she's out of control."

"Reality will be the judge of that," says Father Time.

And moments later, Laurel and Scotto climb out the bedroom window, and take off sailing into the sky....

For the first time, Laurel is now given a sense of exactly what she will be facing in the days to come, as she and Scotto sail over the black mountain range. There are demons below -- they *must* be demons, they can hardly be anything else, such awful, insanely ridiculous creatures, obviously vile and thoroughly evil, the kind of abject evil which only appears in the Dreamtime, the subject of Nightmares, the kind of horror which your mind generates *specifically to scare you* in a way that only your mind can. Among these demons she can make out something far more horrible: there are individual dreamers among them, perhaps brought there by coercion or else seduced there by who knows what, and among *those* dreamers she occasionally spots what she can only call "the dreams of the dead," literal phantoms and phantasms, the remnants of dreaming consciousness after waking individuals long ago passed away. If this is the kind of energy being mustered to destroy her, she realizes slowly, then there is little Hope for her future.

And then, the enormous ruins of Ityl-Atys are upon them, and Laurel's breath is quite literally taken away. She feels as though she is discovering ancient Greece or ancient Babylon, as though she is party to a historical mystery of epic proportions. She could get lost here, spend the rest of her time here among the sadness and the sweetness of this city's dreams. And rising up like a giant in the center of the city is a tremendous, majestic tree, the only sign of growth within the ruins; and lodged within the branches of that tree is a treehouse.

And that, she grows suddenly, is where she will find Melody.

They land softly at the base of the tree and pause for a moment. Laurel glances up the ladder to the closed panel in the floor of the treehouse, and wonders if anyone is home. Moments later, the panel slides open, and a figure in purple drops straight to the ground, landing directly in front of Laurel.

"Do I know you?" she asks.

"I'm here to see my sister," Laurel responds, looking the surly figure directly in the eyes.

"So?" Katie responds.

It becomes apparent that Katie is not going to move out of the way. Laurel attempts to brush past her and climb up the ladder, but Katie prevents her. She makes a move to leap up into the tree, but Katie grabs her arm and prevents her again. This time when she does, Laurel suddenly turns to Katie and gives her a terrible look, in which her entire facial structure seems to bend and morph into something frightening with enormous teeth--

--and a look of shock comes over Katie's face as she suddenly vanishes entirely.

"Holy shit, Laurel," says Scotto. "What did you just do?"

"I scared her silly, and she woke up," Laurel replies, her facial mask returning to normal. "Stay here," she tells him, and then she climbs up the ladder into the treehouse. The panel in the floor slides shut behind her.

Moments later, Scotto has company in his vigil.

Slowly, very slowly, Laurel adjusts to the interior of the treehouse. It is still decorated just as she remembers it, with a small lamp in one

corner, a space heater in the other, various tapestries on the walls. Of course, there are changes, too, notably the bizarre computer monitors which cover one wall, and the six foot black mass of Job the Wonder Computer in the center of the room. And standing near the window is Melody, watching her arrive with almost no expression.

Laurel closes the door behind her, stands up straight, faces her sister from across the room.

In the waking world, an enormous, intensely loud thundercrack roars across the entire planet. As they make eye contact, the entire planet finds itself bathed in a sudden torrent of rain. In the Dreamtime, the black mountains rumble at the sudden reconnection of the twins, and a huge dreamquake, a shifting of tectonic dreamplates, rumbles across multiple iterations. The thunderstorm soaks the dreaming as well.

Melody says nothing. She is entirely taken aback by her sister's arrival; a serious catch in her throat threatens to bring tears to her eyes. Laurel has changed while Melody was away, Melody can see it immediately, can see it in the sharpened features of Laurel's face, the hardened glare which covers her eyes, the black bandanna which is wrapped around her forehead suggesting some kind of freedom fighter, some kind of revolutionary. Slowly Laurel makes her way around the room, taking a closer look at the fascinating figure of Job, taking a closer look at the computer screens on the far wall; and as Laurel walks, Melody sees that even her posture and inherent pose are different, so much stronger now, coiled like a snake, inherently potent and grim. The casual air in which Laurel covers herself does not quite hide a layer of anger, and fear, and desperation. She seems, to Melody's eyes, to be running from something, avoiding something with all her might.

