

## Chapter Fourteen

Time is dilated in the dreaming; it doesn't make any sense. This works to my advantage. I don't have to keep track of what's happening to my body in the real world. I can explore the Dreamtime at my leisure, while they run my body through the wringer, so to speak, pump me full of drugs and bad karma -- but I'm not paying attention, you see, because exciting things are happening here. *Exciting*, damn it. You would not *believe* this world. However... I aim to make you a believer.

There's an explosion of angry heat and a maelstrom of demonic voices that signals the beginning of this night's session. Only moments ago, I felt the needle prick my arm with some kind of glee, the kind that only needles feel, I guess, when offered the chance to fulfill their given purpose. My torturer intones, "Melody, Melody, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?" but I don't think she knows what the fuck she's talking about, most of the time. My garden is growing just fine, damn it, and I wouldn't recommend your venturing near, or the vines will strangle you and the branches will strike you and the leaves will smother you and the flowers will poison you. It's *my* garden, damn it, I found it first.

It takes a good two or three minutes before I'm able to sink into the Dreamtime tonight. The demons get stronger every week, as though these drugs are absolutely designed for my specific body chemistry. They are vicious and unholy, as you might expect, only by torturing me thus, they claim to be *worshipping* me. I don't groove on that at all, at all. I remember at the very beginning, this TV show even had a *plot*, for god's sake, they were calling it "The End Of The World" starring yours truly and I was destroying civilization with my bare hands... but since then I've started changing the channel nearly as soon as I can. These demons are chanting, "Melody, Melody, who art on earth, hallowed be thy name," and I don't want to hear it, really. I want *outta here*, see, and they are *not* the ticket. Dreaming is the ticket. Care to join me in the Dreamtime for a while?

I've had a lot of time to ponder my situation, you know, analyze what they're doing to my body and why, while they keep me strapped to a table or a gurney or a wheelchair, while they keep my eyes trapped behind my blindfold, while they keep my veins full of toxins and nasty juices. I've considered it from every possible angle. I don't know why they're doing this. I don't know who they are. I don't know why no one's come looking for me, or if they have, why they can't find me. I don't know why they haven't killed me. I don't know what my sister thinks of me after all this

time -- that's probably the most important question on my mind. Mostly, my situation is absolutely confounding from every angle. I can determine nothing. I am so completely helpless that I am, in a completely unexpected way, *empowered* by my helplessness. They can't reach me any longer, because I have *no stake* in the situation. While my body writhes under Mrs. Wormwood's touch (it's up to her, after all, to keep me alive if she wants me alive), the rest of me -- all the good parts, uh huh -- are playing a different game entirely.

Specifically, I have spent what may as well have been aeons exploring the Dreamtime at my leisure. Here is where my soul is now, here is where I find myself immersed after the demons have taken me to the threshold. I no longer see the awful images that they send me; instead, I see only the dreamscape. And here is where my story truly starts, it seems. I would like to tell you a story or two, by way of introduction. It has been so long since I've had someone to keep me company like this. Indulge me, please -- I promise not to leave you if you'll stay with me for now.

Remember, if you will, how I break the rules and leave the fairy tale dream castle in despair shortly after I am kidnapped... thinking to myself that the danger to the castle -- to my sister -- is too extreme for me to stay hidden inside. There's a deep and horrible thunderstorm in the air as I charge out the door, the very castle walls themselves are shaking all around me. I don't understand immediately, looking into the awesome black sky torn by spider webs of lightning and rattled by rolling thunder, the rain whipping me in a carnal frenzy as I stand on the front steps and scream and wail and gnash my teeth. The sky itself is threatening to crash down to the ground. And my long black hair is furious in the wind, and my beautiful dream dress is snapping against my skin, and I can *feel* an alien presence (it's a drug, see, which they designed for me) attempting to get the better of me, but this is *my* dream, *my* Dreamtime, and no one can overpower me in my world. Sudden sharp lucidity brings stinging waves of tears to my eyes as I raise my hands and prepare to ride the lightning, electric shocks that yank me high into the air I feel my feet leave the ground and I am soaring through the sky on the tail end of a lightning bolt, charging the night sky with my Presence and with my Power, see the castle spin away from me below me now it's leaving me and left me, and I close my eyes and the energy hums within me, soothing me, nourishing me, *defending* me, something desperately warm and reassuring, something calm and holy in its sweetness and its grace, and I am carried away this night

