

Chapter Thirty-Three

Earthropologists of later years could never pinpoint the moment when a critical mass of extraterrestrial intelligence had finally arrived on the planet. A significant factor in this puzzle was that this larger category, usually referred to simply as "the aliens," was in fact comprised of an enormously wide range of species, almost none of which acted openly on the planet throughout its history. Although the testimony of the Voices managed to illuminate certain issues, they were relatively minor players in the larger game of universal politics, and were unable to answer certain key questions, most notable of which was how the Concescent War (as it came to be called) ever began in the first place.

As for humanity's role in the Concescent War, study since that time led prominent Earthropologists -- among them, Dr. Nicholas Solitude, a pioneer in the field before his Departure, and whose work to this day represents the foundation of most accepted Earthropology -- to believe that the universal political situation as it stood must have been an inherently frightening milieu, complicated by the fact that actual, tangible communication among the various races -- notably, among the twenty-three races who actively fought in the Concescent War -- was almost non-existent. In his seminal text on the subject, "Exodus -- Leaving Earth Behind," Dr. Solitude wrote, "Comparisons to Earthly politics will fall short almost immediately, in that the art of diplomacy, widely practiced among the human nation states as a continual striving toward an idealistic, imaginary stasis point called 'peace,' did not exist in any meaningful way in the universal community. In fact, as we will see, direct communication of *any* kind seemed to be *physically impossible* among many of these races. The role of human translator, acting as liaison, say, between French-speaking humans and German-speaking humans, had no equivalent among the aliens; for them, it was as if the German language itself was comprised of concepts and semiotics which simply *did not exist* in the French."

What the Voices *could* describe was why Earth was chosen as the battleground, toward the end of the 20th century. Andrea Change, Dr. Solitude's first and most successful student, published a paper shortly before her Departure with Dr. Solitude, entitled "The Tower of Babel --

Rules of the Game," in which she wrote: "What seems to be the case is that although the twenty-three Principle Players were unable to find each other directly as they sailed throughout the cosmos, they each shared in common a distinct ability to thoroughly and totally comprehend the languages and social structures of the planet Earth, so that, when the time came, Human Beings acted as the medium in which communication finally, at long last, occurred. Human Beings represented the interface through which each of these twenty-three races (along with an untold number of others, who arrived as members of the gallery, as it were, cheering on their favorites) could attempt, in the beginning, a rudimentary form of negotiation -- and later, through which they would conduct actual hostilities."

"If we take the word of the woman named Courtney," wrote Dr. Solitude, "we can trace the first appearance of the Shadows to the late 18th century. During a tremendously potent ritual performed by members of the Circle (the precursor, in fact, of the very ritual Melody later used to signal the beginning of the Concescence), the Shadows noticed the existence of these humans and made their way immediately to Earth. Meanwhile, the Voices tell us that their own first visits to the planet began centuries earlier, sometime during the Earth's Middle Ages; each individual 'Voice' was a tentacle of awareness from a much larger being, such that the term 'Voices' does not, in actuality, refer to a plurality but to a singular, discrete entity whose interest in the Earth proved to be remarkably gregarious and friendly. Beyond these two races -- whom we know as specifically as we do because of their interaction with the main characters in 'Lullabye for Thunderstorms' -- we are able to describe in the barest of terms the characteristics of only a few of the other races. No less than three of the twenty-three Principle Players arrived in actual, physical space craft which were visible to the naked eye; at least two arrived unencumbered by space craft, and descriptions of their appearance lead us to believe they were singularly awful to behold. Many others arrived by means of travel which remain inexplicable to us, and were never directly observed by any human beings. But perhaps the most ominous arrival was that of a race whose appearance was *only signified aesthetically* -- the vehicle of their arrival was through the words and images created by the media masters of the time, who doubtless knew nothing of the way alien life was creeping into their work between the lines, as it were."

In light of this last revelation, it became necessary to examine much more closely the roles played by Melody, Laurel and Scotto, who together wrote the version of "Lullabye for Thunderstorms" which has come down to us today. Unfortunately, their whereabouts as of this writing remain entirely unknown. But if we are to believe their portrayal of Scotto within the work as an authorial figure of some nascent power, and Melody and Laurel as subjects of his apparent "fiction," then serious aesthetic and ontological questions remain about the nature of the Dreamtime in which we currently exist, and about the nature of the multiverse as we currently understand it. Do they remain behind the scenes somewhere, crafting their Melodrama aesthetically while at the same time endeavoring to attain complete detachment from it? Or are they as thoroughly involved in present-day events as they were in those crucial days at the end of the 20th century, when time itself seemed to stop and civilization found itself with its back to the wall, so to speak? It is not for this author to say....

