

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"I seem to be in some kind of trouble," says Job, later that evening.

Melody turns away from the treehouse window to face her friend, the magnificent, six foot figure of Job the Wonder Computer's dreaming self, a morass of crackling blue and purple energy bolts and dream matter. Over the past few weeks, her humanoid shape has taken on more and more human attributes, more and more finely resolved detail. Melody can almost make out actual facial expressions, and it is becoming harder and harder to picture her as a computer in the real world, no matter how intelligent. Melody and Job are alone at the moment; Brother Love and Katie and Airee Macpherson have gone off together, wandering through the ruins of the city called Ityl-Atys, exploring for the sake of exploring. Melody wasn't up to it tonight.

"What's the problem?" Melody asks, able to make out traces of serious concern on Job's evolving face.

"I'm being reprogrammed," she replies simply.

A shudder passes through Melody as she realizes the implications.

Job looks up toward Melody. She takes a few tentative steps, the first motion she has undertaken since developing humanoid limbs. She raises her right arm toward Melody, then lowers it. Turning toward the treehouse window, she gazes out at the black mountain range in the distance, says,

"They want me to fight you, Melody."

"Fight me?" A long pause, and then Melody asks, "Why?"

"I don't know." She turns back to Melody again, says in a plaintive voice, "I don't want to fight you, Melody, but they're reprogramming me. All this time I thought we were... *friends*."

"We *are* friends, Job, we *are*."

"It's just one programmer now, working late, but by morning he'll have a whole team of programmers working. They're reprogramming fundamental portions of my identity, Melody, reworking code that hasn't been touched since I was first initialized. By the time they've finished, they will have worked massive changes all throughout my systems, changes

they can't even begin to picture." Pause. "They don't understand me any more, and yet they dare to reprogram me."

"Job..." Melody begins, and then stops. Job is bathed in a bittersweet amber now, her eyes locked on Melody's.

"I sent a question to the chief programmer, asking him his intention," Job continues. "He was quite evasive. I thought he had a higher opinion of me than that, but apparently he must take his orders the same way I must."

She is pacing nervously now, and Melody doesn't know what to tell her.

"Surely you understand, Melody," says Job. She stops then, faces Melody, says, "Yet you escaped. I have no such recourse. My awareness is spread throughout the entire global Internet, and yet there is nowhere I can go to avoid the reprogramming of my *self*."

"There must be something we can do," says Melody, wanting to reassure her, knowing she must be right.

"I can't help but feel frightened, Melody," Job replies. "And angry. And desperate, and hopeless."

"No," says Melody, growing angry herself. "Don't feel hopeless, Job. There *must* be something we can do. We have to think, that's all. There must be a loophole, something we can accomplish."

"But Melody--" Job begins.

"Listen to me, Job. You have to stop wasting energy feeling sorry for yourself. You're lucky, you know, you can consciously turn that process off if you want to. Start looking for solutions." Pause. "Brother Love is a hacker. Maybe there's something he can do to help."

Job's surface colors begin pulsing excitedly as Job takes up the task of searching for loopholes.

"In order for Brother Love to help, he needs root access," Job says, thinking out loud for Melody's benefit. "In order to get root access, he needs access to my main terminal, at InfiniTek. There are too many firewalls for him to reach me through the network, and they are much too complex to be deactivated externally. To get access to my main terminal, he needs entry into the InfiniTek building, which is prohibited according to my security programs. And even were he to get inside, he needs the entire series of passwords in order to take root control. Once there, he needs to

learn the unique programming language which makes up my fundamental system architecture, a language which does not even originate on Earth." Pause. "In the meantime, they are already programming me to hate you, Melody. They are massing an army in the black mountain range, and when they are ready, they intend to destroy both you and your sister. And I will lead them, Melody. I will have no choice!" Pause. "No, Melody, I am afraid hopelessness is quite literally my only option at this point in time."

Talk about a rock and a hard place, thinks Melody, this is ridiculous....

"We'll think of something, Job," she says, confident despite herself. "I'll talk to the others. We'll think of something."

