

## Chapter Nineteen

Cohen stares absent-mindedly out the window of the house they've rented, waiting for Laurel to return, sweat pouring down his face. The man is truly the Great Pretender, for while Courtney slumbers on the couch, in front of a television set graced by daytime talk shows, Cohen is engaged in an intense battle of wits with strange Voices inside his head.

Cohen never met Gary, of course, and there are about a trillion questions running through his mind. The only problem is that Gary isn't around to answer any questions, and Cohen isn't about to ask Laurel, of all people, why these Voices have now decided to bother *him*. It isn't that he doesn't trust Laurel, mind you; he trusts Laurel with his life, and after all the far out, fucked up, over the edge insanity of the last few weeks and weeks and weeks (time? who keeps track of time?), they've become very good friends. (This is wild, Laurel, floating outside of our bodies through an astral ocean together, the ceremonial wine is flowing and the hallucinations are starting, and you still remember to smile at me....) Rather, Cohen isn't about to ask Laurel about these strange Voices because Laurel has been through enough shit in her life so far, and he will be damned if he is going to be the next big problem in her life.

This has always been Cohen's style, of course: attempting to shoulder enormous burdens in order to make a friend's life easier, such as the time he worked for a week straight repairing his sister Holly's new Chevy Nova so that Dad wouldn't know she'd driven it into a tree while drinking one night, or the time he worked for nearly *two* weeks straight finding a way to hide the tracks his friend Tilly left when he "accidentally" broke into two dozen companies' computer systems trolling for credit card numbers, or the time he worked for nearly *three* weeks straight on his cousin Zed's dissertation so that Zed could take that cruise to the Bahamas he won in a sweepstakes and still get his Ph.D. Cohen doesn't just grin and bear it, by and large; he grins and *enjoys* it, enjoys the challenge, enjoys the stimuli, enjoys the opportunity to exercise his brain and his body. Strain has never been an issue for Cohen. Cohen has rarely been seen in a bad mood.

But this... boy howdy, this is something different, Cohen realizes, and he may be way out of his league. Voices in his head? Whose fucked up idea was *that*?

"Listen, Cohen," says Gale, the ringleader of the disembodied crew, "it's a very simple matter to cooperate with us. We have simple needs and desires. We're not here to drive you crazy, honest."

*Drive me crazy?* thinks Cohen, taking his first step down a path which may very well be colorful and full of flowers and glittery things but is nonetheless a one way ticket to lobotomyville.

"I don't think he understands," says Vince, the smoothy smooth Voice with the Barry White rhythms. "Cohen, my friend, we come in *peace*, dig? We're here to soothe your soul and ease your mind."

*Ease my mind?* thinks Cohen, realizing that a mind is first of all a terrible thing to waste, and secondly is also a terrible thing to have sitting inside of your head transducing Voices which *are not yours*....

"What do you suppose we could do to *make* him trust us?" mutters the ominous Voice of Gregory, the enforcer.

*Trust them?* thinks Cohen, recognizing the absurdity of ever trusting unannounced house guests *inside his actual cerebellum*, for Christ's sake.

"Ah, who gives a shit?" says the cranky Voice, Jack. "As long as we get the job done."

*Get the job done?* thinks Cohen, wondering just what exactly the job is and who the bosses are and who's signing the paychecks and where can he register a formal complaint.

It was late last night when the Voices first arrived. He and Laurel and Courtney were down in Laurel's basement, performing a ritual designed to, in Courtney's words, "give the cosmos a pinch, if you know what I mean." He only remembers it vaguely now, how they spent the first few hours chanting something in ancient Greek (a series of recitations which, roughly translated, amounted to, "Blessed are those who get down and get funky, for it is the funky who shall transform the earth, from inside out to upside down, and make it shake its thang"). He remembers how they slowly lit the candles on the walls and burned incense in the corners ("I swear to heaven," muttered Laurel at one point, "I don't know where Courtney gets this hallucinogenic incense, but its starting to open my third eye, dig?" and he said, "uh huh"), how the three of them slowly removed each other's clothes and painted fractal designs on each other's bodies with greasepaint and stage makeup, how after only a matter of minutes it seemed as though there were ceremonial drums being played even though there weren't any drums in the house and there weren't any drummers to play the drums they didn't have, how the candles on the walls suddenly