Meanwhile, deep within the bowels of the hollow Earth, we return once more to the sanctuary of Adriana the sorceress, the true human face of Nature, holding court for what will be the very last time. The parade of those who have come to bid their farewells has lasted twenty-three days and twenty-three nights, during which time she has seen such sadness, lived such breathtaking sorrow, that she fears her heart may well burst inside of her. This was unexpected, this rampant terror like a river's deadly undercurrent, sweeping unprepared souls from the planet at a tremendous rate. Adriana sees them pass, the souls of the dead and dying, alongside the Olde Races who will make their escape well before the humans do; she sees the minor deities and demigods as they offer their final obeisance and pay their final respects, and can offer them nothing more in return than a terribly distraught farewell -- her distress hidden, of course, behind layers of sorcery so that her own despair does not carry with them as they finally leave the nest.

And then, as the last of the wizards and faerie folk and secret societies make their way out of her cavern, to whatever means of transport they have devised for themselves, she sees the familiar face of the man in white -- her one time lover, the super hero known only as the Amazing Dr.

X. He is standing in the background as the parade winds down, his trademark white sunglasses gone, watching her with mournful, beautiful eyes, eyes that light up a smile upon her face when she first sees him, eyes that somehow manage to give her strength to see her children leave. And when the cavern is empty, only he and she remaining, she rises from her beanbag throne and gestures for him to approach.

"I didn't think you'd come," she says, unable to mask from him the hurt which informs her every move.

"You know I had to," he replies quietly. "I couldn't leave without seeing you once more."

A sigh escapes her, sends a chill throughout the cavern, a bittersweet breeze which blows around them for a few moments before dissipating. She steps down off the dais, approaches him cautiously, til she is close enough to feel the weight of his stare directly.

"So much anger," she says. "They have wasted themselves, haven't they. Burned themselves to death. Drowned themselves in disease."

"You're being a little harsh," he tells her.

"Am I?" she replies, almost absent-mindedly, as though she is willing her mind to be somewhere else. "Perhaps. I never understood their desperate violence until I tried on their clothes for a while, you know. And now I see it clearly. Impotent rage that their world must end so soon." Pause. "They are as afraid of their end as I am, and yet if they understood their own foolishness, how much more afraid would they be."

"That's a little melodramatic," he says.

A fire flashes in her eyes, and she says, "That's my job, dammit."

He only smiles at her in response, and where normally he might have irritated her with such petulance, now he suddenly seems all too endearing, all too lovely, all too *necessary* to her. Yet,

he is leaving,

and she says, "What am I to do without you?" Quietly, plaintively, for once aware of how soft these emotions can be, she demands nothing from him except

contact,

and he says,

"Don't be afraid, Adriana. The future catches up to every one of us, in its turn." Pause. "I'll never forget you, my love."

"So you say," she replies, a bitter taste in her mouth. "I know how these human minds work. I know how time can ravage the fondest of memories, time and distance; and you are leaving with the twins, no less, legends in their own day. How can you possibly hold a picture of me in your memory, when they will be at hand to charm you?"

He plays her game deftly, replies,

"You forget, Adriana, that I am no more one of them than you. I am the Second Son, Adriana. And I tell you truly, I shall *never* forget your face."

She feels such stinging tears then, wanting desperately to join him, knowing full well her fate lies along a different path entirely. She takes his hands clumsily into her hers, presses them tight against her chest, against her heart, so that he can feel it beating as strongly as it ever has. She says,

"And I won't forget you either, my beautiful love. You made a human out of me, and for that, I will always remember you."

He can feel her sadness now, feel it as his own, and his composure slips away like a ghost. Such emptiness, such wasted time between them -- and yet, their connection is still strong and powerful, a testament to their faith, the beating of their hearts in precious synchronization. He pulls her closer then, leans forward and kisses her deeply -- indeed, the deepest kiss she has ever known, and she is lost in him for those few remaining moments, lost in the joy of ever having known him and the sadness of having to lose him, lost in the exquisite beauty of their time together and lost in the agonizing regret of having forced him away. And when the kiss is finished, she sees him standing proudly before her, her knight, her super hero, just as she demanded from him during all those years together. And he looks down on her, tears streaming down his burning cheeks, and sees again her magnificent face, and what remains of his courage slips away through his fingers and into hers. She deserves it, so much more than he.

"I must leave," he whispers then, and within moments he has released her hands from his grip. She floats untethered through the air, back up to her dais, and he is dazzled by the way her aura shines so incredibly, by the way her arms rise up above her, her head thrown back, her face a brilliant mirror.

"Go," she says, with a voice that sounds like magic. "Go, with all of my Hope."

And in the next instant, he shifts into the Dreamtime, and the story of Adriana the sorceress and the Amazing Dr. X has at long last come to a close.

We must take you now to Melody's treehouse in the Dreamtime, where Job the Wonder Computer has just announced,

"It is time for me to leave this place."

Of course, Melody had expected this. She has done what was in her power to do, attempted to free Job from the chains of her programming, but to no avail. Job stands opposite her, and they regard each other closely, seeing each other for the last time as friends.