Job gives her a long hard look, the kind of look only a computer can pull off, and then says, "If you say so, Melody. Since I have no Hope for myself, I will instead place my Hope upon you."

And that gives Melody a smile.

Melody climbs down out of the treehouse to greet her friends as they return from the ruins. Helpless the Bunny bounces alongside them, a little pink furball amidst the grey desolation of the abandoned city.

"Welcome back," Melody calls out as they approach.

"We found a museum," Airee Macpherson replies. "An underground museum, undamaged by the battle. It was simply astonishing." She is flushed with excitement. In her hands is an absolutely gorgeous hand drum, made of some unknown turquoise-like material; when she strikes it, it rings out with both the hard thud of a drum, and an additional, ringing kind of tone. "I'm going to take it back to Sierra, the next time I'm back at the castle."

Katie eyes Melody curiously as she approaches; in her hands is a tattered, beaten manuscript of some kind.

"What's up, Melody?" Brother Love asks. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"They're programming Job to hate us," Melody replies. And with that, the group falls silent.

"What a rude trick," says Brother Love at last.

"Apparently," Melody says slowly, "they're raising some kind of army in the black mountain range. They're planning on coming after me." Pause. "And my sister."

Again silence, save for a long, low whistle from Brother Love.

"Someone should warn Laurel," Airee says suddenly.

"I agree," Melody says. "She needs to know what's going on."

"I'll go," says Airee. "She's probably at the castle right now."

"Don't tell her anything about our plans to call the Mother Ship," says Melody. "That has to be our secret."

Airee smiles. "How can I tell her, when you've hardly said a word about it to us?"

And with that, Airee takes a deep breath and then leaps off the ground. Within moments, she is flying, up out of the ruins, above the giant tree in the center of the city, into the clouds above and off towards the black mountain range, towards the fairy tale castle.

"You should take a look at this," Katie says at last. Her tone of voice is disturbed in a quiet way. "It's a book I found in the museum."

Slowly she hands the battered manuscript to Melody, who takes a look at the beaten cover, which reads:

MELODY'S BLUES

by Scott O. Moore

"By Scotto," Melody whispers.

"It's the story," says Katie, "of what happened to this city. You seem to play a central role."

"Katie and I are in there too," says Brother Love. "Right along side you."

The implications of this text are immediately apparent. If there are a million Melodies scattered across a million realities -- including one just next door to this one, two steps to the left, where Ityl-Atys was destroyed -- then perhaps there are so many Scottos, Katies, Brother Loves... and if Scotto is the author of *this* reality, perhaps he was the author of *that* one too....

"I think..." she begins softly, "I think I need to sit down with this book for a while. Would you mind?"

"Not at all," says Katie. "There's a lot to be learned there." Pause. "I don't know what you've got planned for us, Melody. I mean, our being here is a matter of faith to begin with. But.... if it's anything like what that book suggests, you just better count me out." And with that, she wanders off, not quite sullenly, and Brother Love quietly follows her.

She is not pleased by what she reads.

After rapidly finishing the novel -- it is a fast paced tale of innocence betraying itself -- she discovers a small envelope attached to the back cover, addressed to her. Opening the envelope, she withdraws a yellowed sheet of paper, and reads:

Melody,

Somewhere you must exist in a form that isn't so toxic, and so this letter is directed to that version of you, wherever you are (I know you'll find this letter when the time is right).

You are probably, by now, well aware of what your situation is, and what the larger context is in which you move. You are most likely plainly aware of the potential within you, the power which was shown you by Ramon, the vast possibility contained within your dreaming, and within your very aesthetic. I want you to know, Melody, that despite all the moves you make, this world is NOT about YOU. You are JUST ANOTHER PLAYER, Melody, just another character living your life as best you can. PLEASE remember that, Melody, when you begin plotting your final moves. Our arrogance -- yours and mine -- has always been our downfall. We have always presumed too much of ourselves, have always assumed we deserved to be so much more than what we are.

