

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Shortly after the physical bodies of Laurel, Cohen, and the Amazing Dr. X were yanked into the Dreamtime by the force of Laurel's will, several enormous volcanoes appeared in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, much to the surprise of oceanographers everywhere, and began spraying bursts of deep blue lava into the air. Upon later analysis, this lava turned out to be molten Play-Doh, a situation that caused more than a few scientists to resort to a week or so of heavy drinking. Meanwhile, the entire population of the town of Reykjavik, Iceland, woke up the following morning to discover that each and every individual's skin had turned a purplish-red plaid overnight.

At a rodeo in El Paso, Texas, as rodeo star Cowboy Slim Sampson attempted to bring down a large black bull, that large black bull suddenly grabbed Cowboy Slim's lasso with its powerful hands and yanked Cowboy Slim off his horse and several hundred feet through the air. It would be the last time Cowboy Slim attempted to lasso a living centaur, and the centaur himself would soon make quite a profitable living for himself on the rodeo circuit. Meanwhile, seventy-three mermaids were counted swimming through the English Channel on their way to "a party in the Atlantean ruins," according to an interview given by one of the stragglers of the bunch. When a group of marine biologists attempted to capture one of the mermaids for study, the group's boat was promptly attacked by a giant sea turtle (the size of a small island) and sunk, with the loss of all hands.

Ghana reported its first ever blizzard in history, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives due to the extreme change of temperature. Within seven hours, the snow melted, but the damage, of course, was done. Meanwhile, in New Guinea, bowling ball sized hail was reported; loss of life was miraculously slight, but property damage was extensive. And in Egypt, several of the great pyramids began mysteriously *bleeding*; the blood, when studied, turned out to be AB positive in most cases, with one O negative exception. Probably the most remarkable occurrence, however, was the sudden reappearance, after thousands of years, of the elven population in Ireland -- but that, of course, is a story for another day.

Adriana the sorceress watched the goings-on with a strange mixture of sadness and elation. Clearly the Amazing Dr. X had managed to rescue Laurel from the clutches of the Circle -- that much was plainly apparent. And Laurel's flight into the Dreamtime meant that the rules on the planet's surface were *changing*. It might just be possible, thought Adriana, for Laurel and her sister to shake things up so thoroughly that no alien race would be able to sustain a foothold on this Earth. "We got enough problems here," she said to herself, "without all these damn *foreigners*."

But -- in order to fully cleanse the planet's surface, Adriana herself would need to undergo a significant transformation. The old ways of doing things were no longer appropriate. New defenses must be established. Time to turn the place over to young blood, is what it looks like. "I gotta go into retirement," she said. "Not so bad. I could use a vacation." The weather channel no longer interested her anyway; it could certainly show the patterns of precipitation on her surface, but it could never accurately show her the patterns of emotion -- and that's where all the action was at, to be sure.

Ah, well, she sighed, soon enough it would all be over, and she could take the longest nap in recorded history. She would set her alarm to wake her up promptly before the heat death of the universe, take a few millennia to travel and see some sights, and then slide into the end of all things with the grace of an aging diva at her closing performance. This life would seem like a dream to her then. These struggles would return to the background where they belonged, in their proper perspective -- she had already invested much too much energy as it was.

Perhaps the Supreme Being was right, she thought -- perhaps the policy of nonintervention was a good idea after all. Perhaps I should have let this place decay just the way everyone expected it to.

But perhaps I was simply too good a mother for that....

To Laurel, the sensation of entering the Dreamtime via the physical world is akin to suddenly swimming through a wall of Jell-O® brand gelatin. She is conscious of dragging Cohen and Dr. X with her, conscious of the direction in which she is headed, but she is not aware of much else until she suddenly, blindly, emerges in the Dreamtime itself,

standing in the middle of the castle foyer. She is thoroughly stunned at this turn of events; never *ever* had she imagined that she could enter the Dreamtime without falling asleep, but somehow, instinctively, she was able to bridge the distance between the two realities by sheer willpower. She stands alone for a few seconds, taking in the sight of the castle through a different set of eyes than she normally does. The underlying structure of the place -- the dream stuff which composes the castle -- is visible to her now, underneath the beautiful facade. She can see the intricate complexity with which the energy of so many different dreams has come together to form this place. She is, for the first time, truly astonished by the castle -- *her* castle -- and she realizes, quite simply, that she has just performed a miracle by bringing them here.

"Everybody okay?" she asks quietly.

"Uh," says Cohen.

"Blurrgh," Dr. X replies.

