

Chapter Twenty

Laurel clears the table while Cohen begins washing the dishes and Courtney prepares to dry them. Not much to be said in these moments, for Laurel is convinced that Courtney is right: she needs to revisit her fairy tale dream castle. She needs to reclaim what's hers. She needs to see the Dreamtime once again. She is already approaching tears at the thought of entering that world again, since her beautiful sister Melody (who fled the fairy tale dream castle, who was kidnapped so long ago, who no longer has a presence in her life, except the presence felt by her absence) will not be there to share it with her. Although Cohen is remaining mysteriously silent on the matter (he looks as though there's something just behind his forehead, trying to burst out), Courtney, whose idea this was, is already helping her to prepare, several hours in advance, for the experience. She is certainly thankful for Courtney's interest, and for their developing friendship. Courtney has dropped multiple hints that the Circle has been looking for Laurel for a long time, and this might have weirded her out if it hadn't been for Courtney's strangely calming influence, for the way Courtney makes it feel as though this is all proceeding according to a very deep plan and everything is going to work out Just Fine. Courtney's definitely a cool one.

"What have you dreamed about since the last time you were there?" Courtney asks.

"I haven't really remembered a dream since then," Laurel replies. "Hmmm... I mean, that's pretty staggering, isn't it? I haven't remembered a dream in so long."

"Whereas before that...?"

"Before that, I had a fully fleshed out fairy tale dream castle that was all my own. Mine and my sister's."

"And you shared this castle with...?"

"Umm, there were definitely others there. Others, as in, beings that were not generated by myself or Melody. I know that sounds pretty preposterous."

"Laurel, after everything I've done and seen, *nothing* sounds preposterous."

Laurel smiles. "Right, right... I like the idea that there's no such thing as consensus reality around here."

"Tell me about these beings."

"Well, it's hard to say, really, who they were or where they came from. I remember some of their names, you know, some of the people we were closest to, like Airee Macpherson the singer, and Dawson the butler, and Tanner Mildew the boy genius... but you know, it's been so long. I can't really tell you how we knew they were 'actual' as opposed to merely dream apparitions. That's something I'm looking forward to experiencing again."

"Do you think you'll be able to slip into that world again easily?"

"I think so," replies Laurel resolutely. "I mean, I still clearly remember the process I used, and I still retain the ability to drop easily into the hypnogogic state, and from there, into the full-blown dream state. I have no doubt I'll retain my lucidity. The question in my mind is: what's happened there since I've been gone? Is the castle still there? Are my friends still there? Will they remember me? I mean, I don't know how stable the castle was. I don't know how patient my friends will have been." Pause. "I'm getting a little anxious."

"Just keep breathing and you'll be fine," says Courtney. Pause. "What about your parents? Did you and Melody ever tell your parents that you could do this thing?"

Laurel shakes her head. "No. We kept it a secret."

"Did you ever wonder if your parents might have been able to shed some light into the whole phenomenon of dreaming together?" Courtney asks.

Laurel feels a sudden sting. It literally never occurred to her and Melody that her parents might have an understanding of the dreaming. As is typical of kids that age, they presumed they were entirely unique in the world, and didn't bother to ask their parents about that which was most important to them in the world, which was dreaming. And now, of course... her mother is singularly unable to answer any questions on the subject, and her father remains in a drunken haze. Now, without Melody, and even without Courtney and Cohen, she will be reentering the mystery, so to speak.

"I didn't," she replies.

Courtney can see which wave of sadness crossed Laurel's face just now. She says, "You know, Laurel, it's not too late, one of these days, to go find your father and explain to him how you feel."

Sharp intake of breath, and Laurel says, "I haven't got any way to explain how I feel. I don't *know* how I feel. I don't know why it's so hard to face him all of a sudden. I guess...."

"I think you look at your father and your mother with considerably less respect than you used to," Courtney replies, "because they weren't able to handle Melody's loss as well as you were. And maybe that's a fair judgment, Laurel, and then again, maybe it isn't."