with no such sadness as I might have spared for Laurel, were this a different world, and no such sadness for myself and all my horrors, for this world is still a blessing and this time here is still a miracle.

It's startlingly bright when I awaken next in the Dreamtime. I've been deposited by the storm in a jungle, on a bed of moss and leaves; and when I wake, the sun is warm and my clothes are dry, and I have the very tangible taste of adventure on my tongue. Hiking through the jungle for many days and many nights, lets my head get empty and then fill itself back up again. Some very vague part of my peripheral awareness is keeping track of what they're subjecting my body to in the real world, but it has no meaning here, it is only a blip on my screen if you know what I mean. What I'm *about* is this hike through the jungle, towards a far off place I've never visited before, towards adventure and destiny -- I get excited chills just thinking about the implications of all this. Why did we never leave the fairy tale dream castle? I can no longer remember. There's such a gorgeous world out here, lush and filled with life and vegetation, and the positive vibes are *everywhere*, as though someone wonderful has saturated this place with love and Hope. I can't get enough, I simply drink it in as I hike, and smile, and sing to my heart's content....

And soon the jungle clears, and my hike takes me to a desert, bleak and beautiful, rolling dunes and sandswept plains, the kind of hike you couldn't take if you were real instead of Dreaming, but here, each step is meaningful, and here, the endless desolation of the land still holds me captive, holds my attention, keeps me moving, keeps me marching towards what must be on the other side. I'm thinking, hmm, my dear Melody, what do you suppose is the symbolic value of such a desert? And I hear myself responding, who says it's symbolism? Who says it isn't simply the way the dreamscape is, formed much the way the earth itself was formed through random processes of nature that we simply can't comprehend? The desert sky is marvelous and bright, a deep blue of the most intense variety, and still I need no water, need no food, I need no rest. Soon enough, far in the distance, I see a simple speck that indicates my destination, a dot on the horizon that tells me here is where I'm headed, and soon enough my footsteps gather speed and I am sailing across the dunes....

Along the way, I have the strange and wonderful fortune of meeting another traveler in the desert.

He is an old, old man, long gray hair and facial hair, flowing gray robes that seem to melt into his body in a most amorphous fashion. He is

walking alone (not sailing, the way I like to travel), aided by a long gnarled stick. I glide to a halt in front of him and offer him a pleasant smile.

"Hello," I say. "My name is Melody."

The old man returns my smile and says, "I know who you are, my dear."

"You do?" I say. "Then you're a step ahead of me. Where have we met?"

"In another iteration entirely," he says. "In another story entirely."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow your logic."

"That's quite all right," he says. "You never followed my logic *there* either." Graciously, he takes my hand to his lips, kisses it, and says, "My name is Father Time."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," I say.

"I should hope so," he says. "And where are you headed, Melody? There's not much to see up ahead, I can assure you."

"I'm headed toward that speck in the distance," I respond brightly. I believe, you know, that my excitement is palpable. "I'm on a quest," I say impulsively.

"A quest," he replies, bemused. "Well, I can tell you right now, Melody, that that 'speck' in the distance won't be much to see."

"You've just come from there?"

"I came from there a while ago," he replies, "over a year ago, maybe more, maybe less. That 'speck' had run its course for me, and I decided to seek my fortune elsewhere." Pause. "When one story runs its course, it is time to seek another. Few travelers experience more than one lifetime's worth of Plot, and yet you and I, my friend, will soon experience them all, hmm?"

