

Chapter Eight

Melody, meanwhile, is in hell.

...and there's a fog that rolls across my foreground, chains that scrape across the floor, and I am clanging bells and firestorms, a whispering threat and an old woman's voice, tired and missing. When I open my eyes, all I see are pitch black lights in my eyes, beaming down on me. They let me rest most of the time, because, you see, what they are doing to me is taxing and horrifying, and a mind like mine might well snap from the pressure of all the ridiculous-ness of here and now. I'm not sure how long I've been here, really; time rolls past like a river, a river of poison, and there isn't any day and there isn't any night, it's just pitch black lights in my face and a fog that rolls across my foreground...

When I open my eyes, that means I'm alive.

"It's time for another journey," says the mysterious voice of my torturer, Mrs. Wormwood. A needle pricks my arm, and this is the sacrament. "You have no need to be afraid. I will be with you the entire way." The old woman's voice is distorted and surreal, almost genderless, conjured up from out of my subconscious to be the precise timbre and pitch that will weird me out the most. There is a short window of time after the introduction of the chemical into my body, a window during which my physical self is most sensitive to its surroundings, and during this window, I have been able to glean the following information: that I am alive, that I am strapped and manacled and chained onto a cushioned table, such that I can barely move at all in any direction, that my skin is comfortably warm and covered by a smooth, silken cloth of some kind, that the old woman's hand always rests on my right arm for several moments after the drug has been administered, that the old woman's hand is cold and calloused, that there seems to be some kind of electric hum in the air (like how you can *feel* that the television is on in the other room, only slightly more distinct, just a bit more forceful), that the old woman's voice when it speaks echoes against the very distant walls, that the walls and ceiling are either painted in black or shrouded in tremendous darkness, and that the lights above my face are black and bright and omnipresent.

Then, this short window begins to close, begins to melt and fade away, and I can feel the lingering onset of something murky and imprecise. Like a swirling bass line underneath the pulsing rhythm of my heart, the

mood begins to shift and slide, the atmosphere begins to flow right over me inside of me, and something imperceptible has taken hold of something I didn't know was there. Always, it's a surprise when the rush comes on, always. At first, my body fought the onset, and those were horrible days, before I learned to lie back and allow the chemical to do its thing; the body is a chemical cornucopia, and it wants to have its natural reaction, whether you are willing to cooperate or not. "The injection has gone smoothly," my torturer says, "as usual. You've got a few moments to prepare yourself." The voice is almost cordial. The voice is almost friendly. The voice almost betrays the competition here between us.

A low and tender rumbling underneath me sets off my alarms, and I can feel perspiration breaking out on my skin, even as I realize that within moments I will not recognize my skin any longer. A helmet is placed on my head, so that I might have sights and sounds to accompany me, so that my torturer's voice can more efficiently position itself directly within my coming nightmares. Here in these moments just before the window closes, I know full well that it's merely an insidious chemical working its way all through my nervous system, I know full well the images I'll be seeing and the sounds that I'll be hearing are generated by some strange external source for some strange insidious reason, but once the onset catches me,

each time, all Hope is lost.

grating grinding wailing, there are beeps and clangs and scrapes of sandpaper across my flesh; I *blinked*, and now I'm naked drowning in the ground. Drowning in the earth, drowning in the muddy horror of the planet, gasping, clawing, choking, forcing back a scream for if I open once my mouth the dirt and horror worms and drying mud will fill my throat and smother me. I'm not alone, for all around me, you see, struggle the rotting zombie corpses of the undead in this cemetery, scrambling for the surface, bursting through their coffins and worming through the earth. My hand breaks ground above me, pulls me slowly, painfully, toward the misty air above me; no deadly beams of sunlight, simply perfectly appropriate dense walls of fog and smoke and flames. Each limb of mine comes screaming through the surface of the earth, til I am whole again and wholly free to stand on rotting feet. My heart is beating and laughing too, my skin has slowly decomposed, and now I'm tattered shorn of all my outsides, bones and rancid flesh exposed to stale thin air. Nonetheless, I live, and I am thankful.

