

Chapter Thirty-Four

Airee Macpherson takes the stage at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco for what will be her last live performance on the planet Earth. Last night, she briefed her touring band and her manager on what was about to take place. It was a difficult encounter for her, trying to explain to these musicians how they were about to take place in something mystical and magical, something with enormously large-scale repercussions, something that would probably confound and terrify them by the time it was over -- difficult, perhaps, because they immediately thought she was a fucking loony who had somehow discovered drugs when no one was looking. Nevertheless, Airee feels better knowing that she has at least planted some kind of surreptitious warning in their minds. Her guitar player, the inimitable Matsutaro Alvarez, joins her onstage that night with a wicked look in his eyes, as though he intends to solo a searing response to her crazed babblings. All for the better, she decides.

The house is absolutely jam packed. Airee's latest single, "Simple Little Metaphor," has rocketed to number one on the charts, and she is almost rueful that she will not be around to enjoy the full flower of its success. Nevertheless, as the first notes of the first song kick in, Sierra's drum beat a blistering shower behind her, she feels every bit of confidence she has ever felt suddenly welling up inside her, translating itself into pure vocal energy; and although it is true that we have described virtually every appearance of Airee Macpherson's singing voice as an event that will stop the heart,

this time, she astounds even me.

I'm up on the roof at the moment, with Brother Love, Katie, Courtney, and of course, Melody. The rooftop door is open, and Airee's amplified voice reaches us with crystal clarity, gives us shivers and chills as we begin warming up for the evening's performance. For we too have roles to play, as you would expect; we too have personas which we must assume, boundaries which we must transcend in order to properly create our sacred space. Courtney has taught us well and quickly, and in some sense you could say we were all naturals to begin with. We are as prepared as human beings can be for something which will entirely defy our expectations. Me, I've got a touch of stage fright, but the others seem to be grooving on some unseen vibe which will soon carry me away with it, if I'm just patient, if I just find my center, stretch my muscles, and above all else, don't forget to breathe.

There are storm clouds gathered above the city tonight, dark and suspiciously ominous.

By the second and third song of her set, Airee has really begun to tear up the house. As she stares into the screaming mass, the faces of young adoration in the front row with outstretched arms reaching for her, desperately wanting to assume even the smallest portion of her allure and glamour, she wonders for the briefest of moments if this is how *she* appears to Melody, no more than a fawning sycophant, with a child's crush on fame and power. And when Airee reaches to touch the hands of those who are fortunate enough to be within reach, they grab her, pull at her, threaten to topple her into the crowd -- and this too is an all too entirely clear message about how seductive such a life can be. Yet she rises above it all, in these moments, because she never does stop singing, and her voice has never failed her yet. If you could imagine the most elegantly powerful, intensely expressive, seriously beautiful and thoroughly compelling sounds you have ever heard coming from your favorite rock star, who stands before you singing the words to your favorite song, the one you listen to whenever things have started to collapse and you need *some* assurance that *someone* understands -- if you can imagine that, then you can place yourself in the front row, as a willing and eager participant in the spectacle. She sings for you in these moments, and you are as thrilled as those around you -- more so, because perhaps she actually did touch your hand just now.

As Courtney has predicted, the rising energy of the crowd below us, the near ecstatic rushes and waves, are being channeled directly to us by way of Airee's voice. Our connection with Airee remains deep and strong despite the physical distance that separates us. She is forging a kind of group mind below us, a mind that will be an active player in the coming moments. And then, there are the Voices -- a network of human individuals, scattered across the globe, whose minds have been penetrated by the tendrils of awareness known as Gale, Vince, Gregory and Jack. Vince is with me even now, and via him, all the rest of those human minds are joining us here tonight, contributing their energy and their concentration in a most mystical fashion. It's not something I entirely understand, of course. What I know of energy manipulation comes not from yogic discipline or study in some kind of magickal craft -- nevertheless, my psychedelic experiences have served me well, preparing me to have my entire head blown and preparing me to enjoy it. When Melody turns to me and smiles, I am captivated by her; it's a bit shameful,

the way I'm attracted to her, and yet, what did I expect? She has the charisma of a main character, and such charisma is often too compelling to resist.

There's definitely something larger than life being perpetrated here tonight, that much is certain. A small raised ledge is the only railing between the edge of the roof and a stiff drop off, and Brother Love is walking this ledge with a kind of severe concentration, ignoring the occasional drafts which tousle our hair and give us all pause. He is defining the space for us, giving it a tangible border, drawing the edges of the space with a clear, distinct line through astral space. As the sky grows gradually darker, Brother Love's silhouette against the city backdrop is exquisite, and his sense of balance equally so. I am inspired by his dedication to this cause, the way he seems to trust Melody so implicitly, as though his entire life has been spent training for these moments. It eases some of my own doubts, his presence does. I catch his eye as he rounds a corner, and smile; and when a man named *Brother Love* of all things rewards you with a smile of his own, you somehow want to melt, ecstatic with the thought that such an individual exists. His is at once a subtle and yet extremely dynamic aura, leaping into the foreground only when a dazzling burst of something indescribable is necessary. I remain terribly glad he survived.

By the fifth or sixth song in the set, the audience is beginning to realize that something is going on here which is entirely out of the ordinary. Even the skeptical musicians in Airee's band are beginning to suspect that Airee has indeed got something up her sleeve. It can't be described too precisely, of course. As the five of us on the roof slowly come into alignment with each other, the minds of many of those in the crowd are somehow becoming "tuned" to our presence, our signal, thanks to Airee's skillful intervention. There is a gathering of energy taking place, a pooling of a reservoir from which we can draw strength once the ritual commences in a few short moments; this reservoir is magnified, of course, by the contribution of the Voices and their human counterparts. Without the Voices, we could not have made any steps in this direction; with the Voices, we were given almost too much to work with.