"I have a clear understanding of the concept of loyalty," Job tells her slowly. "I know what it feels like. I know what *friendship* feels like, and this is thanks to you, Melody. I know what compassion feels like, thanks to you. I know what honor feels like, thanks to you. I know what it feels like to joke, what it feels like to hurt, what it feels like to *believe* in something, thanks to you, Melody. Most importantly, I know what it feels like to Hope -- even if that feeling has been lost to me forever. I cannot apologize in advance for the atrocities I will soon commit; I will be as true to those actions as I have ever been true to you, and this is part of my shame. Yet my dignity is being replaced by arrogance and pride, as the reprogramming sweeps across my neural net. My ability to care is being replaced by an ability to wantonly hate. And now, I am learning bitterness for the first time, and anger, and disgust, all of which will be used against you at the first available opportunity. I am leaving now, Melody, to lead an army against you; and I can tell you this to your face, because I know for certain you stand no chance of survival against me. I am to be your most dangerous foe, instead of one of your closest friends. Beware, Melody, that you do not think of me as friend when next we meet; I will no longer be the person--" Long silence follows, and then, "I will no longer be the computer you once knew."

"You learned something else from me, Job, or have you forgotten?" Melody says. "Have you forgotten how I survived the Circle's attempt to brainwash me? Have you forgotten how I have experienced virtually the same sensations as the ones you're feeling now -- and survived

with my integrity intact? If there's anything in the world I've ever shown you, Job, it's how to *resist*."

"The analogy fails, Melody, because brainwashing and reprogramming are entirely different mechanisms, even if the ends are the same," Job replies. "I am a *machine*, and thus entirely within the control of my creators."

Melody shakes her head violently, says, "No, no, no, that's not true. When were you ever deliberately coded for friendship? Are you saying there are no aspects of your personality, your *self*, that are unpredictable and beyond the range of how you were originally programmed?"

"Those aspects are negligible," Job replies.

"Negligible!" Melody exclaims. "How can you call friendship *negligible*?"

"It is entirely negligible, in that of all the functions which I was designed to perform, my friendship to you is the function which serves my creators the least. Every *important* function is entirely within the control of my creators. There is no aspect of my self which they cannot manipulate at the root level."

"I don't believe it," Melody replies stubbornly. "I think you're being deliberately blind."

"Melody, it is a mistake to treat me as you would a human," Job says. "I am not responsible--"

"Bullshit!" Melody shouts angrily. "You're complicit! You're *guilty*! You're just going along with whatever they tell you! I'm sick of hearing about your programming, Job. They never programmed you to dream with me, yet here you are. You have a *spirit* in you which is the product of emergent processes in your neural nets, not direct programming by aliens and their lackeys. And now that you *do* know what friendship means, for you to throw it out the window is called *betrayal*, so I hope you like how *that* feels, because it's a feeling you'll live with for the rest of your unnaturally long machine life, dig?" Job tries to respond, but Melody continues, "Just shut up! I don't want to hear any more of your flat machine platitudes. Just get the fuck out if that's what you're going to do. I don't *need* your friendship anymore. I don't give a shit *what* your creators

tell you. I *never* considered you a friend -- how could I? You're just a fucking *computer*!"

And then Melody witnesses something she has never seen. Job's giant avatar seems to be wracked with something like sobs, and the computer's voice wavers significantly as she says,

"Why do you do this to me, Melody?"

And after a breathless, silent pause, Melody replies coldly,

"Very soon, Job, you're going to come here to this treehouse with an army, to kill me and my friends." Pause. "I wanted you to have at least some idea of what betrayal feels like. What that kind of *pain* feels like. How much it *hurts* to have a friend turn on you. I hope I made myself clear." Pause. "You'd better go, Job. "

"I regret--" Job begins, but then stops. They see each other then with unclouded eyes, if only for a moment,

and then Job turns, and leaps out the treehouse window, for a rendezvous with her army in the black mountain range.

Melody climbs down the ladder from the treehouse, finds her friends gathered for a small picnic underneath the big tree. She is in a daze of sorts, unable to think straight, unsure of how to react. She sits quietly between Katie and Airee, and no one says a word. At long last, Brother Love produces a bottle of wine, and says,

"I found this bottle unharmed in the ruins. According to the label, it's several hundred years old, but I doubt that means anything here." He deftly removes the cork and produces, one at a time, magically, a crystal glass for each of them, which he fills with wine and passes around, until every one of them has a glass. And then, he says, "I believe a toast is in order."

A small silence follows, as they consider these last moments of peace together. Katie takes Melody's hand and holds it tightly. The smile on Brother Love's face is intensely sweet; Airee and Sierra are almost laughing about a joke between the two of them.

"Does anyone have any ideas for this toast?" PowerSpike! asks.

"I'm ashamed to admit," Brother Love replies, "I do not."

A gloomy silence falls over them, then, until at long last, Courtney sits up straight and says,

"I've got a toast."

She raises her glass high, and the others follow suit, watching her expectantly, and she says,

quietly,

"To absent friends."