And as Laurel turns away from the computer screens, upon which scenes of Melody's torture within InfiniTek are playing on an endless loop, her eyes fix on Melody's, and she drinks in the sight of her sister after all this time. Something has definitely changed within her, Laurel realizes, that much is plainly apparent, and it's not just the gorgeous waves of long black hair. She's definitely more muscular than she once was, physically in her prime due to some intense training regimen no doubt. The dress she's wearing is incomparable and glittery, as compared to the conservative attire which Laurel still prefers. She doesn't wear make-up, as she used to,

but that doesn't matter much; Melody's whimsicality has been transformed into something razor sharp and singularly attractive. Her inherent charisma has somehow been amplified. The way she holds herself as she stands there, returning Laurel's stare, indicates a confidence that was never there before. It's as though, having survived who knows what existential traumas and tortures, she is now convinced that she is not just a survivor, but someone marked with a higher destiny. The look in Melody's eyes is almost one of an overpowering megalomania, coupled with a strange detachment which protects her from the consequences of her actions. Or at least -- that's what Laurel thinks she sees, and she is willing to be proved wrong.

But they cannot bring themselves to speak, not just yet. They are frozen in each other's presence. The heightened awareness which once existed between them is still quite tangible, but now clouded by misunderstandings and separation. Melody wants nothing more than to reach out and touch her sister's face, and in the old days, it would have been a sign of affection; but the one thing which has been damaged most of all by their separation, by Melody's decision to leave the fairy tale dream castle once and for all, is trust.

At long last, the silken voice of the hovering black mass says, "Greetings, Laurel. My name is Job. If my presence here offends you, I will most certainly endeavor to leave this place."

Slowly, Laurel turns toward the Wonder Computer's surreal female avatar, the whirling, churning figure who looms over them like Goliath.

"And why," Laurel asks, "would your presence offend me?"

"Because," Job replies, "it was I who was responsible for your sister's kidnapping."

"You?" she asks. "I was told," she says, turning back toward Melody, leveling her potent gaze at her sister, "that Mrs. Wormwood was to blame."

"It was I," Job answers, "who first called Mrs. Wormwood's attention to you, and to your special abilities. In that sense, it was I who set your sister's kidnapping in motion."

A long pause follows, the kind of pause you could swear lasts an interminable eternity and which actually lasts no longer than the average pause. And then Laurel says,

"I'm not offended, Job. Just don't do it again."

Slowly a smile appears on Melody's face. And despite her best intentions, a smile appears on Laurel's as well.

"Hi, Laurel," Melody says softly.

"Hi, Melody," Laurel whispers.

Tentative steps are taken; Laurel's anger is almost forgotten, drowned in her love for her sister. If there are explanations, she will hear them shortly, but in the meanwhile,

how do you make up for so much lost time?

Laurel listens quietly as Melody describes her story. Perhaps she underestimated Melody. Clearly Melody survived her Dark Night of the Soul with tenaciousness, courage, and strength. Indeed, she seems so smooth and sincere and Hopeful, almost a complete antithesis to Laurel these days. At times, Laurel can hardly believe what she's hearing. Melody does indeed have plans. Melody's going places. Melody's got something in mind, something vast, something unstoppable, and although Laurel is falling more and more in love again with Melody as each word passes, still there is a part of her which teeters toward confusion. Is any of this real? she wonders. Am I really visiting Melody, or is this some dream simulacrum, manufactured by my unconscious mind to give me closure to an impossible situation? She begins questioning her sanity, wondering if anything she has ever experienced was anything more than delusion. She wonders if she herself is not strapped to a bed right next to her mother in a mental ward in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She wonders if all of her actions to date have been so fantastical as to be most likely imaginary. Did she ever once encounter such beings as Courtney and Cohen? Was Gary anything more than a phantom who haunted her after Melody's disappearance? Is the notion that Scotto ever once put two meaningful words together too much to accept? Why does Melody seem to glow when she speaks, her entire face lit up like a glowing candle? I am sitting in my treehouse, she tells herself, and I am twelve again, and we have *not* discovered dreaming together, and we will live our lives as Normals do. We will not encounter