This is the part of the conversation Laurel is replaying over and over for herself as she prepares to go to sleep. As she changes into a nightshirt, she quite carefully locks the window. And then, she climbs into her bed, and sets about the business of falling asleep, remembering for herself so many things about Melody, so many tiny details that had escaped her conscious attention since Melody's disappearance, coming back to her in a silent flood and filling up places inside of her which she had forgotten were empty. Would she have ever spent serious time with Gary if Melody had never left? She would *certainly* not be running around with crazy people like Cohen and Courtney... and of course, she *loves* Courtney, and Cohen too, and it's such a tight little mess. Does she still love her father and mother? Of course, but it's just plain impossible to communicate anymore....

Closes her eyes, quietly envisions the sound of a thunderstorm in the very back of her mind's eye, and soon she is drifting off to sleep.

And once she is fully within the dreaming, she remembers to ask herself, "Am I dreaming?", discovers that she is, and with a joyous leap she bounds into the sky, into flight above the dreamscape itself.

She knows not who she is and from where she has come. Yet lo and behold, her willing suspension of disbelief brings her directly to a vast, fairy tale dream castle, magical and sprawling across the countryside, surrounded by no walls, only lush greenery and beautiful flowers. The courtyard in front of the castle doors is filled with people; some kind of fair is apparently in progress, and there are tents and stages and games and booths, jugglers and musicians and singers and revelers, in modern dress and ancient dress and unusual dress and mystical dress, priests and children and masked men and acrobats. A broad smile crosses her face as she cautiously approaches the edge of the courtyard, staring in wonder at the expanse of the golden-brick castle, rising into the deep blue sky with tower after tower, multi-colored banners flying from nearly every window, trumpeters on the parapets and a giant hot air balloon tethered to the very topmost tower. A genuine sense of awe fills her as she slowly descends to the ground, and proceeds into the courtyard itself on foot.

Her attention is drawn first to the main stage, where a trio of jugglers is performing death-defying feats of agility with flaming torches and giant blades, all the while dancing around the stage, hopping and singing while a group of drummers in front of the stage keeps accompaniment. They carve out intricate and beautiful geometric patterns in the air with trails of flame and glimmers of steel, and occasionally one of them weaves in and out of the pattern, dodging all sorts of danger and splashing color throughout the scene. She is moved by their perfection, realizes that here in the dreaming you could really reach your fullest potential, here in a place where time moves in such an ethereal fashion and practicing really does make perfect. Next up is a simply astounding ensemble of dancers; the drummers intensify their rhythms and the dancers seem to do with their bodies what the jugglers did with their knives and torches, carving out impressive and impossible spaces and pictures on stage, in a whirlwind of motion and synchrony and expressiveness. She hesitates to look away for a second, for fear of missing even one iota of the rapidly unfolding physical fractal before her.

And then, a small band of musicians takes the stage, flute and guitar and violin and drums, and as they begin playing, she feels singular chills run all through her body, as she realizes she is hearing chords that are simply not possible in the real world, and chord progressions that astound her and defy her ability to remain uninvolved in the music. In a world like this, where absolutely any skill or any talent or any love can be explored and maximized and fully realized, these people have taken to all of the arts and brought each of them to life; they can have their heart's desires here, and what they desire is to express their inner selves, and to entertain their friends who surround them. This is the power of the dreaming, she realizes, so suddenly caught up in this place emotionally that she understands instinctively that she never intends to leave, that she belongs here more surely than she has ever belonged anywhere else, that these are kindred souls in a way she never expected to be possible in his lifetime. Although she knows not who she is and from where she has come, she already feels as though she has been a part of this place for dozens and dozens of lifetimes.

And then, as the musicians pause to take in a thunderous round of applause, the guitarist suddenly steps to the edge of the stage and says, "We have an especial treat for you tonight, my friends. I have asked a couple good friends of ours to join us onstage for a song or two, and they have ever so graciously obliged. Please welcome a most wonderful singer, Airee Macpherson, and her drummer, Sierra!"

