

Chapter Twenty-One

Laurel and Airee sit together on a parapet atop the tallest tower in the castle, surveying the vast and ever-changing dream landscape, ever-changing except for the black mountains to the east. It is girl talk, catching up talk, philosophical talk, wandering across a wide range of sadnesses and little victories.

"I'm glad you came back," Airee says softly. "I don't know how the castle could have survived much longer without either one of you... without you or Melody."

"You seemed to be doing quite well," Laurel replies.

"Yes, well, Dawson was a principle factor in keeping everyone's spirits up. The festival was his idea. He wanted to remind everyone that... that there were other reasons we were here besides the two of you, that we came of our own accord, that we... that we still *wanted* this castle to be our Home in the Dreamtime. He wanted us to realize we had to work for it." Pause. "I never appreciated how much work you and Melody did until I started taking it on myself. I think we were starting to lose the place without you, though." Pause. "Let me ask you this," she says suddenly. "How many of the castle inhabitants do you believe are real?"

Laurel pauses, a note of curious caution in her voice, and says, "What do you mean by 'real'?"

"Well, for example, I have no idea if I have any 'real' existence anywhere else. I can't remember, I must have some kind of dreaming amnesia or something. But I can tell, Laurel, just by spending time with you, just by getting to *know* you, that you have an actual existence outside the Dreamtime."

"Wait a minute," Laurel says. "I'm not sure this is something I want to pursue."

"Now Derald and Janszen," says Airee, "the two psychics? I don't think they come from our reality. I don't think they're figments of the dream, but I don't think they come from our reality, either. I think they come from another dimension in spacetime altogether, and are somehow able to dream with us." Pause; she continues almost painfully. "And I don't think Dawson has *any* real counterpart."

Laurel catches a quick breath.

"I think Dawson is totally contained within the Dreamtime," Airee continues. "I'm not demeaning him by saying that. But... I have given this a lot of thought, Laurel, and I believe that there are all sorts of intersections

happening here, not just the intersections of humans from Earth who dream together. I think the Dreamtime is accessible via more routes than just dreaming."

Laurel is silent, fuming, not angry with Airee but suddenly terrified by the implications. She lived here for so long without ever choosing to explore the exact boundaries of the situation. And within the short time that Laurel has been gone, Airee has already managed to acquire a better grasp of the physics of the place than she has.

"What's wrong?" Airee asks. "I know this is difficult to think about, but..."

"It just seems *wrong*," Laurel says, knowing there's nothing "wrong" about it. "You don't introduce ontology into a fairy tale. It's like trying to make a seven course meal out of cotton candy."

"I disagree," says Airee, a note of determination and purpose in her voice that surprises Laurel, shades of Airee's personality that Laurel never noticed suddenly dazzling her. "I think in the coming days, Laurel, we are going to *explode* the boundaries of this situation, and we need to be prepared."

A silence hangs over them for a few small moments, Laurel unwilling to consider the future just yet, and then she asks, "Have you ever been across the black mountains?"

Airee's eyes, fixed on those very same mountains in the distance, replies, "No. Never."

"I can tell you what's across the black mountains," says the voice of a crotchety old man, slowly ascending the staircase to the top of the tower to join them. Laurel and Airee turn, completely surprised to find company here, and see a wizened old man with completely diaphanous gray robes which seem to blend into the rest of his body almost perfectly, and long gray hair and beard, walking with a cane in one hand and carrying a large golden hourglass in the other. He sets the hourglass down almost immediately on a bench, and then brings himself to full height, breathing heavily despite the fact that this is the Dreamtime, and addresses the two of them:

"My name is Father Time. I came to offer my services as temporal consultant." Pause. "Perhaps you've heard of me?"

And that night, for the seventh straight evening in a row, Cohen is awake while Laurel sleeps and enters the Dreamtime. Laurel's daily training no longer involves the visceral, highly experimental,