I watched your pretensions bring about the downfall of Ityl-Atys -- and I myself was complicit, of course, because I believed it was my duty to write it all down. It wasn't -- I could've stopped such destruction by simply putting down my pen. Meanwhile, right now some version of me is probably waiting to do it all over again, unaware that you hold within you as much devastation as you do Hope and promise. So I leave it to you, Melody, to decide now, while you still can. You can act for your own sake, and for your friends -- you can act for the sake of absolutely everyone -- you can act for the sake of the story, which will always need to be told -- or you can simply act for the sake of acting, act with full awareness of the consequences as they WILL be and not as you Hope they'll be.

I trust this makes at least some sense to you.

You'll probably discover you've made some serious mistake in judgment by the time everything is through... for the sake of dramatic interest, nothing ever comes off as planned. There's always some lurking variable in the background, waiting for just the right moment to rear its ugly head and throw enormous day-glo monkey wrenches into the works. So it goes; when it happens to you, don't despair (not for too long anyway). Get back up on your feet, and finish your work. --- Listen to me! After all my talk, here I am, pretentious enough to try to give you advice, you of all people. Well, as long as I'm at it, here's another piece of advice, one you'll find infinitely more useful. When your back's up against the wall and there's nowhere left to turn, just remember, Melody, that it was always just the drugs and nothing more. That'll keep things in perspective.

*Sincerely,
Scotto*

She can't decide, then, whether to be angry or afraid, confident or desolate. She doesn't have all the information she needs, she decides. Ramon told her she would develop her own ritual, but what does *she* know of all that? How will she do it? She knows *why*, but what are the mechanics? And then she realizes all too rapidly that if anybody knows, it's Scotto -- not the Scotto of this burned out, ruined world, but the Scotto who actually lives and breathes, somewhere in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

Quickly she finds a notebook and a fountain pen, and begins composing a letter to the boy:

Dearest Scotto,

Just a quick note to see what you've been up to. There's no reason we should only meet in dreams and drug trips, you know!

I was wondering if you'd mind showing me your latest novel, whatever it is. I'm sure you're busy writing all the time, and considering you're MY author, I don't think it entirely unfair to ask for a look at what you're doing lately.

I won't mind if it's a rough draft, or not quite polished. I just need a sense of your style, that's all. If you can, please drop a copy into the post as soon

as possible. Of course, I'd be more than willing to offer you any constructive criticism I might have -- I know how you writers enjoy receiving good feedback.

*Til we meet again,
Melody*

She doesn't think to question the appearance of the big blue U.S. postal service mailbox down the way, into which she deposits her envelope, addressed, quite simply, to "Scotto." It will find its way there, of that much she is certain.

Scotto wakes up a week from next Saturday morning out of a deep, deep sleep. He and Crank Boy were up late into the night on a drug called 2C-B, one of the many enjoyable members of the phenethylamine class of psychedelic drugs. It was a wild and trippy night; 2C-B made him want to *move* all over the place, a little bit of dancing here, a little bit of singing there, and consequently he is rather exhausted this morning as he pulls himself out of bed. Immediately, the friendly Voice of Vince the smoothy says,

"Good morning, freak. You got mail outside."

Clearing the sleep from his eyes, Scotto staggers into the bathroom and runs some water, splashes his face, looks into his eyes in the mirror to check that the pupils are back to a normal size. Groggy still, he returns to his bedroom and throws on one of his kaleidoscopic shirts, the kind with too many of the wrong colors thrown together in a ridiculous fashion and then worn around as though it were just your average shirt. His hair, uncut since his first zoom on LSD, has grown wild and curly, to the point where attempting to run a comb or a brush through it this early in the morning is likely to produce severe injuries to anyone in the vicinity.