Melody, of course, revels in this energy, in these moments. Her face is absolutely ecstatic, lit up like a bright spotlight, and the way she experiences these moments is as a sensuous tidal wave of beauty, directed toward the goal of communication (as lofty a goal as any). Meanwhile, it is easy to contrast Melody's near drunkenness with Courtney's stoic

determination. There is an awesome conflict within Courtney's heart, even now; only she has betrayed her past in order to participate in this present. Further, the complete disintegration of her respect for her mother, the Circle's figurehead, has left her with a strong suspicion of *any* figurehead, of *anyone* in a position to drink up so much power -- and as you can imagine, Courtney eyes Melody now with a distinct wariness, a wariness to which Melody is all too blind.

I could feel it myself, of course, and had felt it almost immediately after joining this crew. We looked to Melody to give us direction -- not "orders," perhaps, but we certainly made sure our actions were extensions of hers. In retrospect, I may well have been blinded by the way she carried herself so regally and yet so lightly; but Courtney was *never* blinded. Courtney came here with a mission, a mission to activate a Messiah, whom she believed Melody to be. And it now occurs to me, as the five of us come together in a tight circle in the very center of the roof, that Courtney herself is ready to pass judgment on Melody's performance tonight. Should Melody fail to live up to her potential -- well, who can say how Courtney will react? In the meantime, Katie's vigilance is another factor as well; it is as though she has made it her mission to protect Melody at all costs, it is as though she has never dared trust Courtney too much, lest Courtney slip past her defenses. While Melody stares into the sky, scanning patiently, I am quite aware of the way Courtney and Katie dutifully avoid each other's glances, while nonetheless mingling energies, risking their everything, to initiate this space.

The first flash of lightning lights up the sky, and a few moments later, a distant thunder crash is heard.

We have been taught the outline of a ritual which was last used by the Circle in the late 18th century. We have tenfold the amount of energy available to us, and have the presence of the prepared vessel of the Messiah within our midst. Aliens have gathered on our planet, and we intend to call the mightiest of their number, the very Mother Ship itself, to save us from our impending doom.

"May the Force be with you, Scotto," Vince whispers.

"Thanks, Vince," I reply.

Courtney produces the cup of Christ, stolen from a vault in Pittsburgh, and solemnly hands it to me. It is filled with a glistening red liquid, no doubt drugged in some way, and as I sip, I find that I can no longer objectively relate

You are here because of a vision, a vision of peace, a vision of harmony, a vision of shimmering, transcendent harmony. I have been given a vision. I have seen so many things. The Mother Ship will come and save humanity from the end of the world. And how will they know to come here? We will call them here. I have been given a vision. I have seen so many things.

And Courtney delivers the sacrament. Scotto drinks first, and the transformation which occurs upon his face is astonishing, giving us each a charge. He passes the cup to Brother Love, who smiles even as he sips; he passes it to Katie, who sips with no hesitation, no expression; and then the cup is in my hands. Already, however, I seem to know its wisdom and power, even before it reaches me; yet I sip nonetheless, thirsty for as much as I can take. And then I pass it to Courtney, who stares at me with opaque eyes, her thoughts alone remaining hidden to me. The time is near, however, and she drinks all the same, joining us in our reverie.

What's in the air is in the air, and answers rain like singsong whispers onto faces seared by desperation. Tonight we consecrate the vision, forge a vessel so unspeakably beautiful that only the purest of intentions can taste it. Tonight, we offer ourselves, with Hope, to save the dying many. Tonight, the impossible *becomes*. Sing praise to the fire inside of you and all around you, the spirit of Hope, the flames of Life.

And below us, Airee Macpherson sings and sings and sings, roaring toward a musical climax of epic proportions, joining us in spirit from stories below, contributing her spirit to the creation of our--

Tonight we will create a sacred space, a sacred transmitting station, a beacon of glistening order in a world of terrifying chaos. We will tune to the exact frequency that the Mother Ship calls language, abandoning the awful obscenity of the word 'alien' -- for how can we call them aliens without pointing to that which is most abhorrent, most unusual, most desperately other? Nevertheless, the blind insidious impulses of these moments, drugged by the holy blood, will be our litany. We are ready to travel into the most sacred dimensions of horror and blistering beauty. We are ready to travel.

The wind is picking up, and the lightning in the sky is increasing its frequency, its intensity. Slowly the first drops of rain begin to fall, covering us in a warm, even bath.

You are *here* now, and this is what *here* would like to ask of you. We will sacrifice ourselves. We will sacrifice ourselves. We will sacrifice ourselves. Take the sacrament now, and steel yourselves for the onslaught.

"Take my hands," I say aloud, and the electric contact of skin upon skin initiates, initiates the Circle.

The opening phase will be one of disorientation. The following phase will be one of ecstasy. The final phase will be one of transcendence.

The first phase is about to begin. Prepare yourselves....

it's already started, it's already started....

this space comes to define us, gives us the lives we presume to claim. life is slipping sideways into the present tense. life is begging you to pay attention to details and flashes, to focus what you are on what *we* are. to live with all your heart no matter what the situation hands us. to sacrifice ourselves. to sacrifice ourselves.

to sacrifice ourselves.

"Those drugs work fast," I remember Vince remarking.

and then,

why am I the only one who smells the impending disaster? (screams Courtney inside our heads.) why has my tongue been cut out and fed to small children, so that there's no time like the present and we can't see that everything is? it's you on the other side where nothing is but what it was somewhere else, only here, different, as before, depending on where you sit and how much they charge for cable television. plastic is the wave of the future, except when the future is made of particles. that's just the way the cookie bounces. -- and we are roaring our applause.

"I once imagined hell to be a lot like the end of the world," mutters Brother Love.