ontological/metaphysical (get down get crazy throw your mind off a cliff) work; now they spend their days poring over various texts and documents, roaming the Internet for databases full of arcane information, comparing various treatises and manuscripts. We wish we could share more of this search with you, of course, but Courtney is adamant that the Circle's rites remain at least *something* of a secret. What we are allowed to share is the historical context of their search: deep, deep exploration of religious documents, not only Judeo-Christian and its various offshoots, both accepted and heretical, all throughout history, but those with similar resonances (nearly anything monotheistic, from Islam to the Jehovah's Witnesses and weirdness in between you wouldn't believe (most people didn't), focusing on the Judeo-Christian "mysteries" in addition to that which has the most history, the most acceptance. Laurel takes to this study voraciously, having long awaited an "explanation" of the strange path she's embarked upon thanks to Courtney; Courtney, of course, knew well and good that trying to explain things *before* the weird phase of the training would have been rather pointless. Meanwhile, Cohen has a constant yammering in the back of his mind from four disembodied Voices who have begun pestering him to "build a space ship, Cohen, why don't you build a space ship" as though he was some kind of rocket scientist or NASA engineer. Perhaps these Voices are just the shattered, schizoid fragments of his mind, which he damaged too severely in his drug taking days, or in his days of ritual soul-annihilation with Courtney ("reducing, yes, dissolving the ego," said Courtney once, "not heightening it or singing its praises, but eliminating the boundaries between ego and the everything, such that a true experience of cosmos, of white hot void, is possible," to which Cohen replied, " , " and Courtney smiled).

And tonight, as for the last seven nights, Cohen wrestles with these Voices while Laurel wanders off to the Dreamtime. Inherent, unbelievable, near despicable envy fills his nights as he fights off the advances of the Voices and the urge to walk across the hall and shake her awake and plead for help. His survival, he feels, is certainly at stake, and desperate measures may be required. Courtney suggested at the outset of their adventure together: "You will eventually reach a place of great doubt and conflict, where you will find yourself questioning everything you know about everything you know, including what you know about yourself. Very similar, in a way, to the Hero's Journey archetype, mirrored in the story of the Messiah, who accepts the call to adventure, faces a time of deep crisis, descends into the underworld, faces the demons, and then

ascends once again into the light. When your time of deep crisis comes, *that's* when you'll know that all of this is real. That's when you'll know that much more of your Self is invested in me and in the Circle than you ever expected. The training will give you skills to survive the crisis, though, and with my help, the battle with the demons can only make you stronger."

Fair enough, thinks Cohen: the crisis has arrived. After years of work, suddenly Voices appeared in my head, which could be considered a crisis; the demons are the Voices, and somehow, I need to confront them. And this means, also, that I *do* accept that my metaphysical training has given me the skills to survive this. Ontologically I am capable of comprehending what is happening to me, of accepting it, and of evolving beyond it. What we know about the Self tells us that there is just as much validity to a model that says "I am all there is" as there is to one which says "I have no idea what is and what isn't, so I better just roll with the punches, and never mind all this business about 'underlying forms' and 'absolute truths.'" "You think too much," says Vince the cool guy Voice. "You need to just relax. Take a vacation. Get away from all of this Hassan i Sabbah stuff and head off to Maui, dig?" Meanwhile, it would be *easier* to think, he knows, if there weren't images of space ships floating past his mind's eye on a near constant basis now, ranging from the Space Shuttle to the Millennium Falcon to far out space craft he's only seen before in Time/Life® books on the supernatural and old episodes of "In Search Of..."

Is it synchronicity, though, that these Voices have appeared a second time in the very near vicinity of Laurel? And are there lessons to be learned by Gary's ultimate slide into existential doom? What caught Gary off guard? What couldn't he accept? What we know of Gary's history, Cohen reminds himself, and what had struck Laurel the most, was that he had abandoned his faith in God, his Christianity, and had found himself left with nothing (unlike those who never had Christianity or some other religion, who perhaps learn at a very early age that Nothing is actually something very unique and interesting). Cohen has always been the ardent agnostic, willing to accept that something unique is going on, but finding himself coming up with little more than nothing as a definition. (And Laurel, of course, is on the far other end of the scale, having embraced, at last, the Circle's means and ways as her own, having accepted that the Circle is a mystical congregation worthy of her devotion. You won't hear Cohen saying this out loud, of course; but Courtney is absolutely brilliant, sheer brilliance in a can, he realizes, for Courtney reintroduced Laurel to

her Dreamtime at the exact same moment in her training that she brought out the hardcore textual analyses of the life of the Messiah, linking these two events forever in Laurel's mind, almost as though it was the archetype of Jesus Christ himself that opened the door again to the Dreamtime, instead of Courtney.)

"What do you think of the Circle?" Cohen thinks to ask the Voices, and Gale, the headstrong, in-charge Voice responds, "You're a cog in the wheel, my boy, rolling down a steep hill; of course, you *could* design your *space ship* in the shape of a circle if you like...." Don't get us wrong; Cohen's communication with these Voices is a tremendous part of the struggle. He is *not* willing to simply let them shout at him from the nether regions. They antagonize him by their simple presence, but if he was previously falling down the elevator shaft of despair because of their presence, now he has slammed on the brakes and is jammed in the shaft with all his might, unable to release the tension for fear of beginning the plunge again. And they taunt him and tease him and he hangs there, but that's okay for now; Cohen's a tough guy, smiles a lot behind the sweat and the strain on his forehead, occasionally fires off a burst of his own their direction, and has to decide now

who to call for help. The work itself has done this much: it has given him a clear enough perception of what he considers real -- what he has *chosen* to appear as real -- that he is confident these Voices are apparitions within his perceptual control, if only he can discover the means. Laurel is *not* an option here. She is entering a remarkable period of growth, and she doesn't need interference from him (it is always darkest before the dawn, he thinks). It is *just* weird enough here that I am thoroughly uncomfortable with this state of affairs.