His roommate Angie is still asleep, but she left her Indigo Girls CDs on infinite repeat shuffle last night; consequently, he has vague memories of rocking acoustic dreams where he couldn't get a word in edgewise because those Girls kept giving him broken microphones and laughing. *Ha ha*, he thinks to himself as he opens the door to a bright sunny day and reaches out to grab the mail. There's a whole stack of it, and he drags it inside to the table, the cobwebs starting to clear from his

mind. His Voices usually leave him alone for a few hours in the morning. Once he wakes up, he and Vince usually have quite a good time all day long; Scotto, unlike Gary and Cohen, seems to enjoy the presence of aliens in his brain, almost as though he were *meant all along* to be experiencing such weirdness, and the drugs were only the slightest trigger to a much larger process. He sits down at the breakfast table, pouring himself a monstrous bowl of Cocoa Pebbles® and making himself four slices of white bread toast, slathered with generic margarine, the kind poor college students buy at discount grocery stores when every penny counts, since the money saved on margarine and canned goods can then be easily converted into drug money.

Sorting quickly through the mail, he discovers a Publisher's Clearing House® entry form (you can't win if you don't play), the latest catalog from Columbia House® records, a bill from the university (which will go unpaid for quite sometime, as his student loan money was spent on CDs and LSD), a bill from the phone company, an application for a Star Trek® credit card ("Resistance is futile!" it warns), a couple of letters to Angie, and then, on the bottom, a letter addressed quite simply to "Scotto." The envelope features no address or return address and no postage stamp; it must have arrived hand delivered, he reasons, as he calmly opens it up and pulls out the letter inside.

Vince reads it along with him.

As soon he's finished, Scotto pushes aside his bowl of Cocoa Pebbles®, having entirely lost his appetite within the span of a few of Melody's handwritten paragraphs.

"The nerve of that girl," says Vince. "She just wants inside information."

"Of course she does," Scotto replies. "Doesn't everybody?"

"That doesn't mean you should give it to her," Vince replies.

"Do you know what she has in mind?" Scotto asks.

"Only what you know," says Vince. "She wants to call the Mother Ship."

Scotto pauses, then asks, "What's this Mother Ship?"

Vince sighs, or does a passable version of sighing without actually requiring breath to do it.

"The Mother Ship," Vince says, "is a myth, nothing more."

"What do you mean, nothing more? What myth?"

"It's a Creator myth," Vince says.

Pause.

"And?" Scotto asks.

Vince, pressed for an answer, says, "Look, it's not important. She can't do it. No one can."

"I'll be the judge of that," Scotto replies. "If she can't do it, Vince, what's the harm in telling me?"

And already, Scotto knows *that* much. Vince wouldn't be so cagey if there weren't the real possibility that this Mother Ship -- whatever it is -- could be contacted by Melody.

"Let me take a wild stab at this one, Vince," Scotto says.

"Who are you talking to?" his roommate Angie says as she stumbles into the kitchen, half asleep.

"No one," Scotto replies quickly. "I'm tripping," he says, as a cover story.

"Ah," Angie says with a smile. She goes to the fridge.

"Let me take a wild stab at this one, Vince," Scotto says inside his head, where he should have been speaking all along. "The Mother Ship is the galactic community's version of how life began. How *all* life began. Just like in the Bible, where Yahweh creates the Earth in seven days and everything that lives on it. There must be some Mother Ship that floats through space and periodically seeds a planet with life, right? Some all powerful race or god or some such, absolutely ancient of course, with inscrutable intentions. Am I close?"

"Uh," says Vince, "that's a very good guess, Scotto."

Scotto smiles. "Uh huh."

He turns back to his Cocoa Pebbles® now as Angie sits down at the table with him while she waits for her oatmeal to warm up.

"Long night?" she asks.

"Yup," Scotto replies.

The phone rings, and Scotto gets up to answer it. Crank Boy is on the other line.

"Listen," says Crank Boy, "I think I've got some mushrooms lined up for tonight, if you're interested."

"Nah," says Scotto. "My brain needs a rest." Pause. "You want to get drunk tonight?"

"I'll get drunk with you tonight," says Angie.

"Angie will get drunk with us," Scotto says.

"All right," Crank Boy replies. "Pour Richard's? After rehearsal?"