She turns, sees them both collapsed on the floor behind her, smiles just a little bit.

"Sorry about the sudden move," she says, "but I figured you'd appreciate it more than smashing into the ground."

"Uh huh," says Cohen, nodding slightly.

"Urrggghh," says Dr. X.

Dawson the butler appears in the foyer, almost at a brisk run, followed by Tanner Mildew the boy genius. They, too, seem thoroughly and completely astonished at Laurel's presence.

"Laurel!" Dawson exclaims.

And when she turns to greet them, a sharp breath catches her -- for she can seem them both *truly* now as they are, made only of the stuff of dreams and nothing more. They are dream wraiths, with no external lives. They come from nowhere but here. It is just as Airee Macpherson had told her was probably the case -- and yet face to face with the reality of it, she finds herself feeling suddenly lost. These are her friends, after all...

"Laurel, is there some kind of problem?" Dawson asks as he comes closer. "The timing of this visit is most unexpected."

"No, Dawson," she says quietly. "No problem."

"You guys just broke reality again, didn't you?" says Tanner Mildew the boy genius.

Laurel nods.

"I figured as much." He turns to Dawson, says, "It's just like I told you. Leaks are springing up in the Dreamtime. Pretty soon the barrier between the Dreamtime and waking reality is going to dissolve entirely."

"And then where will we be?" Dawson asks.

"We'll be *alive*," Tanner replies.

Dr. X manages to climb to his feet. His shining white suit is still immaculate and slick.

"Let me guess," he says to Laurel. "This is where you spend your evenings?"

"Uh huh," she replies. "You want me to show you around?"

They tour the castle slowly, still in a slight daze from the phase transition that brought them here. Laurel asks Dawson and Tanner to leave her for a while; it is too much for her to accept that they are not actually "actual" in the same sense that she is actual, that Cohen is actual. She is loathe to run into any of her other friends (Derald & Janszen, or Sierra, or Alain the chef, or even Airee Macpherson (heaven forbid *she* turn out to be a dream wraith)) for the same reason. But of the myriad of castle guests and residents they pass in the hallways -- in the basement, on the battlements, in the great halls and the recreation rooms -- only a small handful seem to be dream wraiths. And periodically, Dr. X recognizes one of the guests and waves hello.

"You know that guy?" she asks him, after passing a mysterious dude in a blue pinstriped jacket.

"Uh huh," he says. "That's the Mysterious Ted Bailey."

"How do you know him?"

"He's a super hero from another dimension," he replies.

"Whaddya mean, another dimension?" Cohen asks.

"If," Dr. X replies, "Earth lies in one dimension, and the Dreamtime lies in another, it might be possible to presume the existence of even more dimensions, might it not?"

"Oh," Cohen says. "Quantum many worlds theory."

"Name dropper," Laurel says.

"It's not so quantum," Dr. X says. "It's more an issue of aesthetics."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cohen asks.

"In a given dimension," says Dr. X, "it is *not* the case that at every point in time for which two outcomes are possible, *both* outcomes miraculously 'become' separate universes. That is *not* what happens. So in that respect, the many worlds theory is wrong. By the same token, you shouldn't assume that only one version of reality ever evolved, and you happened to be living in it, back on Earth. That's not what happened either." They pause momentarily as the entire hallway ahead of them suddenly bursts into a magical rendition of a hit Stephen Sondheim tune; and when the song and dance is over, they proceed on their way. "What actually happened is that you have billions of parallel realities existing in a multiverse, with relatively few passageways between them. This reality -- this human Dreamtime -- is connected in some vague way to several million other realities, but it is connected to Earth's reality in a fairly specific way. Although now -- you seem to have created a new doorway between them, Laurel."

"Mr. Wizard never mentioned anything about this," Laurel says with a sigh.

"Don't fret," says Dr. X. "In a context like this, 'metaphysics' takes on a whole new meaning. And I would have to say you have quite an affinity for metaphysics, in all of its various guises."

They pause at a large open window, somewhere on the third floor, looking out over the vast expanse of the Dreamtime itself. Laurel finds herself astonished at the sight: a vast jungle of rampaging, uncontrollable dream matter surrounds the castle walls. It is the land of those whose dreams never approach lucidity, the land of crazy faces and bizarre scenarios, random images of powerful intensity, nightmares and daydreams and impossible encounters. The recklessness of those dreamers amazes her, how they twist and turn and dangle themselves off metaphorical cliffs -- and at any moment they are only moments away from lucidity, from the safety of this castle, for instance. And beyond the jungle, she sees the black mountain range off in the distance, ominous and foreboding; and lightning lights up the sky above it, as though a terrible thunderstorm were headed this way. A shiver passes through her. Cohen takes her hand in his, however, and she is suddenly comforted.