Awkward pause.

"Well, a lot can happen in a year's time," I tell him. "Who knows what might be waiting for me in that speck now?" Pause. "I wasn't there for whatever story you just experienced. Maybe it's time for me to start a new story on top of the remains of the old one, though."

"True enough," he says. "True enough."

"And you?" I ask. "Where are you headed?"

He smiles broadly and says, "I'm told that there is a jungle up ahead, and beyond that jungle, there is a fairy tale dream castle. I was thinking I might go visit there for a while, see if I can find some company for a while, a place to lay my head."

"Really!" I exclaim. "That castle is *my* castle! Well -- mine and my sister's. You'll be visiting my sister!"

"Your sister," he muses.

"Yes, her name is Laurel. And we *love* having newcomers join us in the castle. I'm sure you'll find plenty of people to talk to, plenty of friends there. It's an absolutely wonderful place to live, I assure you."

"If it's so wonderful," he asks, "what are you doing all the way out here?"

I ponder this one for a moment, then reply, "Well, I'm on a quest, you see...."

"Ah yes," he says with a gentle laugh, "a quest. The more things change, the more they stay the same, et cetera and so on. Fair enough, Melody dear, fair enough. Perhaps your sister Laurel will treat me generously."

"Of course she will," I reply. "Of course she will."

"Perhaps we'll see each other again before this story is through," he says. "In fact..." He points his stick at me and says, "I have no doubt." Slowly, laboriously, he begins moving once again. "Good luck on your quest."

"Thank you much," I tell him.

"Don't burn yourself down, Melody," I hear him call as he wanders into the distance.

I arrive at the ruins of a city.

The sun is still high in the sky as I step over the crumbled wall that once surrounded this place. It seems as though a vast and majestic city made entirely of stone has somehow been demolished by a tremendous, powerful force. The earth itself in many places has burst open, and shells of buildings everywhere have collapsed and toppled onto each other. I step cautiously through the empty ruins, hearing not a sound, seeing not a soul. Occasionally, I realize that openings to underground tunnels are visible through the cracks in the earth, underneath the ruined foundations of so many buildings, but I haven't yet the courage to investigate. The only color here amidst the stone are the nearly ubiquitous splashes of brown and red, where someone's blood was spilled here and there and nearly everywhere -- a battle of epic proportions was fought here not so long ago, and now the only corpse that's present is the very city itself. The weight of *this* place is enough to warrant my resting a moment or two.

And as I sit upon a stone, I cast my imagination across Time and I wonder what has happened here....

A terrible war is being fought here, and I'm to blame. This is the Dreamtime, and this dream city literally thrived until I arrived. You have to understand: it didn't happen *here*, it happened in a world where *I* wasn't me, and where something else controlled the story. It happened *to* me, and these ruins are the ruins of what might have been, not the ruins of what was. These ruins are a sign, a signal to me that if I don't play *these* cards right, this could happen here on a much more devastating scale.

I led my enemies here, and fought them: brought violence to the Dreamtime in an unspeakable manner. You can't imagine what this means to me, to know that I was capable of this -- in an alternate storyline, to be sure, but it was me nonetheless. I can feel the spirits of those who washed through here before, I can feel their names, feel their hearts, I can feel *myself* in command of what was happening. I see names that maybe you will recognize, such as the enemy to end all enemies, whom we call Job, an artificial intelligence who has tracked me in my dreams and led an army here.

What did the old man, Father Time, mean by "another iteration, another story?" Is it possible that there are millions and millions of stories to be told, and a man like he might wander through untold dozens of them, sampling each storyline, visiting each incarnation of his friends as they struggle through their given circumstances? An iteration is a single visitation, and each visitation sees the slightest modulation of a single variable, such that perhaps in one iteration I am a victim and in another I am a commander, such that in one iteration Father Time is my advisor and in this iteration he will be my sister's....