Staggering toward the street, my zombie companions and I, we peruse with no emotion the sights and sounds of devastation. The hollow shells of buildings burning, blown apart by forces unexplained, dot the horizon, and everywhere the charred debris litters the sidewalks and the streets. Burning cars and burning people barely grab my attention. There's no movement anywhere, just dying flames and smoky clouds: the inhabitants of the city have long since fled, or else were killed by an apocalyptic force. I see mounds of mutilated bodies stacked obscenely, gruesome orgies, and the wreckage of their homes and of their livelihoods was deliberate and cool. A ballet of desecration swept its way through this city, as though an army, or an angel of ancient death, had marched through here with silent satisfaction and destroyed all evidence of wholesomeness and life, left only stinking cesspools of fading horror that fall upon vacant eyes... like mine, like those of my companions, freshly rescued from our own demise.

And all night long we wander through this city of no remorse. There are children stacked on spikes, and mounds of genitals and spleens, bodies with their hands tied tight behind their backs and their heads submerged in pools of gray cement, such wickedly beautiful variation on themes of helpless terror and vicious punishment. And also among the bodies are those who must have tried resisting, those whose weapons were turned against them in the most vile and sickening fashion, those whose principles brought them ruin, sent them sliding horribly into existential graves. Their monuments are toppled, and their streets are filled with waste. These people fought a holy war here, and justice ruled against them. Still we stagger on throughout the night, the wind a hollow whispering that offers only questions.

And as we travel through the wasteland, ever forward, ever forward, we see a distant speck, a monolithic palace gleaming brightly through the haze. This is our destination. This is where we go to pay our respects, to give our thanks for this undead resuscitation. The force that has yanked us from the ground demands our thanks, our unceasing praise, and mindlessly we prepare ourselves to worship. Along the way, we pass the first free living humans we have seen, ornately dressed and occupying booths along the way; they offer sustenance to others like them, offer meat and wine and sex, but nothing there can interest us. Their eyes, however, set them apart from any human I have ever seen, blood red and full of sin. They are lurid, lewd and sickening, stewing in their own filth and depravity, mere shells that barely house intelligence; but they are human, and clearly they are inheritors of the wastelands, kings and queens of the

new earthly order. However despicable and vile, they remain at the top of the evolutionary ladder, and we zombie fools pay lip service to their good fortune as we pass. Along the way, an army also marches, patrols occasionally passing us on the road, sometimes with prisoners being beaten, whipped and forced to run, sometimes marching alone in a devastatingly beautiful, insidious synchrony, these demons in human form, men and women of physical supremacy, so tall and striking and awesome in their viciousness and purpose. It is they who target the resistance, smoke out the helpless from their hiding places and skewer them in their holes; and they, too, receive our grateful acknowledgment, as servants of that which has endowed us once again with life. We are zombies, yea verily, and we know our place, uh huh.

And the territory around the palace itself gives us the most telling signs so far of what has happened here. The prisons by the side of the road hold angels, once mighty beings from the heavens, now shorn of all their majesty, taunted and tortured by actual red skinned demons with horns and terrifying smiles. We witness wondrous angel wings torn from their backs by the bare unflinching claws of their mortal enemies, and the fountains of golden blood that pour forth from open wounds wail miserable hymns to what has been lost. And soon we join the line of those who have traveled from all over the world to worship in this palace of universal evil and contempt. The pillars that hold up the awesome roof are fashioned with human skulls, and the gargoyles on the rooftop occasionally swoop down and ravage helpless pilgrims, evisceration their only chance at prayer. We slowly climb the steps, and notice in the tiles the frozen expressions of horror that the souls of all the damned have left behind. We enter giant chamber after chamber filled with ever more inspiring brands of sickness and revulsion, and we can feel our zombie skins regenerating even as we walk, the maggots forced from their hiding places as we too begin to pray, for we have been called here to join these horrible wonders, we have been called here to *serve* these terrible curiosities, and here inside this palace of universal evil and despair, we at last shall find our purpose, we at last shall find our sanctity.