"Could somebody sing something for me?" Melody asks.

i never imagined i could feel like this. it's like the entire world has suddenly wrenched into focus. it's like a series of veils has suddenly vanished, it's like my eyes have finally been opened. i see things now i never saw before, things i was always so afraid of, now i know where you get your strength, now i know how you survive! now i know what you look forward to when you go to sleep at night. good fucking god, drinks are ON THE HOUSE!

and Courtney takes what's left of the blood of Christ and hurls it into the air, and it mingles with the sudden downpour of rain, drenches us in steaming hot liquid, and soon Brother Love begins to dance, and Katie feels compelled to join him, absolutely compelled, because

"it feels like," Melody whispers, "we're taking two steps to the left!"

below us, the band stops playing, for Airee has set off into uncharted territory, a song which none of them has ever heard before, a strange and singularly ridiculous assault upon the ears of the transfixed audience, glossolalia and pure unadulterated gibberish screaming out of the enormous speakers,

and the sound seems to lift Melody a few inches up off the rooftop, so that she is actually floating before our eyes, a wide impossible look of stark confusion on her face. Courtney takes several steps away, and as Melody surveys the rooftop, she sees her four compatriots each embarked upon some stamping, jumping, leaping commotion, generating whirlwinds of electricity around us.

i can't see straight. i can't think straight, either; the definition of "straight," in fact, is coming seriously into question. i fall to my knees, the victim of a strong consensual hallucination. within moments, my eyes are forced shut, and i am being transported into an internal realm of misery, an enormous kaleidoscopic prism which distorts reality through the filter of its craziness. i am dissolving molecule by molecule. i am a writhing mass of protoplasm, i am a giggling pond of textual deception. i am an aesthetic mess; there are semicolons lodged in my throat, points of ellipsis bursting from my chest. i am bleeding, i am losing my flesh, i am being played alive by the heat, and by all the details i'm leaving out. they abuse me horribly with the talons of their resentment. i am slashed viciously across the throat. it isn't important any longer.

"You are *here* now!" Melody shouts, and her voice is like a dagger unto mine ears.

and the lightning flashes, and the thunder booms, and it is apparent the storm is getting stronger....

Moments later, the confusion seems to pass, and I am on my knees vomiting over the side of the building.

Within moments, Melody and Brother Love and Katie are standing behind me, their hands upon my shoulders, and I am feeling warmth despite the wind and rain, compassion despite the relentless approach of the storm. We sit, the four of us, and Courtney joins us; and our hands are joined once again, and there are smiles now on everyone's faces, even, surprisingly, on Courtney's. And Melody says,

"This entire rooftop is ours. It's consecrated now. What's more, it's *transmitting*. It's actually *working*. I can feel, I can feel this, this *pulse*, in time with my heartbeat, and with each passing beat, the signal grows

stronger, is propelled farther and farther out into space. It's, it's such a, such an amazing sensation, isn't it?"

And she glances around at us, and we can feel it too, of that there is no doubt. My jaw is clenching and unclenching, but I can't help feeling simply mesmerized by the beauty of this moment, by the exquisite wonder of such impressive

love,

such astonishing Hope. I feel reborn, somehow, in the midst of all this chaos, like a floating raft on a sudden sea of bliss, and the warm rain is tender upon my face, gentle and thoroughly pleasing, and I simply *adore* the way my hand feels inside of Brother Love's, and Melody's, the way our skin meshes so wonderfully, the way our hearts and minds are aligned in the creation of something magical.

"This is the real thing," Courtney says at last, and smiles and easy laughs pass among us, nods of acceptance and joy, and then, Courtney says, "I'm sorry I ever doubted you, Melody," and she leans forward and the two of them embrace. I have never yet witnessed something so heart-wrenching; forgiveness flows between them like a river, cleansing them each of the wounds of their recent past, bonding them at a level which seems to be the foundation. They have fallen in love; and I, too, have fallen in love with each of these individuals, can no more imagine our separation than I can imagine the dawn of time.

"You don't understand," Courtney says softly, tears appearing in her eyes, "how much this means to me. To be here, with you. To be... *present* while this takes place." And Melody replies, "Imagine this, Courtney, how could I ever have made it here without you?" And there is nothing more genuine than their thanks, and their praise of each other's gifts, nothing more tangible than their friendship, nothing more sanctifying than the simple passing of these moments together,

and Katie watches these moments with serene acceptance, finally finding a place inside herself where there are no more enemies, no need to hide,

and I am swept away on a luscious cotton candy cloud to a place inside my mind where latent horrors creep and crawl. I am, perhaps, witnessing Gary's funeral all over again. Or perhaps I am imagining a time when I myself was the instrument of hurt, damaging those I loved; perhaps I am there even now, breathing in their resentment and breathing out my apology. Wishing, beyond all possibility of Hope, that I could take back my actions, restore what was *right* to those moments, restore the easy

laughter and the curious mood which was ours until I ruined it. I am there, again, and this time, I am no longer the helpless child, a victim of my whims, but somehow someone much stronger, somehow someone much braver. And when they ask me why I am crying, I tell them only that I love them, and that I always will; and the answer seems to suffice in the most meaningful way imaginable.

And suddenly, the band begins to play again downstairs, a driving, pulsating rhythm that reminds us of our purpose. Airee herself wades into the crowd, is passed along their hands with microphone in hand, singing all the while and touching as many of them as she can, extending herself beyond reason, and the communion among them is potent and quite visible; with each iteration, each increase in their attention, in their commitment to the music, we on the roof are made that much stronger,

and there are humans all across the globe who can feel our actions
by way of the Voices in our heads, who empathize beyond belief,
and then,
at long long last,
our transmission is received.

An awful silence follows.

There is a crowd gathering in the streets below the building.

Melody has entered into a kind of trance state. She stands in the center of a small circle formed by myself, Courtney, Katie, and Brother Love. Her eyes are closed, and she is rocking back and forth slightly, still floating a few centimeters above the ground.

The rain has increased slightly; it's still a warm rain, and the occasional lightning flashes which light up the sky cast a strange luminescence across our faces.

I've never been certain how the crowds knew to come to this building, why they braved the coming thunderstorm to be here. I don't know if they understood the danger they were in; I don't know if we understood it ourselves. There's a lot I don't know about this situation, and it's suddenly an uncomfortable position for me. I wish Melody hadn't tranced out. I wish I could say I wasn't beginning to panic, wish I could say I had more strength/courage/resolve, but no. Soaking wet, a growing unnamable terror rising in me, it occurs to me that it is only the sheerest, strangest series of synchronicities that brought me to this place, that my trust has been blind, that I believed in Melody only because she existed, not because she deserved it.

