

## Chapter Sixteen

"Good morning," says Ramon, as he watches me slowly rouse myself. I've got a smile on my face; my whole self feels better now, my head feels so much clearer. "I've got some soup for you, if you're interested." He pulls up a chair next to me and hands me a wooden bowl, filled with what looks like a vegetable stew of some kind.

"Thank you so much," I say.

He places a tray next to me with a hunk of bread and some water. Also on the tray are some assorted essentials that I naturally hadn't thought to bring: a toothbrush, a washcloth, a comb.

"We've got some clothes here for you, too," he says. "Dr. X went shopping for you a while ago."

"Where does he go?" I ask.

"Oh, here and there. There are villages and cities all over South America that have attracted his attention."

"Aren't they a little nervous about his space ship sailing into town?"

"It has wheels that emerge so that he can drive it like a regular vehicle. It looks like a VW bus."

I taste the soup: it's extraordinary. And I seem to be extraordinarily hungry, too.

"How long was I asleep?" I ask in between mouthfuls.

"A good fourteen hours," he replies. "You missed our evening thunderstorm last night. You should have plenty of opportunities to see others, however." He wanders back over to the stove and stirs the pot. "Are you interested in a little walk around the jungle when you're feeling better?"

"This is really the Amazon jungle?" I ask.

"Indeed," he replies. "There is much mystery here." Pause. "There's also dirt, grime, and insects. On the whole, it's as interesting as you make it."

"Yeah, maybe I do want to look around," I reply. "Do you think I'm strong enough to walk?"

"We shall see. One of the first things we need to do, young one, is get you on a regimen of regular exercise. Get your body back into suitable condition. You are in an enviable position, healthwise: there is no junk food for miles." He smiles broadly and nibbles on a carrot.

"You grow carrots in the jungle?"

"Of course not," he replies. "That's why they invented supermarkets."

"How long do you expect me to stay here 'exercising'?"

"I'd suggest you stay a month or two, maybe more. Give yourself plenty of time to relax before you plunge back into the rest of your life. You have a very difficult journey ahead of you."

"I know. I'm going to have a very hard time explaining all this to my family."

"Indeed," Ramon says. "Your family is something else we will need to address during your stay here."

Pause. "Oh?" I say.

"Things have changed, needless to say."

"Which things?"

"Eat your soup, before it gets cold."

"I can heat it up again. Which things have changed?"

He pours himself his own bowl of soup and says, "After we eat, we can have a question and answer session. I will try to give you as much information as I can. Everything I know I will tell you. After we eat." He returns to his chair and sits down next to me.

"Where's Dr. X?" I ask.

"I've sent him out collecting ingredients for more potions. He's got a very good eye for that sort of thing."

"You make potions, huh?"

"People travel miles to sample them." Pause. "Must be all the artificial flavorings I use."

"How did you know which potion to give me? How did you know what I'd been poisoned with?"

"I didn't 'know.' I took a guess."

"You took a guess? I came in here dying, and you just... you just took a guess?"

He looks me in the eye, says, "It was certainly an *educated* guess, young one."

I finish my soup and place the bowl on the floor. I feel ready to get off this cot and go *do* something.

"Yes, I think we will get your body in shape," says Ramon, "and also, perhaps we will see what has happened to your mind."

"And how will we do that?"

Ramon smiles broadly. "I have potions for every occasion."

Pacing the hut restlessly, waiting for Ramon to finish his soup. I don't wanna go outside. It's intimidating, all the everything out there, all the biomass.... In the Dreamtime, such thriving, teeming life has a very attractive quality, but here it just seems ominous and insidious. There must be trillions of bugs and lizards and snakes and diseases and poisonous berries and rash-producing leaves out there, just waiting for some defenseless human to wander through. And of course, Dr. X is out there *collecting* biomass for humans to *ingest*. I realize it's a pharmaceutical wonderland out there, but you have to wonder about all the guinea pigs who tried the wrong prototype potion and watched their skins melt.

At last, Ramon takes his last spoonful, collects the dishes, and puts them in a small box by the stove. Later, he will take them outside and wash them with his garden hose, I imagine. I head back to the cot and sit down on the edge, calmly waiting for him to finish the cleaning.

"You're very anxious," he says.

"Yeah, well, some part of me is in total free fall right now," I reply, "waiting for the answers to about a dozen questions."

"Well," he says, pouring himself a cup of tea, "let's suppose for a moment that I'm able to supply all the answers to all your questions." Pause. "Then what?"

"I suppose that depends on what the answers are."

"Hmm. Perhaps. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please."