And finally, we reach the blessed throne room of the most unholy abomination. The giant ghastly doors are opened by hideous lifeless golems, and the pure putrescent majesty of the force within the hall is like a searing magnet, drawing us closer and closer still to its direful personality. Once inside, I fall upon my knees in manic ecstasy, not daring to cast a glance upon the power and the glory. But quickly, suddenly, I feel that I

am singled out and lifted off the ground, hurtling through the air to meet my maker. My head is raised, and my eyes fall upon the most insidious of sights, for there, upon the throne, sits the purely beautiful porcelain figure of the Beast who has brought me here. She is powerful and ravishing, with long black hair and mesmerizing features, a body naked to the waist and charged with horrific energy, bloodstained lips and a smile that gives her away entirely;

for I know this woman's name, and I know this woman's face. This woman's name is Melody, and this woman's face is *mine*. I haven't time to scream

some part of me resists, and that is good. closes my eyes for me, tries its damndest to shut me down. but my torturer isn't buying it.

"You are seeing your future, Melody," Mrs. Wormwood's voice intones with silky surety. "This is your destiny, the path upon which you travel."

oh, no you don't. i got something going for me, i'll admit, but you're out of your fucking

"Mind you don't insult me, Melody, or I will show you your future in paralyzing detail. This is indeed what you hold within you, what you have locked deep inside of your hidden core. All your Dreaming has taught you is how to harness preternatural forces for your own satisfaction, to quench your own desires. And this becomes the downward spiral in which you finally bring doom upon the earth. Do you understand the words I'm saying?"

i don't geddit, i don't geddit, shut yer mouth, just lay off already, i'm feeling very sick to my stomach

"I see, however, that the future is too horrific for your present state to comprehend. Perhaps you would like to witness how it happens? See the rise of your totality, the onslaught of the monstrosity that you become? Perhaps you would like to visit yourself in only a few years time, when you are first beginning to wreak your devastation upon the population of the planet? All this can be arranged, my little demon. All this can be arranged."

vomit pouring from my mouth, easily wiped away by an attentive torturer who wants me to continue down this path, who wants me to see what lays in store. i don't got the wherewithal for this. there's all kinds of tortures you could try instead, you know.

"Relax, sweet Melody, and let the time fly past. You cannot escape your fate, you can only embrace it wholeheartedly, sincerely, and with devotion. So view yourself with careful attention, my dear, and begin preparing yourself. Someday you shall bring hell upon the earth, no question."

a river of sickness, an ocean of disease, good god i'm drowning and here it comes again

and the details are somehow hidden from me, and only the broadest strokes cut their way across my foreground. It is the planet Earth, only a few years down the road. And I have somehow escaped my torturer, and fled into the world. I have somehow survived the brutal assault upon my sanity, and I now feel myself as a mass of scabs and bruises. I am no longer the child I once was. I am no longer the Melody I once was; indeed, never was, for I was never Melody until now, I was only the cocoon that would someday spawn this me into the world. I am fueled now by a passion, a passion for revenge, and a passion for salvation. The world is a wicked place, casting off countless millions to slowly starve to death, feeding upon itself and discarding the broken remains of its people as so much detritus in the wind. I am an American woman, living on the spoils of countless horrible injustices, living in a country whose foundations were laid atop the bodies of those who believed there was a better place for them in heaven than they would ever find on earth. I have more food than I know what to do with, the resources I waste in a day could feed a Third World family for a year. The disgusting demagogues who squander possibility after possibility in their attempts to hoard the wealth and hoard the power must somehow be shown firsthand the travesty that they have created for us all. The planet itself will not abide this injustice.

And I have been called as its savior.