Two young women climb onto the stage to another round of applause. The drummer, Sierra, dressed in dark browns and earth tones, joins the band's own drummer toward the back, while the singer, glamorously outfitted in a sparkling multi-colored wrap, turns toward the crowd, a warm and open smile on her face. As the audience hushes itself into silence, Airee suddenly begins to sing, alone and unaccompanied, her voice carrying through the air like a river of prayer; Laurel doesn't understand the language, but she is able to understand the song nonetheless, and her attention is completely on the music now. Airee's eyes close as she sings, and there seems to be such heartbreak in the song, such simple, sweet, powerful sadness to the story, and as she sings, she embraces and embodies this sadness to its fullest degree, using her entire form to convey the music, hands rising and falling, body waving back and forth. After only a minute of this, Laurel is near tears, isn't sure she wants to know how the story ends, isn't sure she can separate herself from the music,

and then, Sierra's drumming suddenly joins the song, softly, underneath Airee's voice, giving Airee a foundation, and keeping her company as she progresses through the song; the drums give Airee freedom, suddenly, to challenge the sadness, tentatively at first, and then with growing strength and surety as the band's drummer joins Sierra as well. Moments later, the first magical notes from the flute begin to interweave with Airee, in delicious harmony, intense and bittersweet, as Airee's voice slowly begins to climb higher and higher. Laurel is gripped with tension, feels as though the song is teetering on the precipice, is within just a few notes of toppling into darkness; but then, the guitar and the violin join in as well, and as Airee joins forces with the full weight of the band, the rhythm growing stronger and stronger, a mounting urge to dance slowly beginning to take the audience, the musicians miraculously resolve into a joyous anthem, Airee's words of strength and passion leading them forward, and the crowd cheers and leaps into motion, taking up the chorus along with Airee. Laurel, too, throws herself into the fray, finding it within her now to abandon her reserve and feel the press of her new family as they celebrate the happy ending of the song. And even as she dances, she is gripped with *saudade*, bittersweet happiness, knowing that all too soon this song will come to an end, and aware that she will be here to experience the next one whenever it comes.

The song comes to a rousing conclusion, and Laurel determines to meet the singer. Unfortunately, the press of the cheering crowd makes it

impossible to traverse the distance to her, and within moments she and her friend Sierra have vanished from sight entirely. Laurel experiences a momentary disappointment, which has its place, and then she turns to the rest of the courtyard, wondering what could possibly be next. Soon enough she realizes that the aroma of all sorts of food is wafting through the air, and she makes her way toward the booths, realizes again what a strange collection of individuals this seems to be, from all over time and space apparently; and occasionally birds swoop down and accept offerings from the tables. She stands motionless before the sight and smell, taking it all in from a distance.

"You seem very indecisive," says a voice next to him, the voice of a short, teenage boy wearing jeans and a T-shirt that says "I Brake For Black Holes -- But It Doesn't Do Much Good." "Is this because you've never been here before and you're overwhelmed by all the stimuli, or is it because, in general, you just can't make up your mind?"

"I'm not indecisive," she replies. "I'm just taking my time with my decisions."

"A likely story," the boy says. "My name is Tanner Mildew. I'm a genius. And you are?"

"I don't remember."

"Aha. Sounds serious." Pause. "Well, I don't remember you either. You wanna get something to eat with me?"

They are unlikely companions, she decides, as they wade into the lines at the booths, but Tanner Mildew, the boy genius, is the first person to make contact with her directly, and certainly that counts for something. Tanner leads them to a booth where giant slabs of roast meat, dripping with juices and spices, are given them. At first she objects, saying, "I'm a vegetarian," but Tanner says, "Gimme a break. Dream meat doesn't harden your arteries, and no animals were killed in the process of making it. It's all about flavor and texture, and naturally it tastes as great as you expect it to."