seemed to be giant stars in a sudden heaven and how the floor itself seemed to drop away from them as they danced and danced and flailed around helplessly in an increasingly unusual kind of void, how Courtney shouted, "We shall erect billboards in His honor, and devour fast food in His name!" before suddenly appearing in the multiverse's version of an AT&T® commercial, her image beamed directly all over the cosmos and reverberating across their skulls, and how suddenly the Word emerged from the three of them in unison, how the three of them began dancing the exact same rhythm, how they chanted the exact same mantras, how they knew just what to say and why to say it, and how their souls seemed to be transported to another dimension of spacetime entirely where past and future travelers, bemused and horrified, threw up their hands in salutation and accusation, and where the very spirits of the dead swarmed around them, attempting to penetrate their skin, and ultimately, he only vaguely remembers the entire thrust of the ritual, Courtney climbing on top of him as her incessant chanting and shouting grew louder and louder, her bellowing calls reverberating throughout the astral plane, Laurel collapsing next to them as Courtney took him inside of her and took things to the next level altogether, and as the drumming reached a fever pitch

an EXPLOSION of white noise suddenly filled his head, which EXPLOSION timed perfectly, he had no doubt, with a similar explosion that was rapidly enveloping the rest of his body, but this explosion in his head seemed like pain and fear and violent intrusion, as though some red hot gleaming spear from Somewhere Else had suddenly pierced his bubble of self, and he remembers reeling with sudden terror, and he remembers the entirety of the room collapsing in on him, and he remembers screaming in sudden agony and horror at the notion that this was in the process of being what it was, which was, there could be no doubt,

"Hello, Cohen," said Gale inside his head,  
and that was that, by God, that was fucking that.

Courtney stopped the ritual, of course, and she and Laurel both attended to him quickly, but he simply shook his head and wept bitterly, and they took him upstairs to bed. This was not the first time that either Cohen or Laurel had been overcome by one of the rituals, and neither Courtney nor Laurel had any fear that a good night's rest wouldn't put him back together, as it always had before ("we're a damn sturdy lot," says Courtney, "which is mostly because we're young and stupid"). And Cohen simply did not have the words to let them know that

this was *not* the same,

and he was *not* all right,  
and a good night's rest would *not* put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Now, he watches out the front window as Scotto's car arrives in the driveway and drops Laurel off. Cohen may very well be under assault by strange Voices from Somewhere Else, but he is not about to let that get in the way of his training. In fact, his training will inherently be the thing that saves him. His training will be the thing that gives him dominance over this phenomenon, whatever it is. He need only pursue this path with Laurel and Courtney to the utmost of his ability, and never let them know that the quicksand which apparently destroyed Gary has now revisited itself upon him. Such secrecy will make the journey an awesome challenge, but in the long run (long is such a relative word for a lifetime so incredibly short), this is what's best for Laurel; someday, I'm sure, it'll all come out in the wash.

I'm not listening--

Days and days ago, he and Laurel had the first of many late night conversations on the subject of Everything, meeting in the kitchen for 3 a.m. snacks after the house has become quiet. She sits across the table from him, eating a bowl of Frosted Flakes®, while he wolfs down some buttered toast and a banana; they're like actors rehearsing a play, and finally getting a chance to see each other out of character.

"How'd you get into all this?" she asks, preferring to avoid small talk if possible. "Were you always some kind of mystical renegade like Courtney?"

He shakes his head, says, "Nah. I was a computer programmer, in Austin. I was working on an artificial intelligence project for a company that eventually got squeezed out of the market by a hostile competitor, a company called InfiniTek. So I moved to Seattle, started doing some freelance programming around town, didn't work a straight job, couldn't concentrate long enough. I was bored, I guess. Had a degree in mechanical engineering that I didn't intend to use. My dad had taught me the entire vast world of automobile repair when I was younger, but I didn't want to use that either. Programming just paid the bills, and even that wasn't going to last.

"Anyways, I was living in this house called Nexus-Seattle, a little community house on Capitol Hill for freaks and programmers. We probably had fifteen people living there most of the time, and I got to meet

all kinds of crazy people. They'd stream through like some kind of surreal circus: cypherpunks and anarchists, artists of all stripes, hackers, drug chemists, hippies and goths, media guerillas... you name it, really. Constant stimulation, even though I never really found my own path with any of them. It was like, all these people are working to carve out niches for themselves, and that's what *I* want. But I don't want *their* niche. I want something that suits me much more perfectly than any of that."

He finishes his toast, puts another four slices into their four-slice toaster.