He pours me a cup, brings it to me, sits next to me, all in all I get the general impression he wants to dazzle me with his shamanic wisdom, but the safari hat is killing the image.

"Can I just ask the questions and see what happens?" I say. "I mean, sure, I might encounter something I don't particularly want to hear, but... if it's the truth about my situation, then I think I'd be better off knowing than not knowing."

"Very well, then," replies Ramon. "Let's begin."

"What's happened to my family since I've been gone?"

Ramon seems mildly surprised by the question. He starts to answer, but I quickly interrupt:

"Is there something wrong with that question?"

"I expected," he replies directly, "you would be most interested in the reasons behind your kidnapping."

"Oh." Pause. "I'm interested in my family, too."

"There are three stories to tell within your immediate family. They are not as pleasant as you might have hoped."

Sudden choking sensation in my throat, I reach out-- "Wait."

He takes my hand, for some strange reason I'm breathing very heavily, "Would you rather hear a different story, Melody?"

I shake my head. I just need time to prepare for whatever this is. What the fuck is happening to me?

Almost whispering, he says, "You've spent nearly a year, Melody, hiding yourself from your emotions in order to survive."

"Shut up--"

"Strong, strong feelings about what was happening to you..."

"Shut up!"

"And they are ready to be *released*, Melody. The *truth* will release them."

Fighting back: "You're starting to remind me of Yoda, Ramon, and I don't think the comparison is very flattering."

Calmly, ignoring my building rage: "I'll tell you about your family, Melody. Feel free to react however you choose--"

I hurl my cup of tea across the hut, watch it explode against the metal stove. Ramon watches it fly with a suddenly perturbed look on his face. I say, "It's good to know I've got choices."

We sit in silence for a few minutes. This gives me time to realize I'm being a bit nasty to the old man. I suppose that's what he intended me to realize. Fair enough.

"I'm sorry I broke your cup," I tell him. "I'll get you another one."

"Would you like to hear about your family now?" he asks soberly.

I nod.

"Very well. Your family has splintered. Shortly after you were kidnapped, your mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. She has been in an institution since then, and is incapable of rational communication. Your father took an extended leave of absence from his job, and has not left his house for extended periods in some time. It's very probable that he is developing an addiction to alcohol. As for your sister, this is perhaps the most disturbing news. We believe Laurel has willingly entered the same game into which you were coerced when you were kidnapped. It's a game with many players, and we have no idea who Laurel is with now, only that they are able to obscure our attempts to observe them from a distance, and that they are sophisticated enough to

pose a certain danger to your sister. However, there are always dangers in this world."

I don't want to say anything now. Not to him, or to you....

"Should I continue, Melody?" I nod blankly. He says, "You were kidnapped by a corporation known as InfiniTek. On the surface, this company is a large technological empire. Inside, it's a teeming mass of competing interests and plots and schemes, only some of which I am a party to. I have no way of knowing why you were kidnapped, although I suspect your dreaming plays a part in it."

"You know about my dreaming?" I whisper, holding in this and that expression, avoiding this or that slow trickle of tears, you can't stop me, just shut up....

"You haven't felt me there with you?" he says with a smile. "I've been sending you smiles there since you were twelve, but of course, I'm a very subtle individual, so you must not have noticed. I'm also quite a gardener. I noticed the bushes in your new garden needed pruning, for example...."

A small laugh escapes me. I'm squeezing his hand tightly, this is so shattering, who is happening to me? can't do this or that no more....

"So. They know you are a unique individual in that respect. And they must believe they can harness your abilities in some fashion. They must believe they can use them to help fulfill whatever it is their plans entail."

"This sounds so ludicrous... this sounds like a comic book."

He looks me directly in the eyes and says, "What is happening to you, Melody, is unprecedented in the history of the human race."

Shut your mouth, boy, you don't tell somebody something like that with a straight face unless you're living in a comic book, or a weird science fiction novel, ha ha.

Big, deep smile, though, and he says, "Luckily, you have some very interesting friends, too. Like me, for example! And a super hero named Dr. X."