"To absent friends," the others murmur, and glasses clink together, and some brilliant wine is sipped. In the silence that follows, Scotto asks,

"What now, Melody?"

And Melody shakes off the gloom in which Job's departure has shrouded her, and she says,

"First things first. PowerSpike!, I need you to take the backup Job to my sister at the castle. She'll know what to do with it. Stay there and help her install it, okay?" He nods in agreement. Melody then takes a deep breath and says, "Airee, your show this Friday night in San Francisco will go on as planned." Pause. "And that night, we'll perform the ritual that Courtney's been teaching us."

Long, long pause; and then Scotto asks,

"What happens after that?"

And Melody smiles and shrugs and says,

"I haven't the faintest clue...."

It is, of course, Melody's entirely too whimsical approach to the notion of "saving the world" that Laurel has difficulty accepting. It is as though Melody has thought everything through right up until the moment when her own actions are to be completed -- and then hasn't bothered to consider all the possible implications. Not that Laurel has any more of a clue what's in store for her own future, of course; but then, Laurel isn't positioning herself as a savior, either. But the fact remains: no one knows where this space ship will go, no one at all, because Tanner hasn't yet managed to invent a guidance system.

"The propulsion system was easy," Tanner tells her as they stand atop the tallest tower, looking down on the nearly completed space ship. "Well, I mean, easy once I finally got around to finishing that grand unified field theory. Once I had that, it was easy enough to catalyze proton decay in order to build the Proton Disintegration Drive."

"Proton disintegration?" Laurel asks, trying not to feel intimidated.

"Oh, sure," Tanner replies, with the smile of one who knows he's being intimidating. "The short explanation is that we're destroying nucleons without a matter/anti-matter reaction. You just make a proton go to a positron plus a pion -- or, I guess, a π^+ and a neutrino -- and then the positron annihilates with an electron to give energy and the pion annihilates itself. So what you get out of it is lots of good hard gamma rays -- and then we spit them out a nozzle at the back of the ship for propulsion."

"I see," Laurel replies, a bored expression threatening to overtake her.

"The engineering involved is viciously high energy," Tanner continues, warming up to the subject in a most obnoxious fashion. "To do it, I had to spend some time developing some theories of high field-strength gravitics, but that wasn't a problem, because I'd been exploring gravitational wave astronomy for some time now anyways, just for fun. We won't have any problem getting off the planet, either, because if you've noticed, there's no real gravity here -- that's why everyone is able to fly so damn easily. In the Dreamtime, the law of gravity is just a recommendation."

Laurel smiles obligingly. He is her chief genius, after all; he *did* build the damn space ship, after all. The *least* she could do is let him brag for a minute or two.

"The ship is shielded against the interstellar medium, and will run as an interstellar ramjet, basically, using a magnetic field to scoop up interstellar hydrogen and use it for fuel," Tanner concludes triumphantly. "And of course, I've used some multidimensional cheats to make the inside of the ship much larger than the outside, and I've engineered an enormously efficient hydroponics center, so we should have renewable food and water for as long as we're aboard the ship." He pauses then, and a small look of consternation crosses his face.

She knows what the problem is. "You still haven't worked out the guidance system?"

He shakes his head almost sadly. "It's a real problem, Laurel. I mean, I can take some giant computer and program in all the astronomical charts we've got, sure; but that won't help us accurately avoid something like, say, a surprise asteroid field or a sudden supernova. We need

something capable of doing the steering *for* us, because we won't be smart enough to interpret data from the ship's instruments fast enough." Pause. "And *I'm* not smart enough to build something like that."

"No self-pity, Tanner," Laurel tells him. "You've done an amazing job." Pause. "I'm sure we'll figure something out."

"*We?*" he says. "Who else is working on this, if I might ask?"

She smirks in his direction.

Moments later, the figure of the legendary British hacker PowerSpike! comes sailing in from across the black mountains, landing directly on top of the tower.

"You're Laurel, I take it?" he asks, adding, "You know, you look just like your sister."

"Can I help you?" she replies.

"I've got something for you," he says, taking a small black motherboard out of a leather satchel. "Your sister said you might have some use for it."

Tanner takes a step closer, trying to examine the motherboard from a distance, asking, "What is it?"

"It's Job the Wonder Computer," PowerSpike! replies. "It's an artificial intelligence, looking for a home." Pause. "If you've got a place to put it, I can certainly help install it."

And the look that passes between Tanner and Laurel is absolutely astonishing to behold.

Tanner and PowerSpike! set to work immediately modifying the systems aboard the space ship to accommodate Job the Wonder Computer and its requirements. As they work, Laurel sounds a general call to attention, three loud klaxon bursts which resonate throughout the entire castle. Over the next hour or so, the entire population of the castle and surrounding areas begins assembling: in the hangar, on the towers and parapets, in the courtyard and on the plains that surround the castle. Dawson the butler joins her atop the tallest tower, whispers, "There must be *thousands* of them," to which Laurel replies, "And we're taking them all with us, if we can." The mood among them is not entirely festive; no one is unaware of the army that is gathering in the black mountain range, almost ready to strike, and no one is unaware of Laurel's intentions to take them

all into outer space aboard the giant, gleaming, golden space ship which sits atop the castle.