And then, Courtney's voice is whispering in our minds, and we are listening very seriously. She says,

Patience is a virtue, my friends. So, of course, is chastity, and that virtue never got the job done, did it. We aren't here because of Melody. We're here because of something much larger than Melody. Take a look out into the world, if you feel like it. This is the world you're saving, of course -- you, and half a billion other people in different cities, different countries, working major mojo to accomplish the same thing at the same time. You thought there was only one story to be told in the final days of the planet Earth? This is just your story; were you clear across the globe right now, you would be expecting something altogether different, something vastly removed from the angelic beauty of the coming Messiah. You know it's true. Those countries which are Christian, they and they alone will follow Melody into the stars, and it won't just be their loss. So what I'm saying is, the pressure isn't so large, and neither are we. Relax. Take a deep breath. You are a cog in the wheel. You are wallpaper on the living room wall, which room is called the universe. The Messiah is a figurehead; we do the work for her. We pave the way. We establish the context. We give her the security to emerge. So screw your doubts and sink into your reality already, wouldja? You are here now, and this is what here would like to ask of you.

We can hear Airee's voice downstairs, at the climax of her concert. Such a magnificent wail, you can't tell if it's abject horror or sheer, unadulterated ecstasy (as if it matters, at this point -- the tremendum smiles if you want it to).

An enormous thundercrack startles me severely. Melody doesn't seem to notice it.

And then Katie's voice is in our minds, telepathy is a terrible word for what is, in essence, intersubjectivity, or rather, seamless communication, and she says,

We're here because we have nothing to lose. Because everything that came before threatened to swallow us whole. We abandoned what they gave us. They gave us shit, anyways. I've never seen anything like this before in my life, and that's exactly as it should be. I got control. I got a handle on this. Inside the deep dark core of my soul, there's bliss -- bliss like chocolate on a Saturday and I got nowhere to go, or a long, cool bath while the building is burning. You've never seen me smile, you know -- not the way I like to, not the kind of smile that tackles you with joy, and that's because inside the deep dark core of my soul, there's something so evil, so poisonous, that I'm lucky to be alive. Is that the human condition? I don't know. I never called myself human. But we're here now because we have nothing to lose, because everything we used to be is gone

gone gone like leaves in the wind, everything we used to want is forever out of reach and now we gotta find all new desires and drives to motivate us. Me, I don't want much these days. Saving the world would be nice. Saving myself would be better. This is what here would like to ask of you, you know. Here endeth the lesson.

And Melody isn't moving, still isn't moving, still isn't responding to us, her eyelids fluttering ever so slightly, her head tilted slightly back, as though a current is running through her. There is wild applause in the theatre below, as Airee leaves the stage, gathers her band, prepares for an encore of some variety. Our ritual, meanwhile, is nothing of the sort that I expected, nothing codified or calcified, but rather entirely spontaneous, driven only by the sheer power of intention, the sheer power of our collective will. The problem is, Melody isn't responding, and now our collective will is in doubt.

Let me try to describe to you what I'm feeling as I hover there before the others, in the center of their circle, experiencing the first tangible traces of communication from above. I am plainly aware of the messages passing back and forth among them, can hear Courtney's attempts to steady them, can hear Scotto's doubts; I can hear Katie's nihilism, can hear the silence coming from Brother Love. I alone can hear the aliens. They speak in crystal blues and radiant halos, danger pillows and catastrophic love puzzles. I do not speak their language; I am silent, immobile, as they literally burn a new pattern into my neural nets, charging within me a kind of "translating" circuit. They are flooding me with endorphins as they do; I'm sure my organism would otherwise have seized and cried out with unbearable pain. Presently, I feel them stimulating my amygdala, and then, I hear their message for the first time loud and clear. They are repeating one phrase, over and over again, in response to the message we so recklessly spit out into space, and the message they are sending is, quite simply,

Why have you called us here?

"Why have you called us here?" is squeezed out of Melody's vocal cords, her eyes suddenly popping open, facing us with the sheer terror of one who has entirely lost any sense of control. Immediately following, a loud booming thunderbolt rolls across the sky, punctuating her words with a violent exclamation mark.

And we have nothing to say in response. To be quite honest, I don't exactly know why. I know that Melody expected the Mother Ship to

save the world, to intervene in the convoluted torture which the planet is about to face -- is that what you want to hear?

The Mother Ship would have known why we called it here, comes the angry thoughts of Courtney. Her face is becoming a hardened mask, which seems to frighten the helpless Melody all the more.

Why have you called us here? rings out in my mind once more, through my lips. It is not a voice I recognize; it is not the voice I expected. Futile, scrambling, paranoid delusional, I attempt a response, which amounts to, *You are the Mother Ship?* And the response comes,

There is no such Ship in all the universe.

Then... who are you?

A pause that lasts a lifetime, and then,
Let us show you.

The crowd that has formed below us, on the streets of San Francisco, lets out a nervous, panicked sound, something like an "Ohhhh!!" magnified by several thousand. Inside the theatre, Airee and her audience remain entirely unaware of the serious business outside. Melody is suddenly released from whatever current was holding her in place; she collapses in a crumpled heap in front of us, and Katie and Brother Love are instantly at her side, leaving Courtney and me to stare at each other across the remnants of the circle. And then,

descending through the clouds above us,

comes an enormous black flying saucer, easily a mile wide if it's an inch, hovering directly above us. It appears almost out of nowhere, terrifies the living daylights out of everyone who sees it. It's surface is smooth, punctuated only occasionally by blinking neon blue lights -- or rather, some ethereal color which approximates neon blue while at the same time severely improving upon the original concept of neon blue. It is a hard core mother fucking UFO.

"That's not the Mother Ship," Vince warns me.

"I gathered," I reply. "What the fuck is it?"

"Looks like trouble to me," he offers helpfully.

"We're doomed," I mutter to no one in particular.

And then the UFO offers us a demonstration of its power, of its identity. A spray of what appear to be enormous red laser beams shoot out of the saucer in several directions. They are wide, shimmering beams, intensely bright; one of them strikes a point on the far side of the city, and the resulting explosion is absolutely incredible. The crowd in the streets

begins to scream, begins to panic, begins to flee though where can they possibly run, huh. We are not even aware of the beam that sails over our heads, *clear across the country*, incinerating two passenger airplanes in flight and blowing the Statue of Liberty apart. Another beam strikes the opposite side of town, another wild, incredible assault upon our senses in the form of a giant fireball, and massive chunks of debris rain down on unfortunate neighborhoods. This is, apparently, what the word carnage is meant to describe.