"So one weekend we were having an absolutely insane party. My roommates had brought in a DJ, and the entire basement had turned into this massive trance onslaught. The balconies upstairs were filled with people, the neighbors all came over and got down with us, it was very wild. And Courtney was there. I have no idea who she came with; I'm pretty sure none of my roommates knew her, so she could have come with anyone, or just as likely, she may have come alone. You know how Courtney is, all mysterious and shit."

Laurel smiles. "Yeah, no doubt."

"Well, she figured me out in about two seconds. I mean, there are a million dedicated freaks in Seattle, there's no getting around it. And Courtney probably had not only that entire party to choose from, but the entire city, the entire country -- I don't know how she works, you know? She doesn't precisely explain herself, she just... approaches you, and before you know it, you're enveloped."

"So she never said why she wanted you?" Laurel asks.

"Not really. She just said she could tell I needed something extraordinary in my life, which was true; she could tell I didn't believe in the metaphysical, which was also true; and unlike every other so-called metaphysical bozo I'd ever conversed with in my life, she offered proof. We had sex like maniacs that night, which didn't precisely constitute 'proof,' but soon enough, I moved out of that house and the two of us took to the road. I got proof soon enough."

"So you started doing ritual work with her right away?" Laurel wonders.

"Pretty much. The same kind of training that you're getting now, only we started slower."

"Is there some kind of time pressure?" she asks. "Is that why I'm getting trained so rapidly?"

"Could be," he says. "Or it could be that you're more of a natural at it than I was. Mind you, I was totally willing to have these experiences, and Courtney is a fantastic teacher. But I had a lot of blocks when it came to this kind of stuff. I'd always been so ardently skeptical, and now I had a lot of new info to deal with. I still don't know much more about the Circle than you do. But what I do know so far has blown me away, pretty much entirely. There's no going back to the old Cohen, that's for sure."

"Yeah," she says softly, "no going back, huh." Pause, "I probably won't get a chance to go to college. Not like you."

"You're getting quite an education regardless."

"It isn't the way I would have chosen," she says. "You got to have a social life at one point, didn't you? You got to have a regular life? A normal one for a while?"

"This *is* a regular life, Laurel, you need to understand that right off the bat. You only get one life, Laurel. It's not a rehearsal. This is as real as it gets. 'Normal' is for people who want to be anesthetized, like everyone else. You don't want a 'normal' life, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I spent six years after college wandering aimlessly through the world, just like all the Normals expected me to; that's six years wasted, pretty much."

She is quiet then, considering his words, and he decides that for a seventeen-year-old, she has got to be one of the sharpest individuals he's ever met.

"Well, I'm glad to be training with you," she says at last.

"I'm glad as well," he replies. "And I think Courtney's glad to have found you."

"We make quite a trio, don't we?"

"We do indeed," he says. "We do indeed...."

That was then, when things were peaceful. Now, of course, the alpha male in him is fighting desperately for dominance over the chorus of chattering Voices that constantly hums in the background. He remembers once hearing a theory that the human personality is most true to its inherent self during times of crisis, that only then are the basic operating programs of a human being able to operate at their most efficient, because there simply isn't time for the logical, thinking apparatus to interfere with the inherent programming. He always wondered about that: wondered why the logical, thinking apparatus couldn't be considered as crucial to the inherent programming. Now he knows: the logical, thinking apparatus is the first thing to be attacked during a crisis, the first thing to be crippled. Emotional responses, then, overwhelm the thinking circuits, the same way

the endorphins are released immediately after injury to anesthetize the nerve endings and give the body a chance to do the painful work of healing. So -- what part of him is able to observe his new, true self coming into play? And -- can he trust his bare instincts to rescue him from this mess?