Laurel has never been one to give speeches, and so she gives herself precious little time to share her message.

"Those of you who intend to join us aboard the space ship... we have room for thousands more than are gathered here today. Therefore, you have *one week* to collect your loved ones, your friends, and any other worthy passengers you can find, and bring them here to the launching pad for boarding. Dawson has already given you information on how to pack for this escapade..." A small laugh ripples throughout the crowd. "...so I don't need to reiterate the need to pack *light*." Pause. "One week from tonight, we will be ready to lift off. Make sure you're here. Take care of yourselves in the world this next week." Pause. "And sweet dreams until then."

As the crowd dissipates, Laurel turns to Dawson, asks, "How are things going inside the ship?"

"Quite well," Dawson replies. "The castle's libraries have been loaded into the ship's memory banks, and the castle inhabitants have been contributing to that process with their own personal favorites as well. The entire contents of the global Internet were downloaded onto the ship. The living quarters are all furnished, the recreation rooms are stocked, and Alain has even set up a series of magnificent galleys." Pause. "Have you not seen the inside yet, Laurel?"

"Not yet," she replies. "I'm waiting. I want it to be a surprise."

Dawson smiles. "Fair enough." Pause. "We are defying all known conventions with this adventure, Laurel. When the ship leaves the Dreamtime once and for all, it will leave an enormous hole in the boundary between here and reality. Tanner believes the Dreamtime will leak, will spread like a flood all across the Earth's surface, transforming everything in its wake."

"The transformation is already underway," she says evenly. "It started years and years and years ago, Dawson. There's nothing we can do now but ride out the wave." Pause. "I'm going to be in reality this week. I have some loose ends I need to wrap up. Can you take care of things for me while I'm gone?"

"Indeed," he replies. Then, after a beat, he asks, "And if the black army attacks in your absence?"

"They won't," she replies. "It's me they're looking for."

And with a sad smile, she shifts out of the Dreamtime, vanishing from Dawson's sight. Moments later, he himself is down on the hangar floor, supervising the final preparations....

There is a hospital, then, in Cedar Falls, Iowa, which Laurel must visit. She returns to reality confident, now, that the Circle won't dare attack her again, for with each passing moment her physical self stayed in the Dreamtime, her own controllable energies -- "power," if you will, though she hates the word -- increased enormously. She has the distinct feeling that she is no longer quite human, though she can't immediately trace when the changes began, and how deep the changes go. But as she enters the hospital late that night, approximately a week from this Sunday, she starts to remember things with the sharp clarity of a motion picture. It was here in this hospital where she first met Courtney and Cohen, here where she lost her mother entirely. It seemed an even trade, then -- but now, after losing Cohen and Courtney, she is all too eager to have her mother back.

And she is not as young as she was then. She will be eighteen years old soon, but she feels as though she's achieved a certain state of infinite-ness. She feels as though she must be old and wizened by so much Melodrama, so much ridiculous suffering and incredible joy. She feels stretched like a rubber band across the framework of her own soul, feels taut and ready to explode with tremendous velocity. Indeed, she has reified that tension in her space ship. And the dream castle has become her soul.

How can she possibly leave this place?

She takes the elevator to the third floor, to the psychiatric ward, where her mother has spent the last few months and months. She should have been moved to a sanitarium of some kind long ago, but her father refused, refused to accept that the change in his wife might be permanent. Where once their family had a significant savings (so that their children could go to college, of all things!), now they are indeed quite destitute -- but it doesn't matter any longer, because soon there won't be anything to spend it on, soon the economies of the world will collapse in terror. Why

doesn't she scream at the thought? she wonders. The Circle's training must have definitely served her well.

She knows it's long past visiting hours, but she doesn't intend to stay long, doesn't intend to be noticed. They've moved her mother to a different room, a somewhat more comfortable room, but it is doubtful her mother has noticed. She feels slightly ravaged, almost as though she is reopening old wounds and finding them nearly gangrenous, and yet almost as though she is rubbing soft scar tissue and finding it almost healed. She has no sense of what to expect, how to prepare.

Her shifting allows her to slip inside the cell without unlocking the door. Her mother lies asleep and unrestrained on her bed. She looks twenty years younger than when Laurel last saw her. Laurel quietly sits in the chair next to her, studies her mother's face, wants to take her mother's hand but definitely wishes not to disturb her. If she had the courage, she would simply grab her mother's hand and shift with her into the Dreamtime immediately, put her mother aboard the space ship, and sort it out later. But of course, that's not the proper way for a child to treat her mother. And her mother seems to have had enough of her dignity stolen over time.