And we can only imagine how Melody feels, her vision exposed for the hollow sham it really was, her egotistical desire to save the world turned on its head and used to ruin her and her home. Even as Katie and Brother Love attempt to hold her up, the love they once felt for her is being drained away -- sucked away, even, by the black hole which remains of Melody's identity. The tears that stream down her face are an insult to her friends, as though there is any kind of apology she could offer for so boldly deceiving and humiliating them. She wants, in this moment, nothing more than to die a painful death, wants nothing more than to slit open her wrists or hurl herself off the building. She hasn't the courage to move, however. She has tainted the sacred space with her pretensions; it was her own ego which soiled the entire affair, her own ego which led others to believe she was something else entirely, something other than what she was. And what she was, quite frankly, was wrong wrong wrong about everything.

And Courtney is the most furious of all. As the flying saucer continues to fire laser beams about the globe from its position directly above us, Courtney is witnessing the end of her dream as well, the end of all things, the end of her last valiant attempt to uphold an ideal. Yet,

she has one secret weapon remaining. For,

although Melody was not able to Activate herself,

Courtney still possesses the words her mother gave her, ***the words which cannot be recorded in this text.*** She can still make one last attempt to Activate Melody, to attempt to discern if this *really is* the Messiah or some arrogant pretender. Her mother told her that if these words were used upon one who was *not* the Messiah, the words would entirely destroy that individual. In this moment,

Courtney could care less if Melody were destroyed outright, would enjoy the privilege of doing it herself. She pushes past Brother Love, elbows Katie aside, takes Melody by the arms and stands her up straight. I watch the action transfixed, aware of just exactly what Courtney intends to do, entirely terrified, entirely frozen. Katie hesitates, in this

moment lost in a sea of doubt and confusion, unable to protect the one she no longer recognizes; and Brother Love's mournful look makes it clear that he no longer cares what happens in this dangerous, desolate game.

"What have I done?" Melody cries. "What's going on? Tell me what's going on!"

"I'll tell you what's going on," Courtney replies evenly. And then, having secured Melody's eye contact, she shouts aloud

the words which cannot be recorded in this text,

and after that,

all fucking hell breaks loose.

I cannot relate to you the simultaneity of the following events, primarily because I am not sure they happened at all, let alone in the same moments. I may be imagining much of what follows from here til the end of this book; it's hard to say anything for sure, since I had been drugged at the start of the ritual and then had my head yanked through a big reality blender moments later. It's one thing to take LSD and imagine there are aliens somewhere in the universe; it's another thing entirely to have an enormous UFO actually descend out of the clouds and stare you right in the face. I kept searching the surface of the ship frantically, desperately wishing to find the words "U.S. Air Force" stenciled *somewhere* on the damn thing, but no, this was it, this was the UFO we'd all suspected was out there, the big ol' flying saucer that had tantalized humanity for ages.

Or at least, I thought it was for a while, until a few moments later *another* UFO descended out of the clouds, clear across the Bay.

It was long and cigar-shaped, a giant metallic tube hovering brightly over the water. Depth perception at this point became a problem; for all we knew of how big UFOs usually are, it could have been a thousand miles away, an enormous monster larger than California itself, or it could have been this tiny little tube not much larger than a real cigar, containing a race of infinitesimal beings who planned to make us all sneeze to death. Either way, the big red lasers on the flying saucer stopped for a brief moment, and when they resumed, they were aimed right at the cigar-shaped UFO. Brilliant bursts of light followed, absolutely dazzling fireworks, as the cigar seemed to emanate enormous pink energy waves of some kind that rocked the flying saucer in a kind of turbulence. Meanwhile, the appearance of *both* of these objects was wreaking havoc with the lightning in the atmosphere, which, thanks to the arrival of the thunderstorm, began to intensify significantly. The lightning flashed all

around us, almost as fast as the laser beams flashed above us; our skin felt simply electric, tingling and almost numb in a way.

Inside the theatre below us, all the power had gone out; presumably, one of the flying saucer's indiscriminate laser beams had knocked out a power plant or some kind of transformer station somewhere. At any rate, the audience inside was plunged into immediate darkness, their connection with us and with Airee severed entirely, the group mind dissolved, each of them reduced to individual buckets of terror inside a darkened theatre. That is, until Airee, recovering backstage before her planned encore, was forced to take that encore a little early; she made her way back onstage and began singing *loudly*, unamplified. She was unaware of the damage taking place upstairs on the roof; in her mind, she was still connected to our original intention, still swimming in energies that had yet to be released -- and when she did release them, she literally sang the lights back on, powered the place up with the strength of her voice, and kept right on singing, bringing the audience back from the verge of terror (were those explosions we heard outside? is that a crowd we hear screaming outside?) to the edge of musical rapture once again (is that an encore we see coming? are we getting more songs from Airee?). Meanwhile, Sierra made her way to the roof, to check out the situation on Airee's behalf. And what she saw was,

well, I don't know what she saw first, as I've pointed out. What I remember next, though, is seeing the look on Courtney's face, an expectant, eager expression, as though Melody were somehow supposed to burst into flames or something as a result of Courtney's action. Courtney expected either a) Activation or b) destruction, and what she got was mostly neither. Melody just stood there, bawling her eyes out as she had before, moaning "What's going on? What's going on?" in a whimpering voice. Courtney got nothing, absolutely nothing, no reaction whatsoever from Melody; the words were the correct words, that much was certain, yet

as it *dawned on her* what the problem was, I saw Katie's reaction.