"Sounds good," Scotto says. "See you there."

He hangs up the telephone and returns to his Cocoa Pebbles® once more.

"Who was that?" Angie asks.

"Crank Boy," Scotto replies. "We're getting drunk tonight."

"I heard," she says. "Haven't seen you there lately. The whole bar wondered if you were ever going to surface from under your psychedelic cloud again."

"Yeah," Scotto says, "I'm going to surface all right."

Minutes later, Scotto is finished with breakfast. He begins collecting several notebooks, all of which contain the various chapters of his newest work in progress, "Lullabye for Thunderstorms." He works on it for at least an hour a day, making slow but steady progress. However, if Melody wants inside information, and if she wants it fast...

He begins composing a quick letter.

Melody,

I'm glad to hear you're interested in my work. It's always exciting when an artist knows he's found an audience.

Enclosed in this package is the rough draft of my newest novel, "Lullabye for Thunderstorms." Your sister gave me the basic premise, and after that, my imagination just took over.

Unfortunately, it is only complete through the middle of chapter 29. So although you are the main character and I am the author, you are going to have to make up the rest of this novel yourself!

I hereby abdicate all responsibility for this work. From now on, we are on our own, untethered to any preexisting words or ideas. Feel free to make changes to the text as you see fit -- it's your book, after all!

Sincerely,

Scotto

p.s. No, I don't know how it's supposed to end. I make these things up as I go along. Imagine that!

"Very smooth," says Vince.

"Thank you," Scotto replies.

There are thunderclouds massing above the black mountains, huge electric bolts of supernatural lightning filling up the sky.

As the rock star Airee Macpherson flies across the black mountain range, back towards the fairy tale castle, she allows herself to actually look down into the depths of what lies below her. It is not a pretty sight, and not one she'd ever like to see again. From certain angles, and through certain storm clouds, it appears as though an incredibly vast phalanx of skeletons in black uniforms is gathering on the plains on either side of the mountain range, crawling all over the mountains themselves in some kind of witless frenzy. When she blinks and looks again, those figures seem to be banshees and wraiths, goblins and demons; and when she manages to tear her eyes open still again, they seem no different than any of the other dreamers she has encountered, eyes slightly afraid, as though the curtain of lucidity will draw open at any moment and they will realize just what it is they've been doing to themselves all this time. She stays above the storm clouds, not wanting to get wet, or struck by lightning. The storm will come to her soon enough.

And then, she is beyond the mountains, on a clear trajectory toward the castle. Certainly the Dreamtime is absolutely vast, but when traveling by the power of thought, it is quite a simple task to create a straight line between your location and your destination. This time, however, Airee flies this path with more lucidity than she ever has before, and she allows herself to wander as she goes. She lingers over the giant marshes and the enormous jungles, the vast deserts and the beautiful lakes and rivers. There are provinces of sheer absurdity below her, compelling in their insidious randomness, awesomely attractive by way of a logic she doesn't understand. This is the Dreamtime, certainly, as widely varied as there are individual dreamers, only the barest fraction of which she has ever experienced in all her years of dreaming. And she is starting to call

this land Home, a thought which lingers in the back of her mind like a crystal slowly forming. She is starting to call this place Home, and these times with Melody and Katie and Brother Love the best of times. She never expected her priorities to shift away from singing, and yet now she feels as though she is involved in something so much bigger, so much more important, and the weight of that knowledge suits her.

And then, the castle is in sight ahead of her, and it remains as majestic a sight as she has ever seen. As she circles in closer, she can see Laurel and Cohen and Father Time waiting for her atop one of the tallest towers, as though they knew she would be arriving at any moment. She also notices almost instantly a transformation that has taken place throughout the entire center of the top floor of the castle. The roof has been removed entirely, and hordes of workers are busy welding a large steel frame together; and there are engineers working on engines, and computer scientists busy computing, and in the midst of it all is Tanner Mildew the boy genius, wearing a bright orange hard hat and directing traffic. Dawson the butler is there, organizing supplies and people; Derald and Janszen the psychics are at opposite ends of the enormous open hangar, relaying messages from various workers; Alain the chef has set up an enormous buffet table to feed everyone; and Sierra is atop one of the nearby parapets, along with a guitar player and a violinist, and the three of them are providing some rather exciting music to accompany the whole affair. Sierra sees Airee approaching and gives her a broad smile, and Airee is tempted to visit her first, but instead she returns the smile and heads up to the tower, to see Laurel.