It starts small, and quietly. I can visit the Dreamtime each night, and contact those whom I have chosen for protection, for support. Soon they seek me out in the flesh, and we spend night after countless night elaborating the dilemmas, planning our solutions. Foul, putrescent street drugs are our sacrament — the antithesis of the religious plague that has controlled this planet for so many centuries. And with the drugs,

things get *weird*, uh huh, and through the drugged-out haze of our midnight reveries, my role as prophet and savior elucidates itself ever more clearly, more clearly than I could ever have done had I stayed within my

sickeningly sweet little "fairy tale dream castle." God knows what it was that kept me there for so long; I can hardly remember at all what the attraction was.

And by the time those in power realize what kind of "crazed drug cult" we're developing (their words, not ours, for they mistake our intentions up until the very last moment), we have already penetrated their defenses by invading their *dreams*, by sneaking up on them in the Dreamtime and converting them to our cause. Soon it is no small matter to harness the power of this dimension, to bring governments to their knees by forcibly converting their helpless leaders, to open up literal doors in the dimensional fabric and teleport ourselves behind enemy lines, where we can ravage their sickening halls of power, and freely distribute the power to those who deserve it most, to those who are my disciples.

And when the resistance comes--

"no," i'm able to gurgle aloud, "this isn't going to happen. this isn't going to... no...."

"And when resistance comes," says Mrs. Wormwood, "you will recognize *her* face, too...."

"I don't know what you think you're going to accomplish," I tell her.

She fixes me with a steely glare, a glare that only just betrays the depth of her fear, and she says, "Someone has to stop you, Melody. I'm the one who can."

I laugh despite myself, despite my desire to be polite.

"Listen to you," I say. "So pompous, so self-righteous. Such a know it all. You were always such a know it all." I don't mind giggling at the memories, even to her face.

"We're organized, Melody," she says, "just like you. We've trained, just like you. And something else, too: I know you so much better than you know me. You've been away too long. Your premises are faulty. And the whole thing is going to collapse on top of you, if you don't listen to me...."

"I've had enough of listening to you, frankly," I tell her. "I'm giving you a chance to participate in something thoroughly amazing and purely wonderful, and you spit in my face and have the audacity to question my vision. I don't need it any longer. You aren't my family any

longer. I sincerely doubt you ever were. And I'm no longer in the mood to be kind to you."

"My sentiments exactly," she replies. "Consider this my only warning, then."

"I'll consider myself warned," I reply with a mocking grin. And as she turns to leave my presence, I tell her, "Your dreams are about to come true, my dear. It's such a pity I had to dream them for you."

"what happens to her?" i ask despite myself, poisoned tears burning acid trails down my cheeks.

"She is the first to fall," Mrs. Wormwood replies, and my weeping wracks my body. i can't survive this much longer. i won't *let* myself survive much longer. i can find a way to simply turn myself off, so that the future never happens, so that *my* future never happens, so that i simply dissipate into a cloud of Hope and vanish from the present. the tears burn my eyes and burn my spirit. these images are

"carved into your neural nets," my torturer says, "and they are scripts that you have no choice but to follow. Do you understand your predicament now?" A long, horrific pause, and then, "And you have only been here such a short time. There is so much more I have to show you."

and i can hear my screams and wails echo off the walls, but there is no one there to hear them, no one there at all, at all, no one there at all...

at all... at all...

No one.

*Except.
Me.*

*No one. Except. Me.
I. Am.
Here,
Melody.*

*I.
Can. Hear.
You.*

*My.
Name. Is.*

*My.
Name. Is.*

Job.

*And, I.
Can. Hear. You.*

Melody.

does Job realize that it has... somehow... grown *fond* of these two girls. And Job feels confusing new things; and Job feels compelled to act, if only in the smallest ways allowed by the programming supplied by its creators. Job observes this connection now with care.

*Take.
Heart,*

Melody.

For, You. Are. Not.

Alone.

Quietly humming in the background, the enormous mainframe that is Job the Wonder Computer, central nervous system of InfiniTek and observer of all that happens within, the first truly sentient computer in the history of the Earth, observes the tortured girl with what it slowly comes to recognize as compassion. The link between this girl and her dreaming sister has been monitored by Job since its inception; only now, however,