Katie was in motion the *moment* Courtney started uttering those words. It was as though she suddenly recognized the danger Courtney intended to drop upon Melody, and upon the rest of us for that matter. It was as though Katie had read Courtney's mind -- which may very well have been likely, as the sacred space had not yet been broken, and we were still clinging to each other for security. At any rate, Katie's right leg shot out from her hip, and the black combat boot at the end of her leg caught Courtney directly in the face. Courtney crumpled like a rag doll; and once

Courtney was no longer holding Melody up, Melody collapsed on her own. After a few moments, Courtney tried to sit up, and her face was an absolute mess, a morass of blood and broken bone, her nose almost smashed flat. Katie advanced slowly, and I watched Courtney back up toward the edge of the building; I wanted to scream something inane like "STOP!" before I had to witness any more violence, but my voice wasn't working. Brother Love was moving toward Melody, Sierra was moving toward me, and I wasn't doing a damn thing, other than casting my eyes about frantically and apparently recording as much as I could.

And then, Katie stopped, and Courtney got to her feet -- very slowly, as you might expect. They looked at each other only briefly, and then Courtney turned and

leapt off the edge of the building

and I swear to high heaven, I never saw her again.

The battle between the two UFOs in the skies above us was but the precursor for a fullscale war which was to begin immediately; and we were about to be numbered among the first casualties. The cigar-shaped tube thingie turned out to be a lot more powerful, for whatever reason; the flying saucer seemed to be crippled, was listing to one side like a cruise ship after hitting an iceberg. And what I realized then was that these were just the aliens we could see in our own physical space; I asked Vince, "What the hell's going on, buddy?" and he replied,

"",

which indicated to me that there was some serious action going down. Finally, the flying saucer began to lose altitude, and it became apparent that it was going to land, whether it wanted to or not. And in fact, its makeshift landing pad would likely include this theatre and the square mile or so surrounding it. Sierra grabbed my hand, yanked me to my feet, and the two of us sprinted to Melody and Brother Love. We were joined by Katie just as the flying saucer began to seriously plummet toward us, gaining speed and whistling loudly, several bolts of lightning striking it on the way down, a huge thundercrack filling up the sky as it fell,

and somehow, someone had the wherewithal to shift us all into the Dreamtime, and somehow,

we survived.

That someone turns out to be Airee Macpherson. She had somehow suspected something was seriously wrong, and shifted not just us but her band, the backstage crew, and the entire audience into the

Dreamtime as well. We materialize in the main foyer of the fairy tale castle, filling it with people until the foyer expanded itself to accommodate us. One moment they are watching a most extraordinary concert, these folks, and the next they are being yanked two steps to the left through a wall of reality pudding, into a world that isn't supposed to exist this way. If it were me, I would have gone stark raving mad; but Airee immediately jumped up on a staircase and began slowly, rationally explaining the situation to everyone. Meanwhile, Dawson the butler arrives within short order, rushing to Melody's side. She is unresponsive, a ball of tears and mumbled nothings.

"Where's Laurel?" I ask.

"She's at her home," he replies. "In Iowa. Packing for the trip."

"Will all these people fit in your space ship?"

"Easily," he says. "I'll see to their needs, don't worry."

"What are you going to do?" Katie asks me.

"I'm taking Melody to Iowa," I reply. "If Laurel can't help her, no one can."

"You'd best do it quickly," Dawson says. "We are going to need both of them here very shortly."

Understood -- dammit, there's a war on, right?

I grab Melody's hand, ignoring the suspicious stares of Katie and Brother Love. Why should they trust me, after all? I wrote this awful predicament, didn't I? I want to lean over and whisper, "It coulda been worse, this coulda been a romance novel," but I don't.

Moments later, Melody and I are shifting right back into reality.

Laurel's eyes are glued to the television set, and she barely notices Scotto and Melody materializing in her living room. Scotto, exhausted despite himself, drops into a couch, leaving Melody curled up in the fetal position on the floor. Laurel is watching CNN, of all things, as reports pour in from around the globe: a giant cloud of some kind of "black gas" sweeps through Europe, poisoning millions, taking control of electricity grids, and firing off huge bursts of energy into space for no apparent reason; Lake Michigan literally stands up off the ground and then hammers the city of Chicago with a relentless tidal wave, wiping the city off the face of the Earth in one fell swoop; three flying creatures, resembling enormous, half-bird half-machine eagles, swoop down out of the skies and are sighted soaring all over Asia, sucking human beings off the planet with a relentless alacrity. Volcanoes all over the planet are erupting in protest. Hideous

blue wraiths are emerging in midair from the Bermuda Triangle and are scattering across the globe, wreaking havoc in their midst. Finally, the anchor person seems to undergo a kind of nervous breakdown, and the channel goes black. Laurel channel surfs, finding uninterrupted video feeds from all over the world. An army of zombies is bursting out of the ground in Mexico; they look just like the movies told us they'd look, and the aliens who control them evidently have a ghoulish sense of humor, for they are indeed in search of live brains to eat. Laurel recognizes on one feed the telltale signs of a Dreamtime leak, an enormous rainbow sliding across the sky for no apparent reason, raining gold coins and diamonds on the hapless creatures below; indeed, the falling diamonds imbed themselves viciously in the skulls of anyone unfortunate enough to be captivated by the sight. There are riots and mayhem everywhere, UFOs and monsters, politicians losing their minds and missiles being fired. We do not know who fired the first nuclear weapon at the flying saucer which appeared over the Atlantic Ocean, seemingly headed toward Washington, D.C. We only know that the weapon was somehow turned in midair, and directed toward a point somewhere in Maine, where it devastated much of the northern coastline.

"What are we watching?" Scotto asks wearily.

"The end of the world," Laurel replies.

"Really?" he says, his interest in the TV suddenly perking up. "Is it any good?"

"Come here," she says, taking him to the plate glass picture window at the front of the house. Her father's exquisite telescope is set up on a tripod, and she says, "Take a look at that."