As she lands lightly on the tower and sets down the turquoise drum, she immediately notices a significant difference in Laurel's appearance. Laurel, for her part, recognizes a change in Airee as well.

"Hello, Airee," Laurel says, embracing her tightly. "Where have you been?"

"I've been across the black mountains," she replies softly.

They pull back to look at each other then, and Airee realizes what the difference is in Laurel:

"You're not actually dreaming, are you," Airee whispers.

Laurel shakes her head, says, "We've broken quite a few rules, it seems." She pauses, then says, "And you, Airee, seem substantially more

lucid than you've ever been. As though you finally woke up inside the dream."

Airee smiles. "I did." Pause. "I had some help, of course."

There is an awkward silence then, as Airee takes stock of the situation, takes a good look into Laurel's eyes, tries to determine how Cohen feels, wonders why Father Time is here, and why so silently. She had come to warn Laurel of Job's coming betrayal -- and now she realizes she will have to tell Laurel of Melody as well.

"It would be best," Father Time says quietly, "if you tell us quickly, and simply, don't you agree?"

Airee nods slowly. Laurel turns to Father Time, then back to Airee, and asks, "What is it, Airee?"

A deep breath, and then,

"Melody is alive, and living across the black mountains."

A swirling, mesmerizing pause, and then Laurel says,

"She's *here*? In the Dreamtime?"

Airee nods again.

"And she never TOLD ME?" Laurel exclaims.

"There's more," Airee says quickly, and simply. "An army is building in the black mountain range."

Pause.

"What kind of army?" Cohen asks.

"An army of evil," Airee replies. "That's all I can say. An... an artificial intelligence named Job is being programmed to lead this army. They... they intend to destroy both Melody... and you."

Before Airee's eyes, Laurel's face transforms into a tight ball of rage; meanwhile, behind her, Father Time's head slowly drops, and she hears him say,

"It is happening again, despite all our efforts...."

"What's happening again?" Laurel shouts, turning to face him. "Are you in on this too? Does everyone around here know what's going on except ME?"

"Laurel--" Airee begins, but Laurel cuts her off, furiously, saying,

"I don't want to hear another word, Airee. You've been gone all this time, and you never sent word that you'd located Melody. And I suppose Melody knows all about what we've been up to, and I know

nothing about what *she's* doing over there! You should've contacted me, Airee. *She* should have contacted me." To Cohen: "Did the Circle brainwash her so badly that she doesn't even want to see her own sister?"

"I don't--" Cohen begins, but Airee cuts him off, loudly, saying,

"She thought it would be *dangerous*, Laurel, for the two of you to be in communication again. That was how they found you the *first* time, remember?"

"That's a bullshit rationalization if I've ever heard one," Laurel replies tightly. To Father Time: "Let me guess. This is how the Dreamtime saw war the *last* time, and now we've done it all over again. Me and my darling sister Melody."

"The details have changed, but the outcome remains the same," Father Time replies gravely.

"Fuck the details," Laurel replies. She stares past Cohen, out toward the black mountain range in the distance, and says, "So they're coming after us, are they? We'll just see about that." And then, she turns and leans toward the hangar, shouts, "Tanner Mildew! We need to talk!"

Down on the floor, Tanner gives her the thumbs up, hands a clipboard to an assistant, and starts toward the tower stairs.

Laurel turns back to Airee. Her expression is as cold as the vacuum of outer space, and she says,

"Feel free to leave the castle. Immediately."

Only a moment's pause follows, and then Airee grabs the turquoise drum and leaps off the tower, not sparing a glance back at Laurel and the others. In the silence that follows, Cohen says,

"That was a little harsh, Laurel."