the phantasmagoric realm of the Dreamtime, and our childhood will not be rudely interrupted by figures of dangerous power and contempt. My family is waiting inside the house, and when we climb down from this treehouse and head inside for bed, they will tuck us in and say goodnight, just like they always have. I am not listening to stories of intelligent computers and ayahuasceros and super heroes and rock stars, I am not listening to my sister rave like a woman possessed, I am not hearing talk of aliens and wildfire and the end of the world, and most importantly, there will be no war to end all wars which sweeps the entire Dreamtime, and if I ever once had a bad dream, it was nothing more than the random processes of a sleeping brain, certainly not some larger than life adventure where I am forced to live impossible scenarios.

But Melody does not give up in the face of her sister's denial, is unwilling to accept that they could walk away from this moment at any time, rewrite the ending if they so decided. Melody has plans. I'm going places. I'm *ready* for Concrecence, in whatever form. I don't *want* the same old same old. I can't *stand* the thought of being in a position to act and failing to do so. It is not sheer, simple arrogance that has led me here, Laurel. It is not a craving for power, or a desire to be more than I am. This is exactly what the circumstances have demanded of me, and I have risen to the challenge. This is the role I was intended to play, don't you see? From the moment we first dreamed together, Laurel, we became something else -- something other than what we were. No longer simply living our midwestern lives and facing the mundane trivialities which life offered us, we were suddenly catapulted into a whole new realm. And did we collapse under the pressure? Did we, as twelve year old girls, Laurel, leap to insane conclusions and give up Hope? Certainly not -- as quickly as we entered this world, this world became *ours*, or rather, we became *of this world*, removed from the ordinary plane and placed prominently within the Melodrama. This is where we belong, Laurel,

but Laurel is not convinced. You see, Melody, there was a whirlwind which swept you away. It was the forces of nature conspiring against us. Determined to put us down, before our egos grew too large, before our quest for importance grew too heavy. I can see how you struggled to survive in those early days of the Melodrama, but you must understand, you were never in charge of your *self* during those days, and

you are no more in charge of it now. You're playing a precious and dangerous game, Melody, one I can hardly begin to understand. You never saw the look in Mother's eyes after you vanished, Melody. You never saw how damaged she was. You still don't see your situation fully, still think that your every action is as right as the last one. You don't know how much our father drinks now, Melody. You don't know how much despair the two of them see. I can barely stand it myself, haven't seen either one of them in months, don't intend to ever see them again for fear of -- for fear of drowning in quicksand, Melody. And you can't see it, too caught up in a realm which for all practical purposes exists *only in your mind and nowhere else*. There is no Mother Ship, Melody, only delusions of grandeur. If there's one thing I've learned, it's never trust the Messiah, Melody.

They stare at each other for a long moment then, wishing for all the world that there wasn't so much distance between them. They have grown along widely divergent lines, and it seems there is no way to bridge the gap. Still and all, they remain sisters, and when Melody leans forward to embrace Laurel, Laurel is swept away from her anger, can feel a little something of the magic which Melody now possesses; and they hold each other for the longest time, occasionally crying, occasionally laughing, whispering secrets to each other and memories about the old days. And then Laurel says,

"You know, they wanted me to come here to stop you. I was supposed to be your enemy as the end approached."

And Melody replies, "I know. They tried to teach me to fear you as the 'resistance.'"

"I was supposed to threaten you," Laurel continues. "I was supposed to represent the Circle, you know, and I was... I was being trained to oppose you."

"They wanted me to believe," Melody says, "that you were no longer my family."

They hold each other tightly then, and say nothing more. No amount of fantastic intervention could have *ever* truly separated us, I know that now. We are as One, as we have always been. I have always known you were out there somewhere, waiting for me, and although our tales range far and wide, they will always wind up here, together. I want you to know, sister, that no matter what you do in the days to come, I will always

love you; and though I cannot be with you as you work your own particular magic, I will most certainly see you on the other side. Nothing can separate us; nothing ever has. Love above all else -- our love has changed this world....

And then Melody says quietly, "I read about Gary. In Scotto's book."