Wonders, briefly, if *they* are doing this to him, if one of their techniques is to flood him with useless theories on how and why he could escape them, so that while he spends his time exhausting useless possibilities, they are insinuating themselves deeper and deeper into his system, and then, Gale says, "Here is what we know about our interaction with the human organism, Cohen. Once we've entered a human's higher functions, we cannot ever leave without leaving the human dead. You would slowly, psychically, bleed to death from the sudden gaping hole that would be the result of our departure. Your mind can adapt to our *presence* because we are here to assist; your mind can *not* adapt to our *absence*, because, of course, we're gone, and there isn't a doctor on your planet who would understand the symptoms and be able to treat you in time. We are *here* now, deep inside of you, and don't think for a second, Cohen, we made the decision to come to you lightly, as though we were just hopping across the multiverse looking for innocent, helpless organisms upon which to wreak our own mercurial brand of havoc. No, Cohen -- we chose you because we believed you could help us. And you aren't alone -- we've chosen hundreds of thousands all across your planet, some of whom can't handle us, some of whom are now our allies and, more importantly, our friends. The multiverse is in an uproar, Cohen -- All Things are coming to a head. It is unfortunate for you, perhaps, that humanity must act as interface for the rest of the multiverse's negotiations and struggles, but so it is -- we cannot argue with the multiverse, we can only struggle with the cards we're dealt." She speaks in measured, direct tones, almost enough to placate him, almost enough to persuade him to attempt, at the very least, communication, until Gregory, the enforcer Voice, suddenly says, "Would it help if we manifested inside of Laurel, too?"

And Cohen suddenly SCREAMS inside his head. He vows to be an exception to what they've told him -- he *will* eradicate these Voices. His training with Courtney and Laurel in the metaphysical realms will teach him how to silence these Voices and still retain his sanity, and his life. And Laurel must *never* know of their existence.

"Just because you're a Voice inside my head," says Cohen, "doesn't mean you're telling the truth. And furthermore," he says bitterly,

"whatever it is you did to Gary will *never* work with me. I'm a much more righteous dude than he ever was, you dig?" Cohen's essential self, it seems, is quite a tough guy, and he can hear Gale sigh somewhere in the background, as though she just threw up hands she doesn't have and said, "These fucking kids today, I swear...."

As Laurel is riding home with Scotto after their afternoon coffee and cinnamon rolls, she is thinking to herself about how in movies or television shows, it's often some severe crisis that brings people together, in a much more intense fashion than they ever would have come together otherwise. Luke Skywalker and Han Solo and Princess Leia become tight friends because they wind up destroying the Empire together, risking their lives together, battling the Dark Side of the Force together. The heroes of action adventure movies -- actually, as she thinks about it, it's usually the male hero and the designated love interest -- wind up together because they are risking their lives together on a great adventure of some kind. This is an archetype that perhaps only exists in the movies, but certainly seems attractive. They may not be fighting Bad Guys per se, but they are certainly on an adventure together, and that has its own satisfaction.

Still, someday the adventure ends, theoretically. Indiana Jones grows too old to scour the world for archaeological treasures, Princess Leia winds up a bureaucrat somewhere.... She wonders if there will be days ahead when the adventure is perhaps behind them, or if they will forever be maneuvering for more and more adventure, more and more Melodrama, if someday they will really truly want to settle down or if they will actually dearly miss the days of ritual exploration of the far side of human consciousness for the sake of a mystical organization which wants to transform the world. She wonders why she never saw Princess Leia cry about the destruction of her home planet of Alderaan -- was she just that tough a cookie? I mean, is that what adventure does to you, gives you all the adrenaline rushes you could ever ask for, but eliminates your human compassion?

She broadens the search parameters in her mind, and begins exploring the Melodrama from other perspectives. For example, how do you suppose Princess Leia felt when she discovered Luke was actually her brother? How do you suppose Indiana Jones felt when he discovered that Marion didn't actually die in a fiery explosion? The very nature of the Melodrama doesn't allow them to have a deep human reaction to these events, because even as Luke is telling her he's her brother, he's on his way

to battle Darth Vader to the death (again), and even as Indiana Jones finds out Marion is alive, he's gotta tie her up again and take off to fight the Nazis. Laurel wonders if *she* will be afforded the luxury of deep human reaction to whatever surprises are in store for her, or if she will skate across the surface of the Melodrama and steadily continue down a slippery slope that amounts to losing her humanity in favor of becoming a human archetype, a resonance point for others who may find themselves trapped in similar situations, but a resonance point without a clear cut choice or feeling -- an archetype has no reaction to its existence, for the very definition of archetype implies that its existence is inherent, natural, a state of perpetual static flux.