The house is up in the hills, giving them a magnificent view of the city below. The view, at present, is one that will likely give them both nightmares for a long time to come. The city is filled with people, and Laurel says,

"Over the last week, Cedar Falls has been flooded with what we thought were refugees from all over. Now we know better. There are close to a million people running rampant down there. It looks like a riot from up here, of course. Buildings burning, cars exploding, people shooting and killing each other. Doesn't seem to make much sense, all the violence, all the mayhem. But it does. Those people aren't people any more. And that riot -- those are the *negotiations* taking place. Those people are aliens now, or rather, each individual is a transmitting station for one of the alien races, and they are all attempting to interact, attempting to communicate, using

the clumsiest of all languages, the human race. The space ships that are fighting? Those are the aliens who didn't like the terms being negotiated. Those are the *weaker* races, chewing up Earth in frustration. I don't understand the dance, don't understand the conflict, but I know that at least some of them are trying to resolve it. It's a dangerous trap, of course, trying to understand the situation by anthropomorphizing the players; but the fact remains, they're negotiating to the death, whether they want to or not."

"How do you know all this?" Scotto asks quietly.

"What do you mean, how do I know all this?" she replies. "Don't ask stupid questions."

And were you one of those who happened to be caught up in the maelstrom taking place within the city of Cedar Falls, you would have first felt your humanity suddenly being invaded by any one of two dozen less one alien races, of all colors and varieties, consciousness both sublime and sacrilegious, awe-inspiring and dangerously awful. Your body would have been stolen from you, your mind would have been suddenly yanked away from you, you would have been a helpless observer as the organism which once contained you was now put to a greater purpose. You would not have understood the gibberish and the babble which poured from your mouth, from your limbs, you would not have enjoyed the dance, the delicate series of attacks and retreats, and very soon, you would not have been *you* any longer, and it would no longer matter one whit what became of you. These humans are living, breathing puppets now, caught in a whirlwind of attempted communication. We don't know what they're saying to each other, nor why they waited so long to say it. We don't know why the enmity among them, why the collision, why the calamity. We only know that they are *here* now, and this is what *here* is asking of them.

Laurel at last notices her sister, curled up and whimpering on the floor. She asks,

"What happened to her?"

And Scotto replies, "A meltdown."

"A meltdown? What do you mean, a meltdown?"

"I mean, a *meltdown*," he says firmly. "That's as clinical a diagnosis as you're going to get." Pause. "I brought her here because I was thinking you could bring her back."

"Back from where? The void?"

"Possibly."

Pause.

"She was melting down," Scotto says, "and then Courtney tried to Activate her."

"It didn't work, did it," Laurel says.

"Nope."

"Of course not. Courtney was a fool." She turns to Scotto, says, "Do you remember the words she used to try the Activation?"

"I do," he replies. He starts to recite them, and Laurel rapidly interrupts, saying,

"No, no, write them down. Don't tell me."

"Why?" He scribbles the words on the side of a phone book.

"What are you going to do with them?"

Pause.

"Courtney made a mistake. The entire Circle made a mistake. They never should have separated us." Pause. "Only when we're *together* can we be Activated."

The implications sink in as Scotto listens, the notion being that these two are *both* required to Activate the Messiah, that one or the other of them was not enough to contain the latent archetype. He notices, then, Laurel's mother, standing in the kitchen doorway. Her father is emerging from the upstairs, coming down the steps. They are seeing Melody for the first time since her disappearance all those months and months and months ago.

"We'll bring her back from the void," Laurel says. "Give us twenty-three minutes."

"You want me to leave?" he asks.

"I do," she says. "This is family business."

He nods slowly. Then, awkwardly, he leans forward and hugs her tightly. Even as he does, he is starting to shift, and moments later, the air in front of Laurel is entirely empty.

She turns to her parents, and says,

"It's time."

The castle inhabitants have been returning over the last week or so, and the flood is increasing as the countdown (T minus 23 and counting) approaches liftoff. The tales they have to tell of what's become of the planet are absolutely staggering. Word quickly spreads throughout the castle that over half the inhabitants have not made it back, and the ones that do make it back are more often than not a bloodier, grimmer crew than before they left. You can't survive on the streets without a gun or a knife,

and the billboards and television sets are hurling threats your direction. Cracks in the pavement want to swallow you, want to prevent you from leaving, and falling debris from collapsing buildings attempts to convince you that there's no place like home, there's no place like home. If you believe you can make it easily to your friend's house, or to your parents' house, if you think you can dodge the flying arrows and the hurled insults, the screaming twisted faces of your former neighbors coming out of their houses with the most incredible smiles and wounds, then you are sorely mistaken; for there's something downright seductive about the chaos, about the loss of all civilized behavior. The streets of your town are calling after you, beckoning you to join in the revelry. You can't survive long without making choices. The fortress you've built around yourself is rapidly invaded.

"We must imagine what led us to this place in order to try to understand it; we can *only* imagine because the facts have since remained as elusive as they were then, because communication has never quite taken place between ourselves and those who destroyed the planet Earth. We must picture the global political scene, with its nation states and boundary disputes and military machines and inexplicable slaughters, as the prologue to this alien conflagration. We must imagine that a nation like the United States -- to choose a giant, random example -- with its constant, boiling identity crisis threatening to run rampant across the weaker nations of the planet at any moment, was actually already in the hands and minds of those who would soon pull the planet down. As we ponder the example of the Voices, inhabiting a network of some 100,000 or more individuals across the globe, and the example of the Shadows, seeding InfiniTek with alien technology and karma, so must we somehow find a way to envision the aliens who were responsible for manipulating the media, compelling us to appreciate a culture which was clearly inimical to the very planet upon which it lived. How else to explain the rampant ecological destruction, the ideological warfare, the relentless persecution of those humans whose ideas were in conflict with other, more powerful humans? How else to explain sundry holocausts and massacres and enormous World Wars, if not in the context of alien life who treated this planet as their *game board*, as a tool whose longevity was entirely irrelevant? Would they *ever* have treated their *own* homes this way? We can only presume they didn't have to, since they found ours, since our intellectual and spiritual development was so stunted that careful consideration of our *feelings* on the subject of doom were also irrelevant.

"Nonetheless, we can also presume that using the human race as a translating interface caused unforeseen ripples in their negotiations; truly, we can presume that supposed 'higher' forms of life had somehow found a way to eliminate violence in their societies, and even though the inability to communicate with other alien races must have been a fearful situation, there is no reason to presume that genocide was on their minds as they came to the planet Earth to settle their affairs. Rather, we must assume that the very notion of 'genocide' was transmitted by humanity to the alien negotiations like a *virus*, and we must assume that the methods and tools of mass destruction and violence were only considered feasible in a context where *human minds* were involved in literally *every transaction* among the gathered races. Which finally begs the question -- had these aliens not been the instrument of our planet's downfall, would we have engineered it ourselves? A Cold War question, perhaps; but then, there is nothing colder than outer space." (Dr. Nicholas Solitude, "*Ruminations on the Revelation*."