"What in the world is going on?" escapes me, throw my hands up, leap up off the cot, I can't sit still any longer. "I haven't escaped anything. They will *never* stop torturing me, will they? This is so outrageous. This is so outlandish. I don't feel human anymore, all of this has stripped me of anything I recognize and left me with this person I know nothing about. How am I supposed to do this? I don't know my own body, I don't understand what's happening in my head, even my dreams are outrageous

and beyond belief, but it's *me*, it's all happening to *me*, I can't do a thing about it, can't escape it, can't hide, can't scream, I can't have any revenge, I can't see my family together again, I can't go home because I haven't got one anymore, I don't know you and I don't know how you know what you know, I haven't got any money or any belongings and I've got nowhere to go, this guy who rescued me flies a *space ship*, and there's this, this talking *computer* who turns out to be the only person I trust anymore, and I miss my sister, and every time I close my eyes I get these *flashes* of things I can't stand to look at, I get these waves of feelings that want to be fear and revulsion and turn out to be pleasure, *and you tell me I've got friends?* So what? Big deal! I miss my sister. I miss what used to be important to me. I miss theatre, I miss doing little plays for kids, and I miss sitting in my treehouse, and I miss eating my mother's cooking. Tell me why they poisoned me, why don't you! Tell me why they think I'm such a big deal, when I've never left Iowa for more than a week at a time! Why does all this seem like it isn't real, like it couldn't be happening in this world?" Staring straight out of the page: "And why does it seem like I'm being *watched* all the time?"

The door to the hut swings open, and there stands Dr. X, his immaculate white suit still spotless after a day in the jungle, swinging a bag full of biomass, and he says, "Melody, could you keep it down? You're disturbing the neighbors."

"You again," I spit angrily. "Thank god *you're* back. Now at least we'll be safe if Lex Luthor decides to attack us."

"Temper temper," he says, bemused.

"It's called *transference*, for your information. This is where all the anger I've got built up in me gets directed at you, simply because you're in my way and I think you're an ass."

"I've just told Melody about her family," says Ramon.

"Oh," says Dr. X, suddenly chagrined.

"Yeah, and now I'm devolving into a cry baby. So what?"

Dr. X wipes the dirt off his hands onto a towel, says, "Did he tell you about InfiniTek as well?"

"He told me they kidnapped me."

He turns to Ramon, asks, "Were you going to tell her anything else about InfiniTek?"

"I don't know if I *believe* the rest of it," replies Ramon.

"There's more?" I shout, incredulous, my lungs tight from screaming, and also from deliberately not crying when I should.

"Let me tell you a little story, Melody," says Dr. X. Surprisingly, he does not sound patronizing in the least, which captures my attention. "I think it will help you take your mind off InfiniTek for a while, or at least, put that in proper perspective. The Australian aborigines believe that the world was created in what they too call the Dreamtime. At the dawn of the Earth, the Ancestors moved through the Dreamtime, pouring forth among them the creation of the world. One particular cave painting, in fact, very ancient, shows two women united in their sharing of the Dreamtime -- I always called them the Sisters of the Dreamtime -- and the first time I saw it, it sent chills down my spine, Melody. Two sisters, literally sharing their dreams... seems like such a beautiful thing to me. I've spent my entire life training to do the things I want to do, I've worked incredibly hard, put myself through enormous trials and tribulations, and have faced demons like you wouldn't believe. And you know what? I've been *alone* all this time. Meanwhile, you've been given such an extraordinary *gift*, such a precious gift, such an intimate way to communicate with someone you love... and it's something you do effortlessly. Would you sacrifice this gift to be rid of everything else that's happened?"

"More," is all I can say.

"The Dreamtime," he continues, "is more than just dreaming, the kind of dreaming most of us do at night. It's not exactly 'time' either, so much as a state of being. It's an entire state of being that subsumes the world, fills it with creative joy and wonder. Imagine if the place you go to in your dreams was a place you could go to in real life. Think about how magical that would seem. And the aborigines believe that someday, the world will *return* to the Dreamtime, just as it began in the Dreamtime. They are patiently waiting, hoping civilization doesn't destroy the last vestiges of their society before it happens. Someday, they believe, the Dreamtime will return, and those with an understanding will celebrate with all their hearts." Pause. "You, meanwhile, experience the Dreamtime every single night."

My heart just wants to burst, there's so much inside of me, and still I have so much, wiping my eyes but the tears can't stop now that they've started.

"I didn't ask for this," I tell him slowly, carefully, choosing my words through the blur, "and it feels as though this hundred ton weight has been dropped onto me and I'm supposed to know exactly how to respond, exactly what to do. I'm supposed to know how to move underneath all this weight, and live a normal life."

"No one said your life was going to be normal," says Dr. X.

"Even if that's what I want?"

"As the man says, you can't always get what you want."

"And how do you learn to live a weird and unnatural life?"

Dr. X smiles softly and says, "You practice."

"It's hard to be a Jedi, isn't it," chuckles Ramon.

"I get the feeling," I say, "that when I finally *do* figure all this out, things are going to get even weirder, huh..."

"We can only hope," replies Dr. X with a laugh.