She hugs Scotto goodbye and climbs out of the car. As Scotto's perky brown Toyota speeds off back to the city, she slowly makes her way up the driveway to the house, goes inside, says hello to Courtney on the couch watching daytime television, hello to Cohen standing at the window. She notices immediately the thin sheen of sweat on his forehead, the signs of strain around his eyes, and she asks,

"How are you feeling?"

and he says,

"The events of last night have left me a little weak, but I believe I'll be okay,"

which is not precisely a lie, but certainly an avoidance of truth, although Laurel believes it is okay for him to mask, since she felt the same way the last time she was overwhelmed by one of the ritual training sessions; it is, after all, your self on the line each evening, and if your self needs a bit of privacy in order to recover, so it goes. I don't need to ask him any potentially damaging questions, he'll talk when he's ready  
(famous last words)  
to talk.

Courtney stir fries for dinner, and as the three of them sit down to their chicken and vegetables, Laurel is tempted to spend the meal quietly probing Cohen for information. Cohen, in fact, has already steeled himself for this occasion, since he knows her well enough to know that she is going to need concrete assurances from him that he is all right. But Courtney, in her usual direct and confounding fashion, decides to change the subject entirely.

"I don't think we should talk about Cohen right now," says Courtney as she calmly munches on a piece of broccoli.

"Oh?" says Laurel, slightly disappointed.

"Cohen just needs a little time to recover," replies Courtney. "I think we'll just give Cohen the night off tonight."

"And what are the two of us going to do in the meantime?" Laurel asks her, confident that the answer will be entirely not to her liking.

"I was thinking," Courtney replies, "of doing a bit of dreamwork."

A heavy silence falls over the table as Laurel absorbs Courtney's suggestion. Courtney continues munching on her vegetables

"What kind of dreamwork did you have in mind?" Laurel asks slowly.

Courtney takes a sip of her water, says, "The Circle is well aware, Laurel, of your unique dreaming abilities. In fact, that was how we found you; we noticed that you and your sister were able to dream together."

"How did you notice that?" Laurel asks, her cheeks suddenly red hot.

"Come now, Laurel," says Courtney. "We're a fairly metaphysical group, aren't we? You think it wasn't apparent to us that the two of you were doing things we could only, well, dream about?"

"We aren't able to do that anymore, obviously," snaps Laurel.

"We're aware of that," replies Courtney.

"Then what kind of dreamwork did you have in mind?"

"It's just a suggestion, Laurel," says Courtney. "If it's really that touchy a subject with you, I have no problems dropping it."

Pause.

"Laurel, I realize this may be a difficult matter for you. I'm sure the dreaming you do is inherently tied to your memories of your sister, and I'm sure that those are memories you'd rather leave alone. But you can't deny that the dreaming you do is a part of you -- not the everyday, random dreaming you've allowed yourself to revert to since your sister's disappearance, but the intense, purposeful, metaphysical dreaming you used to do when she was with you. Just because she's gone doesn't mean you shouldn't access those realms and explore them. The Dreamtime is a part of you still, and there's no sense avoiding it."

Long pause. Courtney munches vegetables, all the while keeping her gaze locked on Laurel's. Cohen stares on in humble awe as the two of them literally gaze right into each other; somehow, they seem to be communicating volumes without saying a damn thing.

Finally, Laurel says, "I have a fairy tale castle in my dreams."

"A castle?" says Courtney.

"Uh huh," nods Laurel. "And there are *people* there. They're probably waiting for me. It's been so long. I'm afraid that perhaps they will not remember me. Or perhaps they'll be angry that I've been gone so long."

"No room for fear, sweetheart," Courtney replies. "It's *your* dream, isn't it? And if they *are* your friends, they *must* forgive you, mustn't they? That's part of the definition of friend."

Laurel's eyes drop. The sadness which rolls off of her is almost palpable.

"You've let your sister vanish without a trace," says Courtney, "and you watched that fact destroy your mother and father, but you won't let it destroy you, will you? But all the while, it gnaws at you on the inside, and you've even sacrificed your greatest gift, the dreaming, for your sister's sake. Laurel -- you can't survive a cancer like that. You *must* come to terms with yourself, and you must come to terms with this loss. It is a part of this world, dear, a deep, deep part of this world."

"I know," mumbles Laurel, "I know, but I just...."

She looks up, turns to Cohen, says, "I can't talk to my father anymore." Pause. "I don't know what my mother's thinking anymore." Pause. "I will never know what happened to my sister." Pause. She turns back to Courtney. "But you're right: at the very least, my dreams are still mine, and I deserve them." Pause. "Tonight, we do dreamwork."

Courtney smiles, says, "Excellent."

"I'm not very sleepy yet," says Laurel.

"Don't fret," Courtney replies. "We've got a *lot* of dancing to do before it's time to sleep."