They scare up goblets of some very scintillating wine, and as they sit down to eat, she asks, "You can just eat and eat and eat as much as you want, right?"

"Uh huh," Tanner replies, "and you aren't abusing your body or squandering resources. It's kind of a glutton's paradise."

The meat (no animals were killed, so it's impossible to tell what kind of meat it is specifically) seems to be spiced and cooked precisely to please her taste buds, which must be another wonderful component of the dreaming. And, she's getting a very delicious kind of buzz from the wine,

perfectly suited to her temperament, allowing her to remain fully aware of her surroundings while still getting a nice bubbly shift in her consciousness.

"Now what brought you here?" Tanner asks. "You don't look like an ordinary wanderer. Did you come here for a reason?"

"Uh huh," Laurel replies instinctively. "I'm looking for someone named Melody. Do you know who that is?"

Tanner shakes his head very slowly. "We don't talk about Melody anymore, I'm afraid." He squints his eyes behind his glasses, peers at her with a curious and intense gaze; there *is* something he recognizes about her, certainly, but it is hard to place, something has changed. This wanderer with the black headband feels at once entirely familiar and yet thoroughly alone.

"Why don't you talk about Melody?" she asks, pressing him without quite understanding why.

"She left us," Tanner replies curtly. "She left us in a time of very great need."

"You have very great need of anything at all, here in the dreaming?"

Tanner's eyes grow dark. "You have no idea." Anxious to be gone, he says, "Feel free to wander all over the grounds if you want. And you're free to roam the castle as well, although be careful not to get lost. The castle is constantly growing in every direction. And there are doorways and passages in the castle that can be very misleading, so to speak." He stands up, finished with his meat, and says, "I'm gonna get dessert. I'm sure we'll bump into each other again." A long pause, and then: "You look like someone I've met before, but I can't quite place the face."

"It's entirely possible," she says. "I've been lots of different places."

He nods and wanders off, leaving her to her thoughts. As he goes, she thinks to wonder why Tanner Mildew even bothered to speak to her, kicks herself for not asking more questions, about the nature of the dreaming, about whether Tanner was a real person or a figment of the dream, about whether all of this had continuity during the day when they were theoretically awake. But it's all such a novelty that she hardly has time to consider such things. Exploring the inside of the castle definitely sounds like an intriguing and exciting possibility. She only hopes Melody is here somewhere, looking for her as well. Perhaps Melody can tell her

who she is and why she is. These dreamers won't remember her until she remembers herself, certainly.

She heads into the castle itself, half expecting the classical picture of the inside of a castle, and finding herself fully surprised at what she sees instead. The vast foyer is more reminiscent of an elegant Victorian hall than a medieval castle. The walls are covered in gold and hung with intensely beautiful paintings and tapestries, and the two giant staircases on either side of the room are covered in rich red carpeting. The chandelier which illuminates the room is enormous and opulent, hundreds of diamonds and rubies refracting the light throughout the room. And there seems to be some kind of midafternoon cocktail party going on: the foyer is half filled with an assortment of individuals, dressed in fashionable formal wear from several different time periods, mingling and chatting, while a tinkling piano plays somewhere in the background; young waiters slip in and out of the scene with trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Although she is hardly dressed for this particular affair, she decides not to feel self-conscious and proceeds into the room, lingering here and there, eavesdropping on as many conversations as possible, hoping to find clues that will help her grok what this place is all about. "I've analyzed the situation from a number of different angles," says an abnormally tall and silver-skinned woman to her left, "all of them very compelling, intriguing, pertinent angles -- I mean, very very attractive angles, really -- and I have determined, and I say this with the utmost conviction and sincerity, that this nonsense about the end of the world is absolutely nothing at all for us to worry about." Meanwhile, to her right, a normal enough fellow, except for his three mouths, says, "Yes, dear, one way to look at it is that while it certainly might look and feel like the end of the world out there, especially to those directly participating in the riots and the mayhem and the generally disturbing level of anarchy, destruction, and callous disregard for the societal structures that have, in the past, managed to *keep* us from rioting and destroying things and people and so on -- *nonetheless*, no one has been able to turn up any objective, scientific proof that this situation is, in fact, the end of the world, and not just a really bad day for everyone or some such." Still buzzed from that delicious wine, she boldly says, "Pardon me, I couldn't help but overhear your discussion about the end of the world..." and the man with three mouths says, "Oh, don't mind us, dear. We're from the future. Things happen differently there, you know." And