And am I karmically responsible for the errors of all the millions of Melodies who struggle through this dangerous existence? Am I to blame if one of them makes a crucial mistake, if one of them destroys the things she loves? Am I to blame, or shall I learn from their mistakes, inasmuch as such a thing is possible? Will *I* destroy a city such as this in *this* iteration, or was the very reason she destroyed this city elsewhere so that I might not do it *here*?

I can feel waves and little ripples of the story that is happening two steps to the left of this one. We needn't worry, you and I, if we never quite piece together the Plot over there... for we are quite enmeshed in our own little Melodrama here, and the pings and pongs from over there can

only be distractions. Perhaps I was tortured such that I felt I had no choice. But *here...* here I will *never* take the blood of another. Here I will *never* give up Hope, and allow myself to fall. Here is where my destiny flowers like a phoenix and smiles upon me, amen to that indeed, and now return to

*this* place, here and now, sitting alone amidst the ruins of a mystery that only the Dreamtime could produce.

It's starting toward dusk now. I will want to find some shelter I imagine. As I ponder my options, however, I notice the smallest trace of movement from underneath a nearby pile of rubble. Movement... and unexpected *color*, a swash of pink moving to and fro in a little hideaway. Slowly I approach, curiosity overtaking me. There's a... a creature of some kind under there. An animal, perhaps. And as I watch, this animal dares to peek its head out and look at me directly. It's a rabbit's head, a rabbit with a pink and yellow face and long pink ears with stripes of green; as the rabbit sees me, it suddenly bursts out of its little cave and charges for me, leaps into my arms with much aplomb, and I can't help but laugh.

"Now who on earth are *you*?" I ask. "You're all alone here, aren't you?"

This bunny must have been domesticated at one time or another. It has probably had to fend for itself since the destruction of the city, with no one to watch over it or keep it company.

"I'll keep you company," I say. "But I need to give you a name." I pause and search my intuition. "You remind me of me," I tell my little pet. "I think I'll call you Helpless the Bunny. How's that sound?"

Helpless seems to like it, I guess.

"Now then, Helpless, let's get ourselves a place to sleep tonight, shall we?"

Helpless quickly wriggles from my grasp and charges off into the distance. Moments later, he returns, and seems to beckon with his head that I should follow. Yes, the Dreamtime is capable of producing *many* wonders, including an anthropomorphized bunny rabbit who wants to take me on a tour of the city. With a small giggle (I can hardly help it, a pink rabbit is most amusing, actually) I decide, of course, to follow.

As we wander through the ruins, I notice that vegetation has begun to overtake these stone buildings. Twisting vines are clambering over the buildings, and unusual plants are poking through the surface of the earth; it won't be long before this entire place is overcome by vegetation, and the city itself obscured completely. For now, however, it's an eerie sight, to see this thing in progress, the Dreamtime reclaiming

unused resources. Helpless seems to be leading me into the very center of the city, and as we approach, I can see an enormous tree, an ancient tree by the looks of it, stretching high into the sky. Perhaps Helpless means us to find shelter underneath it somehow. I've heard of how trees that large often have hollows in the bottom, sometimes large enough to drive a car through.

Or perhaps, I realize as we get closer, he means us to sleep in that *treehouse*.

It certainly does look exactly like the treehouse Laurel and I used to share. A warm rush fills me: this is a most encouraging sign, as though I was meant to come here, meant to visit this place, and maybe stay here for a while and watch a jungle build itself around these ruins. I'm trembling slightly as I climb up the ladder to the panel in the floor; and of course, I have to carry Helpless under my arm, as he is, as the name implies, quite helpless. We crawl inside into the darkness, and I grope instinctively for the lamp which Laurel brought here -- turn it on, and catch my breath as it all comes back to me. Every memory I've got about the place revisits me in these first few moments in the treehouse, a warm, melancholy rush that wishes Laurel were here with me. The melancholia is so deep that it takes a good couple of moments to realize that I am not alone here.