"You have a lot of questions to answer," Laurel says to Dr. X as they descend down a long spiral staircase.

"I know," he replies.

"I need to know about Melody," she says. "And about her kidnappers. And about the Circle. I need to know a lot of things."

"I imagine you do," he says. "There's a lot you should know, Laurel, and it seems that now is quite definitely a good time to tell you."

"You've been watching me for some time, haven't you," she says.

"Yes, we have," he replies.

"We?" Cohen asks.

"Myself," says Dr. X. "And Adriana the sorceress -- more commonly known as Mother Nature. And another individual, whom I believe you've met..."

They come to the end of the staircase, open a small doorway, and find themselves in the hot tub room. Susie Satori sits in the tub, and the expression on her face is as far from ecstatic bliss as it has ever been -- both Laurel and Cohen are instantly aware that Susie is still possessed by the Voices, by Gale and Vince and Gregory and Jack. Instinctively Cohen's hand moves to the blood-soaked bandage around his forehead.

"Greetings, Cohen," says Gale's Voice through Susie's mouth.

"What a surprise, to see you here after the way you treated us."

And in the hot tub next to Susie sits Laurel's temporal advisor, Father Time.

"Why, Dr. X," says Father Time, "I never expected to see *you* here."

"Hello yourself," says Dr. X with a smile. "I see you've made yourself comfortable."

"Yes, well," replies Father Time, "we do what we must."

Laurel cannot take her eyes away from Susie Satori, and Susie, a dream wraith now controlled by Gale, returns her gaze with a steely glare. Since Gary's death, Gale has been Laurel's mortal enemy -- and now, here she is, soaking in Laurel's hot tub with Laurel's temporal advisor (whatever *that* means). It is almost too much for Laurel to accept; yet she bites down on her surging rage, and merely asks,

"Father Time, what the hell is going on here?"

"Gale and I have been discussing the nature of our situation," Father Time replies slowly. "We were, in fact, hoping you would join us soon."

"Very well," says Laurel. She disrobes smoothly and slowly, leaving only her black bandanna in place, and then slips into the tub, across from Susie and Father Time. "Here I am."

An awkward silence follows; Cohen pauses only momentarily, then he removes his battered leather jacket, blue jeans and T-shirt and descends into the hot tub, next to Laurel. His eyes never leave Gale's eyes.

"I see you've found a way to avoid us," says Gale, slightly impressed despite herself. "Although drilling a hole in your forehead is hardly the most elegant way of handling things...."

Laurel gasps, turns to Cohen, who simply nods and smiles. Slowly he removes the blood-soaked bandage. A small round hole is present in the middle of his forehead.

"Cohen, my God!" Laurel exclaims. "What happened?"

"It's an operation called trepanning," Cohen replies. "Mrs. Wormwood herself attended. It seems she hates these Voices even more than I do."

Laurel turns to Gale, almost viciously, and says, "You told us the Voices could never leave a human brain, or the human host would die."

"It's true," Gale replies. "What Cohen has done is destroyed a part of his prefrontal lobe. Although the damage is superficial in some sense, the human brain cannot properly decode our messages without a fully functioning prefrontal lobe. So although we still maintain a presence inside Cohen's mind, he can no longer hear us." Pause. "Rest assured, my friends, the moment we decide to leave Cohen altogether, his brain will cease functioning altogether as well. We consider it a... *kindness* on our part that we have not simply abandoned him already."

"Yadda yadda yadda," says Cohen.

Laurel quickly turns to Cohen, says, "How do you feel, Cohen?"

"How do I feel?" he replies. "I feel a little dizzy, a little light-headed. I feel as though I've just released a metric ton of pressure through this little hole." Pause. "I feel great, Laurel, don't worry about me."

She looks into his eyes, sees that he is as sincere as he has ever been. He is there to support her, she realizes; he gave up the Circle to be with her. Yes, she does not need to worry about Cohen.

But Gale, on the other hand....

"You needn't worry about Gale, either," says Father Time.

"Is that so?" Laurel responds.

"You're lucky to be alive, Laurel," says Gale. "You very nearly sealed your own fate."

Before Laurel has a chance to respond, she hears Dr. X say, "That much is true." He is moving from the doorway now to the edge of the hot tub, pauses only a moment, then steps into the hot tub fully clothed and sits down. Behind the white lenses of his sunglasses, his expressions remain inscrutable, his sympathies unknown. Laurel and Cohen listen intently as he begins speaking.