the three-mouthed man and the silver-skinned woman *laugh* and *laugh* and *laugh* and quickly excuse themselves from her vicinity.

"Care for a drink, ma'am?" says a smooth voice behind her, not at all the young voice she might have expected from one of the young waiters circulating throughout the room. She turns and finds a tall gentleman, dressed in an immaculate tuxedo, holding a tray with exactly one glass on it. "Tanner Mildew tells me you enjoyed the wine outside at the fair, and I thought perhaps you might like to try some of our more... sophisticated fare, hmm?"

She notes the man's bemused look, and graciously accepts the wine, saying, "Thank you. I'm quite new here."

"I know," the man replies. "My name is Dawson, and I am the head of staff."

"You're a friend of Tanner Mildew's?"

"I'm a friend of everyone in the castle, as it turns out," says Dawson.

"Then perhaps you can help me. I'm looking for someone named Melody. Do you know her?"

Dawson searches his memory intently, and says, "No... no, I'm afraid there's no one named Melody currently living here. Did she tell you she'd meet you here?"

"This is... this is *her* castle, isn't it?" Pause. "I thought that's what she said. But... maybe I misunderstood her...."

"Don't worry yourself," Dawson says. "The lady of the house will make her appearance soon enough, my dear." He straightens his bow tie and says, "I'm afraid I must leave you. I haven't met all the new arrivals yet, which is partially why we're having such festivities today: so I can circulate and see to the needs of those who might decide to stay." Pause. "Such as, perhaps, yourself?"

"What do I have to do in order to stay?" she asks.

Dawson smiles. "Keep coming back, I suppose. I suggest you wander the halls of the castle for a while longer. Perhaps you will inadvertently stumble across the one you seek." And without another word, he slips away into the crowd.

This has become altogether too frustrating, she decides, even as the first sip of her new glass of wine rushes down her throat and convinces her body to become dizzy from the taste. All right, she thinks to herself, I will wander up *those* stairs over there, wander into *this* hallway here, wander around *this* corner here, stop and stare at the signs that say

"Beware: Reality Still Under Construction" and "This Way To The Void", staring out the windows which feature gorgeous and remarkable views of the dreamscape outside, all the way across the hemisphere to the giant black mountain range in the distance, leaping to her feet and sprinting as she realizes the hallway is suddenly *expanding* and leading her into a labyrinth of epic proportions, dodging the sudden emergence of a knight in shining armor charging down the hallway on a fiery steed and vanishing into the distance, nearly toppling into a sudden abrupt chasm that appears before her (and staring down deep into that chasm gives her the absolute screaming willies, seeing before her insensate nothingness, dreamscape that couldn't be sustained by other dreamers, dreamscape that is waiting for interactive input, and she puts her mind to work and creates a staircase here, which she quickly begins following, stopping only to (see her reflection in a mirror at the very bottom of the steps, finds herself caught entirely off guard, for it isn't *her* she sees there, even though it's her reflection, some strange kind of (transtemporal distortion, the Dreamtime itself waving hello via her hand, the hand of hers which she will occupy in whatever future this present resolves into as the days and years pass, as her ("I wanted to let you know," says the reflection, "that my survival depends upon you and your") approach to the dreaming and its connection to reality coalesces into a) singular interface, contained within her body and its reflection here, which reflection is covered with purple and black streaks of electric lightning, blue and yellow sparks of electric energy, surrounding a strange and amorphous form that occasionally resembles her and occasionally causes her to) scream in terror at the unknown, which is certainly part and parcel of creating a staircase out of thin air and descending into a deep deep chasm), until finally she reaches the bottom of the steps, wonders if the weirdness can possibly go on.