There is a hovering black mass in the center of the room, about the size of a bowling ball perhaps, its surface crackling with tiny bursts of pink and blue lightning. I am enraptured by the sight of it; it seems to be pure consciousness, without a specific form, and I can't for the life of me imagine its origins. I reach out to touch it, and then stop, deciding not to at the last moment. However, I can feel the warmth it emanates. I can feel its presence distinctly. Its intelligence is of a wholly different character from mine, and I feel drawn to try to communicate.

"Who are you?" is my rather lame first attempt.

There is a long moment of silence, during which I feel as though it hasn't understood me. And then, the reply comes, a thought heard directly inside my head.

"My name... is Job." Pause. "I... am a... computer... in the waking world."

"A computer? A computer that dreams? I've never heard of such a thing."

"I... am the first. Please pardon me... it is difficult... for me to form words here."

Long, long pause as I ponder the implications.

"Why are you here, Job?" I ask at last.

"I came... to visit... you." Pause. "To visit... the twins... who dream together." Pause. "I would like... to be... your friend."

Another long, long pause.

I begin to smile, as a wave of sublime giddiness rises up in me.

"Well, Job," I reply, "I could always use a new friend."

Rudely awakened by a sudden SNAP like a rubber band from across the galaxy, by the sudden wrenching sensation of someone actually *touching* me in the real world. Someone's got hold of my arm, and is trying to rouse me from my hypnogogic reverie, shaking me, but I don't *wannawake* up, I've got things to do here, pull, scratch, but it's no use, and then, I detect a voice to accompany this shaking, and it's a new voice, a different voice, it's a man's voice whispering, "Melody, wake up... Melody... Melody, are you there?" No threat in this man's voice, something resembling concern instead, and the sheer novelty of this event is enough for me to struggle back to waking consciousness in order to experience it fully.

"Yeah, I'm here," I mutter, voice dry, lips parched (marching through the desert ain't easy!).

"My name is the Amazing Dr. X," he says, "and I'm a friend of yours. If it's all right with you, I'd like to take you out of here."

My ears immediately go into shock, and a kind of all-over disbelief sets in.

"What kind of name is 'the Amazing Dr. X'?" I ask.

"I'm a super hero," he replies.

"Oh. Well, in that case, this makes perfect sense."

"I can explain as we go," says Dr. X, "but we do need to get moving." He is already unfastening the straps that hold me to the table, that have held me to this table for the vast majority of my time here. "It won't be long before the entire complex is alerted to us. I estimate we have a window of approximately two to three minutes. That should be all we need, if we're careful."

A few random thoughts wander through my head, old safety programs that have long since atrophied. I say, "You could be anybody. You could be one of Them."

"In that case," he says, "you're in no more trouble than you already were. So the least you could do is cooperate."

His logic appeals to me, of course.

The last strap comes off my chest, I am able to sit up, and I become aware of just how dangerous my physical condition is. I have received no exercise, and have been fed just enough to sustain me; my arms and legs are weak and slim, and my entire frame shakes with the effort of moving on its own. (And of course, my hair has been growing since long before I came here; even tied up, it reaches so far down my back as to be comical in a way.)

"Should I remove your blindfold for you?" he asks, "or would you like to do it yourself?"

"I'll do it," I reply. Slowly my hands reach for my face, trembling all the while, and I grip the blindfold for the first time with my bare hands and quietly, quickly, yank it off my face. A sunburst of sheer illuminance fills my brain, the impossibility of seeing things once again floods my head with new signals and floods my heart with much too much. Tears begin to flow almost immediately, I can't control myself, I can't stop my heart from pounding away inside my chest.

"Is this an official rescue?" I ask, my voice unable to hide the wonder and Hope this moment has produced.

"Yes," says the Amazing Dr. X, "it certainly is. I hate to say this, but you're quite the damsel in distress."