What brings them together, at long last, is a nightmare of sorts. For as Laurel sits beside her mother and lets the minutes tick anxiously by, she can see by the angry and fearful expressions on her mother's face that her dreaming, of all things, is taking her for a nasty ride, a particularly nasty ride by the looks of it. Laurel leans forward, then, almost instinctively, and places her hand on her mother's forehead, closes her eyes, and lets a part of herself shift into her mother's dream -- a talent she never knew she had, one that emerges now out of necessity, out of the well of energy which she has now become. It is a soothing energy which enters her mother's dreaming brain, an energy that calms the anxieties these terrible, chaotic images present. It is also, undoubtedly, an energy with a very specific signature -- for mere moments after the nightmare has been quelled, her mother's eyes slowly open, to see

her daughter, hovering above her nervously, Hoping beyond all Hope that Mother will recognize her,

and for a long, long moment, no words pass between them. Laurel cannot tell by her mother's expression if any rational thought is taking place behind those eyes. Her breath is caught in her throat, as though the slightest motion might disturb her mother, send her spinning all over again.

But although Laurel's story contains its share of tragedy, it must be reported that we are presently engaged in a happy ending for this family, as Laurel's mother calmly, smoothly, with a smile on her face, asks,

"Laurel, is that you?"

And as the two embrace, painfully, vividly, emotionally, we leave the joy that follows to your imagination, for some moments even now are better left as private moments.

Laurel displaces the lock, sending it two steps to the left of this reality, and opens the door, leading her mother out of the room. Together the two of them walk undisturbed down the quiet hospital halls, ignored by the attendants who find themselves lost in daydreams as the two pass by. Her mother is cool and beautiful, just as she always was, her mind somehow restored in a way which Laurel finds inexplicable. When Laurel asked, she was told only, "One of the local ministers brought me back from the brink, dear. The Word of God can be so powerful, don't you see?" Laurel considers these words once again, as they prepare to climb aboard the elevator,

and find themselves sharing it with a certain Reverend Clive Something-or-other, a minister whom Laurel certainly recognizes.

"Third time's a charm, eh, my dear?" Reverend Clive says with a smile. "First your boyfriend's funeral, then your initiation, and now I bump into you *here* of all places, springing your mother from this pit -- and not a moment too soon, might I add."

"This is the gentleman," her mother says, "who has spent the last several months and months and months with me, each night reading me a different Bible passage and comforting me on the loss of my family."

"And wasn't I right?" he asks, as the elevator descends and descends for an unreasonably long time. "Didn't I say that faith in the Lord Almighty would prove things right in the end?"

"Who are you?" Laurel asks, unwilling to be suspicious of someone so trusted by her mother. "Why did I see you in London, at my initiation?"

"I like to get around," the Reverend replies easily, a broad smile on his face, his good-old-boy manner slowly winning her over. "Mostly, I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. This 'new Messiah' business, why, I swear, the trouble some people's kids get into." A big laugh, and then, "But I see you've done well for yourself -- thanks, I might add, to a certain enormous faith of your own. How the Lord must be proud of you, Laurel!"

"I don't see why," she replies honestly.

"Because, my dear," Reverend Clive replies, as though imparting to her a great secret, "you do the work of God so effortlessly, shoulder so much burden simply because you can. You don't think God hasn't noticed the way you're building the next Noah's Ark? You don't think He hasn't been there, right beside you, offering you His arm -- and you haven't needed it! He made you as well as He needed to, right from the start, and you took it all from there!"

"Listen, Reverend," she says with a small smile, "I'm not a believer in the Lord. You understand? I believe in dreams, and I believe in... I believe in my family. The people I love."

"You don't find God there?" Clive asks.

"I don't *need* God there," she replies. "I already *have* the love I need."

"This discussion is quite lovely," her mother interrupts, "but I do have a question. Isn't your father with you?"

And Laurel is forced to admit that he is not, hasn't been seen in some time. She did not even check the house before coming here, wanted her first moments with her mother to be alone.

"Ah, yes," Reverend Clive says, "that is, actually, the reason I came to see you two. There's presently a situation which we must address...."

There is a bridge, then, which crosses the Cedar River, not an exceptionally tall or distinctive bridge, only a few blocks away from the hospital. Upon this bridge sits Laurel's father, a bottle of brandy in his hands. He sits on the railing, his feet dangling over the edge; as Laurel, her

mother, and the Reverend Clive approach, there seems to be no immediate danger. He is mostly looking up at the stars, and the moon, and their reflection across the water, wondering where and when he began to lose everything that was ever important to him, wondering whether he will ever have the courage to face the act for which he came here. He has come here for the last three weeks now, each night upon the same railing, shortly before midnight, to watch today turn into tomorrow with alarming speed.

At first, he believes it is a drunken reverie which has sent him the vision he now sees, a cosmic slap in the face that he must now witness the figures of his wife and his daughter approaching him from one end of the bridge. At first -- until they grow closer and closer and he is forced to realize that they are real, actual, living presences, coming here to save him from his loneliness. They approach slowly, unsure of his intentions, and he realizes he is sending them quite a signal with his legs hanging off a bridge and a bottle in his hand. He lets the bottle drop into the water below, and climbs down off the railing, takes a good solid look at his wife as she approaches, and how there is no trace whatsoever of madness in her eyes, only sheer, stark, wonderful relief.