Laurel is silent.

"I have no idea what any of that feels like," Melody continues. "Maybe I never will." Pause. "What does it feel like?"

To be in love, to have someone inside you physically instead of in the dreaming? No English available, try back later.

Moments later, Laurel rises to her feet. A kind of bitterness has been melted away inside of her, and she feels it trickling away. Yet if she stays here any longer, she may lose even more of herself. Melody's path is her own; there is no longer a place for her in Melody's life, even if Melody doesn't see that now.

"I have to go, Melody," she says. "The castle is quite busy right now, and they need me."

Melody smiles. "I'm pleased to hear you've taken care of our home so well."

"Yes, I certainly have," Laurel replies, returning Melody's sweet smile. And then: "We're building a space ship, Melody. We don't intend to be here when the Conrescence occurs."

"A space ship?" Melody asks. "What do you mean?"

"We're leaving the planet," Laurel tells her simply.

It had never, of course, occurred to Melody that there were possible courses of action other than direct confrontation. But it makes sense; she who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day, and while Melody stands and faces whatever alien races lie in wait, Laurel will be taking a space ship full of people into the stars, to take their chances in the universe, as brave a course of action as Melody could possibly imagine. She is so proud of her sister, then, so amazed by what Laurel has accomplished in these last months and months and months; and although Laurel will not speak of her own suffering, Melody has already read all about it, knows full well the sacrifices Laurel has had to make.

And then, it finally dawns on Melody that this may be their last moment together.

"If your ritual doesn't work, Melody," Laurel continues, "you will be left behind."

And the silence is thick in the air.

"I believe," Melody says softly, "I will have to take that risk."

"That's what I thought you'd say," Laurel replies. "Ever the adventurer." She leans forward, kisses Melody on the cheek, whispers in her ear, "You have my Hope." And then, moments later, unwilling to prolong this goodbye,

Laurel leaps out the treehouse window, and disappears into the deep blue Dreamtime sky.

Slowly, very slowly, Melody sinks to her feet, exhausted, drained, tears welling up in her eyes, a deep deep smile on her face. It is as though she has visited the well after a long draught, and the taste of the water is ecstatically beautiful.

"Your sister is quite an individual," Job says at last.

"Isn't she?" Melody replies.

"My initial prediction may have been incorrect," Job continues. "She seems now equally as strong as you."

And for the first time in a long time, the tiniest fraction of a doubt surfaces in Melody's mind....

Scotto watches Laurel fly away with a sort of bemused sense of wonder. "Don't worry," Brother Love tells him, "you'll have a lot more fun with us."

"I'm sure I will," says Scotto. After spending the last hour chatting excitedly with Brother Love and Airee Macpherson (Sierra lingering in the background), he is convinced something is seriously wonderful about this camp.

And then, the floor panel slides open, and Melody drops through to the ground. As she does, Helpless the Bunny appears from under a nearby bush and leaps up and down around her legs. Melody is beaming; it's a kind of expression that neither Brother Love nor Airee have ever seen before, a kind of tranquil satisfaction, an end to a certain restlessness, and they are certain it marks a significant change in Melody altogether.

"Greetings, Scotto," she says. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person, though not quite in the flesh."

"Yeah," he replies, "and me without my LSD."

"Scotto thinks he might like to join us," says Brother Love.

And although this may have seemed impossible earlier, Melody's smile brightens considerably.

"That's wonderful, Scotto," she says. "We should talk about your book sometime. I'm sure I could suggest some improvements."

"I'm sure," Scotto replies.

"But in the meantime, we have some work to do before we can get down to the business of this ritual."

"Perhaps you could tell me a little more about this ritual," Scotto says.

"Not yet," Melody replies. "Not until the time comes. But I certainly don't intend to let some rampaging army destroy both my treehouse and my castle in the meantime." Pause. "We need to rescue Job from InfiniTek. And we need to do it tonight."

"That may be a problem," Airee says. "Katie accidentally woke up."

"It's not at all a problem," Melody replies. "Scotto is going to teach us a new form of travel between the Dreamtime and reality, one which Laurel taught him a short while ago. And very soon, we shouldn't need to sleep ever again."