That's it, then, he decides, climbing out of bed this evening. Courtney practically owes me, he thinks, after having lavished Laurel and her dreams with so much personal attention (as though Courtney herself could somehow climb inside those dreams and run the show). He opens his door, only to find Courtney standing there smiling, as though she's been waiting for him, and he's startled enough to jump.

"Courtney," he says, "it really *gets* me when you do that."

"What," she says, "read your mind? Come on, let's go downstairs and chat. We don't want to wake up Laurel."

In the basement -- the seat of the rituals, where the very outer layer of the Circle's deep hidden mysteries has been revealed to a potential initiate -- Cohen and Courtney seat themselves on the floor together, cross-

legged, facing each other and holding hands, creating a circuit of energy between them. The amount of implicit trust Cohen has in Courtney cannot be quantified; he only knows that the Voices actually *shut up* when he's in her presence, and that's a factor that can't be denied. After over a year together, she knows him incredibly well. She's certainly his friend, but more importantly, she's his mentor, and he's never had one of those before. Courtney says, "Let me start by asking you about Laurel. Specifically, Cohen: why does her dreaming make you so jealous?"

This question -- *immediately* she's got him -- catches him offguard. He hadn't realized he was jealous until now.

"I mean," she continues, smiling, "it's not as though you can share this entire journey with her. As training partners, you've become close, but you will be judged alone when initiation comes."

"I understand," he says.

"That's good," she replies. "Certainly you've resented the attention I've paid her recently as I reacquainted her with her dreaming mind. But Cohen... all this time, you've had your own significant situation, which Laurel is in no position to share, which you aren't even willing to tell her about. In short, Cohen: selfishness is a dangerous friend, *comprenez?*"

"Uh huh," he says, keenly embarrassed.

"Now then," she rumbles on, "with that said, let me also say that extenuating circumstances being what they are, I understand that selfishness has been part of your strategy. When the self itself is at stake, this is a healthy enough sign. It brought you here to me, after all, where you can start to get some help. So please, Cohen, communicate. Let me know what's up in your world, and perhaps I can lend a hand."

Quietly relieved, he braces himself to speak, knowing that as soon as they can, his Voices are going to punish him for this maneuver. But here it is nonetheless....

"I think," he says softly, feeling the weight of Courtney's scrutiny, "that I am hearing Voices."

A leaden weight rises from his shoulders as the words escape his lips. He looks up with a soft joy in his eye, expecting to find some kind of release in Courtney's response. Courtney, however, has gone white, suddenly seething with a kind of fury and unsettling confusion he has only seen in her once before. A quick flourish of panic rises up in him, but then Courtney's demeanor instantly resolves into her usual, calmly intent appearance, and she says, "Don't sweat it, Cohen. Really."

"You looked a bit surprised," Cohen replies. "I didn't expect this to surprise you."

"Sorry, Cohen," she says. "There are some things in this universe that still do manage to surprise me, even now. And Voices in your head, in this time and place, is one of them. What are the Voices saying?"

"They're telling me to build a space ship, but I doubt it means anything. Listen, haven't you ever encountered anyone who was hearing Voices before?"

"Don't panic, Cohen, please," she says. "Have they told you anything else? Think hard, Cohen. I need to know everything of substance they may have told you."

Cohen closes his eyes and drops into a tranquil place, using Courtney's energy as well as his own, calls up the memory of the one blistering moment when Gale had something of import to say, and begins reciting it for Courtney's benefit: "Here is what we know about our interaction with the human organism, Cohen. Once we've entered a human's higher functions, we cannot ever leave without leaving the human dead. You would slowly, psychically, bleed to death from the sudden gaping hole that would be our departure. Your mind can adapt to our *presence* because we are here to assist; your mind can *not* adapt to our *absence*, because, of course, we're gone, and there isn't a doctor on your planet who would understand the symptoms and be able to treat you in time. We are *here* now, deep inside of you, and don't think for a second, Cohen, we made the decision to come to you lightly, as though we were just hopping across the multiverse looking for innocent, helpless organisms upon which to wreak our own mercurial brand of havoc. No, Cohen -- we chose you because we believed you could help us. And you aren't alone -- we've chosen hundreds of thousands all across your planet, some of whom can't handle us, some of whom are now our allies, and more importantly, our friends. The multiverse is in an uproar, Cohen -- All Things are coming to a head. It is unfortunate for you, perhaps, that humanity must act as interface for the rest of the multiverse's negotiations and struggles, but so it is -- we cannot argue with the multiverse, we can only struggle with the cards we're dealt." When he's finished, a wave of exhaustion wells over him, but Courtney squeezes his hands and supports him.