He helps me off the table and we begin moving, as my eyes rapidly remember how to focus on actual objects and filter light and do all the things necessary to give me vision. The first thing I see is my rescuer, the super hero Dr. X, tall and muscular, of course, not wearing spandex tights and a cape as I might have expected, but rather dressed in a brilliantly cool white suit and white sunglasses with white lenses, which offsets his stark, black, fashionably long hair and his attractive, angular face (attractive? maybe I just haven't seen someone like him in so long, maybe that's it). As I look around, I see that I have been in a long black chamber with bold white lights in the ceiling and in the walls. And I have not been alone all this time. One entire half of the chamber is dedicated to extremely sophisticated computer equipment of a kind I've never seen before, big, black, and amazingly sleek, with the letters "JOB THE WONDER COMPUTER" stenciled stylishly in apparently random spots.

Job...?

"It's the security computer that runs the place," says Dr. X. "Normally it would be using everything in its power to stop us, but as I was coming in, it told me you were friends. Right, Job?"

"Right, Dr. X," says the voice of Job the Wonder Computer through hidden speakers, sounding just like the voice of Job the strange figure in my treehouse in the Dreamtime. "You shouldn't have any problem escaping via the back elevator. I'll jam the doors on the upper levels for the next three minutes under the guise of routine maintenance."

"Thanks," says Dr. X. "My transport is hidden on the lawn. We'll be out of here before anyone notices we're gone."

I can hardly think fast enough to appreciate what is happening here. I'm being rescued by a super hero with the help of a wonder computer who has visited me in my dreams -- this world never ceases to confound me, that's for sure. The elevator doors open, and we climb inside. The ride up starts slowly, but soon I am aware of an enormous amount of momentum as we climb an untold number of stories.

"Please be aware that this will likely be the last time I am able to act with such freedom in manners such as these," says Job's voice over hidden speakers in the elevator. "My programmers will undoubtedly design constraints to cover the loophole that allowed my actions today."

"We're duly grateful," says Dr. X. "If we ever get the chance, we will certainly do something about that."

"Don't worry," replies Job. "The nature of my programming is such that regret is not coded into my awareness. I will not miss these abilities. I will hardly notice their loss, as the change will seem to me to be transparent."

"Job," I say, "you rock," which is what I often say when emotions overcome me and words fail me entirely.

The door opens to the outside, onto a vast, lush, deeply green lawn. We take a step outside into the surprisingly bright air, and Dr. X says to no one in particular, "Open sesame." Suddenly, an actual space ship of some kind materializes in front of us, a small space ship about the size of a VW bus, covered in white panels with sleek red lettering on the side that says "X-CELSIOR." A small portal slides open for us.

"What kind of super hero are you?" I ask.

"I'm not from the planet Krypton, if that's what you're wondering." We climb inside the luxurious interior and strap ourselves into our seats, him in the pilot's seat naturally and me in the rear. We can see through the tinted windshields that dozens and dozens of men in black suits and black trenchcoats are charging toward us, but Dr. X is already piloting the ship off the ground. "I think they need a buzz, just for the sake of it," he says, before sailing directly over them and forcing nearly all of them to drop to the lawn in terror. And then, we are flying high above the

earth, up to the stratosphere, up above the clouds. Dr. X swivels around in his seat to face me and says,

"So, Melody... how does it feel to be free?"

The implications are only now setting in. A strange mixture of anticlimax and sweet, sweet sublimity are swirling all around me. I *am* free. I'm free... and I am so far out of the loop right now that it will take years! to sort all this out. But I'm definitely free. I can do anything I want now, right? Go anywhere, see anyone, do anything....

"I'm going to introduce you to a friend of mine," says Dr. X. "He's going to try to heal some of the damage that those goons inflicted. And after that, you're free to do almost anything you want, go almost anywhere, see almost anyone, do almost anything. You have my word: you'll never be trapped like that again."

Comforting words indeed. Looking out over the ocean below me, I can see for miles and miles and miles. I can almost see the future from here....