"Let me tell you a bit about myself, Melody," says Ramon, that night before sleep, "for I don't believe I've taken the time to properly introduce myself. I've called myself an *ayahuascero*. I am what you would call a 'shaman' to various people in this area. I'm not a tribal shaman; the tribes I once knew have long since abandoned me. Rather, I have decided to... 'specialize,' if you will, in the peculiar sicknesses of the Western mind. I believe that if someone could only get around to addressing *that* problem, this world might have a chance, heh heh." Pause. "I want to share with you a suggestion, Melody. I've told you that I'm a healer. I believe the sickness *you* have has its roots at a very deep level, was implanted there in a way that we cannot yet discern." Pause. "I would like to examine that level up close."

"How," I reply, "would you do that?"

Ramon smiles. "I have a potion I would like to share with you. You and I, we will both take this potion. And while under the potion's influence, we will attempt to examine this sickness up close, and perhaps heal you entirely of its influence. Does that sound like something you'd be interested in?"

"It sounds almost mystical, the way you talk about it."

"It is, perhaps. Isn't healing a magical event? Medicine itself, even something as simple as aspirin, is a blessing!"

I look past Ramon to Dr. X, who has been observing quietly from across the room.

"I think," he says, in response to my gaze, "you can trust Ramon."

Back to Ramon, examining his face deeply, every line and wrinkle, every glimmer and shake. Yes, Dr. X is right: I *can* trust Ramon. He may not be able to heal me, but he will certainly use every power at his disposal to try.

"What is this potion?" I ask.

"Ayahuasca," says Ramon.

"Barks and fungus?"

"A little of this, a little of that," he says, smiling. "All natural, one hundred percent free of preservatives and additives and artificial flavors."

Dr. X chuckles. "Artificial flavors, now that might be an idea...."

"Quiet, you," says Ramon.

"When can we start?"

"Tomorrow. Get a good night's sleep. It may be a very exhausting process. We will be running your sickness out of your body entirely, if we're able; that will require a certain stamina." He stands up. "And think, tonight, as you go to sleep, of what you would like to accomplish tomorrow. Think of what it would mean to be free of what has captured you." Pause. "I will think of such things as well."

I rest my head on my pillow and stare at the ceiling for a while as Dr. X and Ramon clean up various pots and pans, prepare their sleeping mats. Somehow, Ramon has managed to instill a very reverent attitude in me towards this "healing," using very few words and giving me almost no indication he was doing so. Tomorrow is bound to be another day on the journey, that much is certain.

"I know what they've done to me, Ramon," I say aloud. "I don't know that they intended it; I guess there's no way to know that. But. I've got a strange kind of strength now that I didn't have before. They activated in me some very deep survival programs. And... they really, truly gave me a taste of what hell must be like, I know that much. I think it was self-awareness, really: in order to survive the hell they were putting me through, I had to be aware of every last element of my own psyche, so that I could somehow -- without really thinking about it -- redirect the onslaught, defuse it, live through it without sustaining major injury, you know? I think maybe they intended to give me a view of the world as some kind of giant evil, and I think maybe they intended me to find a way to *enjoy* that evil, to want to participate in it, just like, presumably, they are. Maybe you're right: maybe they want access to the Dreamtime and they believed they could manipulate me. But I think it backfired. I think instead, I developed a deep resistance to the notion of evil. Yes: I think part of my survival programs involved an... an *ethical* element that I was not previously aware of. I mean, yes, I knew right from wrong, but this... this is something much more profound. I think they achieved exactly the opposite effect from what they intended: I think if anything, they've made me entirely wary of the creeping evil that I can feel charging over the planet

now, and I think they've inspired me to *do* something now. In my dreams, perhaps! I think they never intended to release me, certainly, and I think whatever they were doing failed miserably. I've got more control over myself and my desires and my emotions than I ever had before, and I have a greater sense of honesty about myself than I ever had, and I have some sort of fundamental awareness of what my place is in the universe now. I didn't have that before. I didn't have much of anything before, except Laurel. I miss Laurel dearly, but I'm alive now, for better or for worse, without her. I think InfiniTek has carved a very definite enemy for itself, and I think InfiniTek is going to be in a fair amount of trouble once I get my bearings in the midst of all this."

Ramon is silent, but his gaze is worth a multitude of words. Far off inside of him there's a pain that hasn't healed. The pain of a tribe that has abandoned him, perhaps? We are all tied together in this journey, and my tears are as much his as they are mine.

"Goodnight, Ramon," I say as I close my eyes.

"Goodnight, Melody," he replies.