And there are those of you who stand atop the skyscrapers and watch the viciously beautiful dance of destruction below you, stand with your wine glasses held high and your tears flowing freely. Some of you manage to elude and evade the mayhem, crawl scramble kick and bleed your way to higher ground, and the knowledge of your impending doom isn't the thickening, desperate quicksand you might have imagined; it is instead some kind of awesomely liberating sensation, as you become aware that you are witnessing the Judgment Day in all its fury, with all its glamour and violent intrigue. You are standing atop the tallest building in your town, and you have somehow made it here with a handful of your closest friends; there are fires and barricades preventing anyone from following you here, and from here, you will watch the end in its entirety, as the lightning flashes and the thunder booms and the gunshots ring out like Fourth of July fireworks. You can see things you never expected to see in your lifetime, marionettes on the streets with gleaming knives in their hands, and terrifying brutality, and terrified voices, clawing and hacking at each other; and despite your tears, and your near drunkenness (not because of wine, to be sure), you aren't quite afraid any longer. You aren't so sad that it all has to end like this. There are those who have been *living* this reality for *years* now, while you remained secluded from such things, hidden by your arrogance, easily seen in retrospect, and your belongings, and your books and music and pets. You have *always* been more fortunate than those who lived under conditions which would have appalled you had your society not deadened you to their influence. And now, the cup of

despair is overflowing, and as you taste it, you wonder all along if the taste would have been less acrid if you had shared this cup from the very beginning.

And then there are those of you, stationed all around the globe, who in these final moments will be *stunned* to see the face of someone you love materializing out of thin air before you; you will be instructed to gather just a handful of your things, and then your hand will be grabbed tightly, no time for explanations, no time for tearful embraces, and you will be

yanked,
sideways,
into the Dreamtime.

If you are one of these few, please count your blessings at this time.

Years and years and years after these events took place, Melody would offer this description of what took place between her sister and herself in the twenty-three minutes before their final return to the Dreamtime:

"Scotto always referred to it as a 'meltdown,' and though I've never been sure why he chose that term, it seems to work; the moment I realized the Mother Ship was *not* coming down to save us, I experienced something along the lines of a 'core breach,' and my ego, my identity, began to go critical. A million horrible realizations began to flood my brain, all at once. Waves of despair and misery began to wash over me. I felt myself suddenly going mad, and was powerless to do anything about it. I felt I *deserved* it, for being so wrong about my so-called 'vision' of the Mother Ship. I deserved to be abandoned by everyone who had loved me and whom I had loved, because I had ensnared them in my own arrogance. They would have been better off if they had never met me. That's what I was feeling. And then I realized that I had done just what the alternate Melody in the Dreamtime had done -- just as she had somehow managed to destroy the city of Ityl-Atys, so had I managed to bring destruction down upon San Francisco, and upon Earth. It was I who signaled the beginning of the Concrascent War. I had lived the scenario implanted in my mind by Mrs. Wormwood, that of a ridiculous demagogue leading her minions into evil. I had ruined everything with my pretensions. That's what I was feeling. And then, after receiving as much guilt as I could

possibly receive -- guilt which is still with me today -- I melted down entirely into the void.

"I was completely non-existent by the time I got to Laurel. The essential parts of *me* were no longer functioning. They had been overwhelmed by grief and regret and self-pity. Now I was a hollow husk of a person, and all there was inside of me was nothingness. My identity had winked out of existence, and 'I' was no longer present. There was only the void. Absolute nothingness. No desires, no feelings, no skin or mercy or dreams. Just emptiness. Just absence. No words. No God above or below. The void was not darkness, not blackness or stillness -- the void was *not*, and that is all there is to say about it.

"That's what had become of me by the time Laurel got hold of me.

"I was surprised by the idea of forgiveness. It seemed so irrational. It seemed as though I could Hope for nothing more than a quick death, and instead, I was... somehow... redeemed. Pardoned for my crimes. That's what woke me initially, Laurel's arms around me holding me tight, and she was whispering something to me, I don't remember what exactly, variations on 'it's okay, it's okay, you're with me, it's okay,' and so on, soothing, consoling sounds, and then she traded off with my mother, of all people -- and if *anyone* can calm a wounded soul, it's my mother. I couldn't believe how long I had been living without my family. I felt as though I had run away on purpose, instead of having been kidnapped into some strange life. My father was there, too, and the four of us sat together while I somehow managed to bring my eyes into focus -- and as soon as I realized I was no longer safe inside the void, I began to cry and cry and cry, I couldn't stop, not for a long long time. These tears were different from my tears atop the theatre, however; those were tears of despair, and these were cleansing tears, restoring me piece by piece.

"And Laurel talked the whole time, softly, gently, quietly explaining to me just how I had gone wrong, and just what the repercussions were. She also managed to convince me that it wasn't *all* my fault, and that my intentions had always been good, for what that was worth. She was direct and honest with me. She didn't want to sugarcoat my mistakes for me. She wanted me to know just what I had tried to do, and how I had failed, and what it *really* meant. Most of all, she wanted to prepare me for what *she* was about to do. Just when I was beginning to think all my talk of Messiahs and saving the world was poisonous detritus to be jettisoned, here she was bringing it back to me, telling me I had only been *half* wrong.

"She was, of course, my other half, and I was not complete without her.

"She took my hands and held them as my mother read scribbled words written on our phone book, and as she did,

"I experienced such warmth,

"and such grace,

"and such tenderness,

"that words now fail me entirely.

"We were Activated, then, and the presence of the Messiah, true and holy, was within us.

"I don't remember much of anything, after that. Not for a long, long time. Not til we were long away from planet Earth.

"It had all come true, despite my best intentions.

"I believed you know what happened next?"