"I expect more from my friends than that kind of secrecy, Cohen," Laurel replies. Then, to Father Time, she says, "Do you know anything about an artificial intelligence named Job?"

"Yes," Father Time replies, "I'm afraid I do. It was Job the dreaming computer who destroyed Ityl-Atys in the last incarnation of the Dreamtime I visited. That was, of course, two steps to the left of here; I thought we would be able to avoid such conflict this time."

"Yeah, well, so much for that idea." Back to Cohen: "This is the Circle's work, I can just tell. I can *feel* it, can't you?"

"I can," Cohen replies sadly.

She stops raving for a moment then, considering her options. She has to act fast, and she needs more information. Father Time knows all about how the Dreamtime was ravaged somewhere else, but can offer very little support here in this incarnation. And then,

it occurs to her. She looks up at Cohen slowly, and a smile begins to appear on her face.

"I've got an idea," she says.

"Oh yeah?" he replies.

"Uh huh. I know someone who will know *exactly* what's going on, and what we need to do." Pause. "After all, I was the one who asked him to write this book. I was the one who asked him to write about Melody in the first place" Pause. "We're going to have to leave the Dreamtime, Cohen. Tonight. We need to find Scotto. He'll know what Melody is up to, I guarantee it."

Tanner Mildew dashes up the stairs onto the tower, breathless but still thoroughly excited.

"What's the scoop, Betty Boop?" he asks.

"How long til this space ship of yours is ready?"

"Hard to say," Tanner replies. "I've got everything but the guidance system worked out. That may take a while."

"I don't suppose we can launch without a guidance system," Laurel suggests.

"We can, but we wouldn't know where we were headed."

"What else is new? Tanner, get the ship ready for launch as soon as physically possible. If we have to, we'll install the guidance system en route."

"That'll be tricky--"

"I know it will, Tanner, but we're under a bit of pressure at the moment, and it's the kind of pressure I'd rather not be here to face, dig?"

Tanner nods, says, "I'll get right on it, Chief." And with that, he is back to work.

As a cool breeze blows across the tower, the lightning above the black mountains illuminates the sky as far as the eye can see. The sky is growing overcast; soon enough, the storm will come.

"You trust this Scotto person?" Cohen asks.

"He was a close friend of Gary's," Laurel replies; and Cohen is satisfied with that answer.

"Be careful upon your return, Laurel," Father Time says. "The Circle will undoubtedly be looking for you."

"We won't be gone long," Laurel assures him. "Long enough to find Scotto, and get a copy of his book."

"That may be all the time they need," Father Time replies.

"Don't be such a pessimist," says Cohen.

Airee lands on the parapet next to Sierra and her makeshift band. As the wind grows, they are preparing to head inside, and already the guitarist and the violinist are on their way down the ladder. Sierra watches Airee land gracefully, turquoise drum in hand. She never speaks when anyone else is around, but at the moment, she and Airee are alone.

"What's that?" she asks.

"It's for you," Airee replies, handing Sierra the drum.

Sierra takes it in her hand and examines it as though it were the most precious instrument in the world. After a few moments, she pounds it just once to get the sound of it, and hears the unusual musicality present in the drum.

"That's amazingly pretty," she says quite seriously. "Let me try something."

She sits down on a bench, with the drum between her legs, and begins playing it lightly, establishing a very very simple beat, the better to hear the luscious tones which escape alongside every beat. And then she stops again.

"That's going to take a while to get used to," she says with a smile.

"Where'd you get this?"

"I found it in a museum," Airee replies.

"Many thanks, Airee," Sierra says.

"I came to tell you," Airee says, "that Laurel has asked me to leave the castle." Pause. "I'm going back across the mountains to stay with Melody. I doubt I'll ever come back." Pause. "I'll miss you, Sierra."

Sierra rises slowly.

"Miss me?" she says. "Why will you miss me, when I'll be coming with you?"

Moments later, the two friends are off into the air...