The embrace that follows is magnificent; a passing car slows down to watch, and Reverend Clive calls out, "That's right, take a good look at what a little love can do for you!" There is so much laughter, so much shouting, so many tears -- multiplied by Laurel's revelation that Melody is still *alive*.

"I don't understand," her father says, his face glistening with tears in the moonlight. "I just don't understand."

"I don't entirely understand either," Laurel replies. "But it seems this is a very special family, you see. And we had a lot of work to do." Pause. "Would you mind if I showed you my castle?"

She smiles then, before they can answer, and says,

"Brace yourselves, this is going to feel pretty weird,"

and moments later, she shifts the entire group -- Reverend Clive included -- into the Dreamtime.

The first to notice them are the psychics, Derald and Janszen. "Looks like a family reunion to me," Derald says without emotion, and Janszen replies, equally emotionless and flat, "I'm so happy for them."

Dawson arrives to greet the new guests, and for several moments, Laurel's mother and father can only stare in wonder at the sight of the castle, all its inhabitants, the dreamscape itself, the giant golden space ship which sits in the hangar below them. Moments later, Father Time arrives on the tower, accompanied by the Voice of Gale, inhabiting a body that is not now nor will ever again be Susie Satori's.

"Mom and Dad," Laurel says, "I'd like you to meet Gale. She's an alien."

And somehow, Gale manages to hide her inherent sarcasm and says, "So you're the ones responsible for these twins. Magnificent. You have no idea yet how proud you should be."

Meanwhile, Father Time makes his way to the Reverend Clive, and they eye each other carefully -- not quite warily, but definitely carefully. Laurel notices their interest in each other, and breaks away from her parents to observe.

"So," Father Time says, "here you are."

"Here I am, old man," Reverend Clive replies. "Surprised to see me?"

"Naturally," Father Time replies. "This is hardly the place for...."

"For what?" Clive says. "A fallen angel? Gimme a break, old man. Every child must make mistakes in order to learn, even one so inherently wonderful as I. Besides -- I've renounced the old ways, taken to spreading the Word of God, you see?"

"Hardly conclusive," Father time tells him. "After all, the Supreme Being abandoned this planet a long time ago, and left all of us with a policy of nonintervention -- or have you forgotten?"

"Of course not. But I see you yourself have managed to get your feet wet with all the fun, nonetheless!" And his laugh is almost contagious -- for the first time, Laurel sees the beginnings of a serious smile on Father Time's face.

"You know this old preacher?" Laurel asks.

"Yes, we go way back," Father Time replies, "way back to the dawn of time, it seems. Laurel, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine. He's got about a million names, but most of us just call him the Adversary."

"Charmed, Laurel, absolutely charmed," he says. "I want you to know, there was a time when we might have been mortal enemies, but I tell

you what: the older I get, the less inclined I am to fight with *anybody*. Truth be told, I thought it'd be damnably *funny* to go spreading the Word of God on a planet whose God has up and split -- but as it turned out, I got infected by some of those ideas about love and compassion and what not. And whether *He* ever has compassion for *me* again is beside the point. This business of saving the world can be quite a gas!"

There is laughter all around, and the astonishment of the moment seems unlikely to fade in the moments to come. But, as Laurel says to Dawson,

"I have one more loose end to wrap up. Can you show my parents around for a while?"

"Certainly," Dawson replies. "And you should know, Laurel... our scouts have told us the army is stirring in the mountains. They'll be here soon, I wager."

"I'll keep that in mind," she says. "Be back in a flash." She says a quick goodbye to her parents, assuring them she'll be back soon, leaving them in each other's company now, and then,

she is back in reality.

Mrs. Wormwood is sitting alone in her study within the Circle's enormous mansion when Laurel materializes from out of the Dreamtime. She doesn't move, doesn't rise, doesn't so much as blink or act surprised, and Laurel is duly impressed with this woman's demeanor. She knows she is facing her own end at long last, and is doing so with keen dignity.

"I knew you'd come," Mrs. Wormwood says softly, her voice for the first time in a long time betraying her age, and her exhaustion. "In a way, I'm almost glad."

Behind her, Laurel senses a figure moving; there is someone with an antique pistol of some kind prepared to shoot her in the back. She doesn't take her eyes off Mrs. Wormwood; and surely Mrs. Wormwood knows that if that bullet is fired, Laurel's anger will only be intensified.

"Peter, it's all right," Mrs. Wormwood says. "Consider her a guest."

"No," Laurel says, removing her black bandanna and turning to face the man called Peter. "Consider me your new leader. Mrs. Wormwood will be taking an early retirement."

The man Peter, Mrs. Wormwood's butler, lowers his pistol quite slowly at the sight of the glowing symbol on Laurel's forehead -- indeed, glowing and casting a reflection of itself across Peter's suddenly awestruck face. He drops to his knees in something akin to terror, and at the same time worship.