"This confirms our suspicions," says Courtney. "These Voices have taken over a small network of human beings across the globe. We don't know their motives, we don't know their plans, we don't know their origins, and we don't know the nature of their existence; all we know is

that they are orbiting perilously close to us. It's my suspicion that they chose Gary because they somehow knew we were headed for Laurel. They must have chosen you for the same reason. Why they don't simply choose Laurel herself is beyond me. And they've never managed to invade a full member of the Circle proper."

"They're getting close," Cohen says.

"Perhaps they're expecting you to become a sort of spy within our organization," she replies. "Then again, perhaps they're simply intending to attempt peaceful, direct communication with us. It's impossible to tell." Long pause.

"So what do you propose I do?" Cohen asks, the tension within him mounting as he ponders all the imponderables, walks the tightrope between crazy and something altogether elsewise with alarming speed and recklessness.

Courtney smiles. "I dunno. It's yer head."

She lets go of his hands, figuratively cutting the tether which kept him connected to safety. He lies back on the floor, suddenly assailed and assaulted by the buzz of screaming, angry Voices in his head, and he knows that this is his judgment call entirely, that this is the beginning of the end, that this is territory where no one but no one can guide him or help him. If he survives it on his own, then he is a worthy candidate for initiation into the inner Circle, into a congregation that plans to activate the new Messiah and somehow save the world. If he cannot survive it on his own, then they never needed his assistance to begin with, and they are better off without him. Reels in despair and violent agony and shame, and Gale's Voice shouts, "You simpering little weasel, since when are we the Bad Guys? Since when do you need *their* help figuring out what's happening on your paltry little planet? You think you got it bad, you giant schmuck? Try this on for size: you're an alien intelligence between an olive branch and a hard place, and now you gotta put up with geometric interference from the Jesus club?" And Cohen's crawling across the floor, as Gregory and Jack turn into bruiser Voices and kick him and pound him from the inside, he feels like William Shatner in *Kingdom of the Spiders* under assault by about a thousand ugly creepy things, crawling up the stairs out of the basement, and they're shouting, "Punk boy, loser boy, first we're gonna mess up that shiny hair of yours, and then we're gonna fingerprint on your leather jacket, and then we're gonna *teach you ballet!*", just totally ruining his cool here, tickling him in church and tripping him as he runs out onto the football field, and Vince is in the background,

mellower than a Jimmy Buffett concert, calling out, "Hey, Cohen, it's not too late to build that space ship, and if you act now, we'll throw in this handy 42-piece socket and wrench set!" but nothing's sinking in, Cohen's a determined, Stallone-like monster on his way to the second floor, fighting off the disgusting and virulent influence of that which cannot be understood, until he's standing before Laurel's door, a furious decision welling up inside of him.

It seems, thinks Cohen, she would be perfectly content to just stay in that dream forever, I don't think she'd mind at all if she could just check out of this reality and move into the dreaming, permanently. And something about that impulse is foreign to me. Something about that desire seems somehow dishonest to me, as though the dreaming could have any relevance if there wasn't some kind of fundamental reality for it to play with and riff on and dance with. But: if that's where she is, then that's where I must go to find her. And perhaps in that mystical, magical dream land of hers, she can *help me get rid of these Voices in my head*, or I may very well yet have an appointment with quicksand, yea verily.

He opens the door slowly, quietly, so as not to disturb her fitful slumber, quietly collapses on the floor next to her bed. As Cohen closes his eyes, already he can feel that there is an enormous reservoir of energy in this room. And Cohen himself is no stranger to such energy; he brings his entire concentration to bear on the situation, prepares himself to leap off a metaphysical cliff, as it were. It is true that perhaps only Laurel and Melody alone of all the people on this planet are able to dream together, but it may also be true that the times they are a-changin', and soon enough this reality will undergo more dramatic paradigm shifts in a shorter span of time than anyone will be able to withstand -- so why not start now? Why not start here?

Laurel, he thinks to himself, I hope you're ready for me, because tonight I will be the man of your dreams.