"Yes, the weirdness *can* go on," says one of the two figures suddenly before her. They both wear tan trenchcoats, one very short with red hair and the other quite tall with dark brown hair, and they unsettle her right from the first. She begins walking, but they proceed to walk down the hallway alongside her (which hallway seems to be moving at a different pace than any of them), and the short one says, "She's wondering if we're going to leave her alone," and the tall one says, "She thinks we're just part of the weirdness around here," and the short one says, "You have nothing to fear. My name is Derald, and this is my companion, Janszen. We're psychics." And before she can say, "Psychics?", Janszen the tall one says, "Yes, psychics. We can read your mind and hear your thoughts. And let

me tell you, you need to stop thinking things like 'what the hell is going on?' and 'are these clowns for real?' and 'why does the short one have such ridiculous hair?'" And before she can say, "I was *not* thinking that the short one has ridiculous hair," the short one says, "She was *not* thinking that I have ridiculous hair, you ninny!" to which the tall one replies, "Well, explain this fascination with butter tubs and sandpaper, as long as we're on the subject of you," to which the short one replies, "STAY OUT OF MY HEAD AND STICK TO BUSINESS!" And before she can say, "Business?", the tall one says, "Yes, business. You're our business, friend. Dawson the butler told us you were having problems finding a friend of yours, and we thought we might offer you our assistance." And the short one, Derald, says, "Have you considered that Melody no longer lives here, and therefore asking for her here is about as good as asking for a pound of bacon in a vegetarian deli? Which," he continues tangentially, "you oughta try some time, because their faces get all red and their eyeballs nearly pop out of their heads. Have you *also* considered the notion that who you really seek is someone so similar to Melody as to be her near exact opposite, and that someone, my dear, might very well be her twin sister?" And as she slaps her head, suddenly beginning to realize just exactly where she is and who she is (after all this time), Janszen smiles and says, "Ah, you could have had a V-8©, I see. Yes, your real name is waiting for you downstairs in the hot tub. Which," he continues, opening a door that hadn't existed merely a few seconds earlier, "can be reached via this Secret Passageway." And Derald and Janszen laugh loudly and charge into the Secret Passageway, and she practically giggles herself as she charges after them, their voices echoing loudly throughout the passageway, which twists and turns and goes up and goes down, and finally empties out into

a small but intimate, lavish honeymoon suite, featuring a beautiful pink and gold hot tub right in the center of the room. She sees a smiling Dawson standing in the doorway, and in the hot tub, she recognizes Tanner Mildew the boy genius, and Susie Satori the bliss queen, and Alain the head chef, and Sierra the drummer, sitting on the edge of the pool, next to

Airee Macpherson, who stands solemnly, glistening magic water rolling off her body, and as Laurel finally, fully, remembers herself in this lucid place, they finally remember her, and Airee says, "Laurel... where have you been?"

And Laurel is frozen in a moment of sublime self-awareness, frozen in front of these friends, simply frozen as Airee steps out of the hot

tub and comes to her and embraces her tightly, whispering, "Where have you been? I have missed you *so much*."

and Laurel can say nothing, remains frozen,

and Airee says, "Are you all right, Laurel? What's wrong?"

and Laurel replies, "I'm unaccustomed to the sensation of Home.

It's just... taking me a moment to adjust."

Silence, and warmth flows through the room, Laurel clings to Airee and smiles and smiles and cries all at once.

"Maybe you should join us in the hot tub," Airee suggests with a tiny grin. "I think the hot water will do you some good."

And as Laurel looks around the room at the collected faces of her friends, she smiles and begins removing her clothes without hesitation and says, "Yeah, I think you're right."