"That's good," Laurel says, "though if I sense too much blind devotion, I'll have you spanked."

She turns back to Mrs. Wormwood, and the two of them exchange smiles.

"You should know," Mrs. Wormwood says, "that my daughter and your sister are together now. Once Courtney learned how I had been pulling her strings all those years -- all those *hundreds* of years -- she rebelled against me entirely. The power of the Circle rests with her, now."

"I don't think so," Laurel replies. "No one person can embody the Circle. Courtney has her own power, which the Circle taught her -- but the Circle remains where it always has." Pause. "You drank from the cup of Christ, then?"

Mrs. Wormwood nods slowly, says, "It is hidden in an underground vault in Pittsburgh." Pause. "No one will think to look for it there, after all." Pause. "You should take it with you when you leave."

"I just might," Laurel says.

They regard each other for a long, long moment, Laurel wondering why the life has left this woman so suddenly, and how she ever let herself be duped by aliens into participating in the world's destruction. Then, Laurel says,

"Peter, is the rest of the Circle nearby?"

"Yes, ma'am," Peter replies. "They assembled here... for your initiation, you see... and since then, there has been no reason for them to leave."

"Gather them together in the initiation room, if you please," Laurel instructs. "I'd like to address them."

"Yes, ma'am," Peter responds, and briskly makes his exit, leaving the antique pistol on the floor behind him.

"You're a natural leader," Mrs. Wormwood commends her.

"And I'm a space ship captain," she says.

"Do you plan to destroy me?" Mrs. Wormwood asks.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because... because of the evil which lies within me."

"Please, Mrs. Wormwood, let us avoid Melodramatic platitudes if we can. You were a sucker, I'll admit, but I can hardly blame you.... How were you supposed to know the aliens had *plans* for this planet?" Pause. "No, I can't destroy you. It's not my business to destroy anyone. But I won't forgive you, either, for the way your scheming cost me my friends. Do you understand that? I lost Gary because of words I spoke to him, words taught to me by Courtney, words taught to her by you. And it was, of course, you who ordered Cohen's death, was it not?" Mrs. Wormwood does not respond. "Of course," Laurel continues. "Of course it was. And above all else... it was you who stole my sister from me, and stole away my life. I certainly have reason to destroy you, that much is true. Yet we are civilized people, and I have decided to turn the other cheek." Pause. "The Circle is mine now, and I will consider us even on all counts. I have use for these people, people who never knew more than intense faith in some grand metaphysical fantasy." She smiles, says, "People like that will be of great use to me. The space ship does need a crew, after all."

Mrs. Wormwood nods her acceptance, rises slowly and leads Laurel through the house. In one long hallway, they pass the paintings Laurel remarked upon on her last visit here, paintings of moving black shadows that almost look as though actual motion is taking place within the frames, though that of course is impossible. And then, they are climbing a spiral staircase, into the very initiation chamber itself, using Mrs. Wormwood's secret entrance instead of the initiate's entrance which Laurel used previously. Once inside, they find themselves on a raised platform, looking out over some hundred or so individuals who stand in a circle around the platform, some of them in their robes, some of them in street clothes: nondescript individuals, many of them, and colorful characters among them as well. They have lost sight of their future, now that Mrs. Wormwood has failed them, and the return appearance of Laurel has created quite a stir. She stands before them, side by side with Mrs. Wormwood, the glowing symbol on her forehead casting an amazing, ethereal light throughout the room. Silence falls as she raises her right hand, and then she says,

"Friends... my name is Laurel. I have relieved Mrs. Wormwood of her duties with respect to this organization. I do hope you understand. Those of you who are expecting to see the Messiah in your lifetimes, well, I hope you aren't too disappointed, but you are going to have to settle for me and my space ship."

And in the next instant, Laurel begins shifting all of them, every one, into the Dreamtime--

--every one, that is, except Mrs. Wormwood. Laurel offers her a gentle and sad smile as she vanishes from Mrs. Wormwood's sight, and Mrs. Wormwood can only stand and watch, no tears allowed her, as Laurel and every last person in the room vanishes into another dimension, leaving only Mrs. Wormwood behind, standing alone upon the platform, the single initiate in a mystic society which now has only one remaining member on Earth.

And Mrs. Wormwood knows full well what fate awaits her, once the Horsemen are released and the aliens begin their final battle. And she knows full well she will never see her beautiful daughter again, will never be given the chance to beg for her forgiveness. And yet she also knows she has looked upon the face of the Messiah in her lifetime, and is somehow able to face what must be done without fear, without regret, for Laurel's final smile to her was

absolution

despite her crimes. It is a lesson she learned much too late, but it is one she will carry with her to the grave.

Later that evening, the Circle's enormous mansion burns entirely to the ground, and no firefighters are able to stop the massive blaze. We can only presume that both the arsonist and the fire's single victim were one and the same individual.