"The Circle is a pestilence on the planet Earth, Laurel. Has been, down through the centuries. They're dangerous, because they operate so close to the truth -- and yet they twist it to suit their own agenda. They toy with incredible power, as though it were their birthright. They have the arrogance that inevitably comes with uncovering secret knowledge, with guarding hidden mysteries." Pause. "It was Mrs. Wormwood who kidnapped your sister, Laurel."

The room is silent as the news sinks in. Screaming bitterness makes itself known inside Laurel. She was close enough to her sister's kidnapper to have spat in her face -- and instead, she was caught up in the charade, enraptured by the attention being lavished upon her.

"When you and Melody were twelve," Dr. X continues, "you shared your first dream together. It was an event of monumental importance, Laurel. It signaled to all those who were paying attention that the human race was approaching a transformation. Father Time and I were watching, and Adriana. But we still labored then under a certain policy of nonintervention, given to us by our superiors. Meanwhile, the Circle had no such policy. The Circle recognized the inherent *power* in what you had done, and immediately attempted to swallow it up."

"They believed Melody was stronger than you," says Father Time softly. "They believed she would be much more valuable to them, in the pursuit of their ultimate goal."

Laurel almost hesitates before asking, "And just what is their ultimate goal?"

"They intend," says Father Time, "to produce a Messiah. Someone who can save the Earth from its wicked ways, someone who can protect the Earth from the coming alien invasion... and most importantly, someone

they can control during the final Concrecence, someone they can use to save *themselves*."

"A Messiah..." Laurel whispers.

"Imagine an energy field that surrounds and infuses all of humanity," says Dr. X. "A morphogenetic field -- a layer of existence which contains every human memory, every human thought, every impression, every dream, every sensation. Over time, certain memories and beliefs gather strength and power, because of the sheer number of humans who share those memories and beliefs. These become *Archetypes*, beliefs and memories which soon attain *independent existence* within the morphogenetic field. Every human culture contributes its own Archetypes to the cosmological framework, and these Archetypes coexist on a spiritual level, invisibly supporting those humans who sustain them by believing in them. The figure of the Messiah is one such Archetype."

"Then what they told us about the body and blood..." begins Cohen.

"All of that is true," replies Dr. X. "Just as you were told. Not only that -- do you remember the appearance of the Shroud of Turin several years back, supposedly the shroud in which the original Messiah was buried? That was a decoy, planted by members of the Circle, in order to distract any who might come too close to the truth -- that the Circle actually *does* possess the original burial shroud. They possess the original pieces of silver which Judas Iscariot was paid to betray the Messiah. They possess the bowl with which Pontius Pilate washed his hands of guilt. They possess the spear which pierced the Messiah's side as he hung on the cross, and the spikes which held him there. They know the final resting place of the Holy Grail, and their highest members are said to drink from it during their final initiation.

"Mind you, the Circle was originally begun by several women who traveled with the Messiah in his days on Earth. In the early days, the nascent Christian Church did not hold women in any higher regard than it does today. These women carried with them the knowledge that they had *seen* the Messiah, had been given his grace *directly* -- and yet were still shunned from positions of importance within the Church after the Messiah's ascension into the heavens. So the Circle was intended to be *their* outlet, *their* context within which truly appropriate and wondrous worship

was possible. But from the very beginning, a spark of bitterness controlled them. After all, it was *they* who had access to all of the actual mysteries -- and yet, there was no way to prove it to the world at large."

Laurel's hand tightens around Cohen's as Dr. X speaks. His words are entirely outrageous -- but no other explanation will do.

"The brothers of the early Christian Church expected Christ's return within their lifetimes," says Dr. X. His expression hasn't changed since he began speaking; only a slick film of sweat on his forehead reveals that the water of the hot tub affects him at all, at all. "The women of the Circle knew better. It was their goal *from the very beginning* to properly set the stage for the Second Coming of the Messiah. It was their plan to *ensure* that when the Messiah returned, *they* would be recognized at his right hand."

"And now..." says Laurel.

"Now," says Father Time, "they are within sight of activating the Archetype themselves."

"Activating the Archetype?" says Cohen.

Father Time nods. "Look at me," he says. "I am the embodiment of Time itself!" He laughs quietly, says, "And Adriana, whom you haven't met... Mother Nature, condensed into a human form, so that she might *feel* this life the way you feel it, so that she might *empathize* with your plight... And the Messiah, too, is an Archetype that can be called into human form once again. Left to its own devices, who knows when the Messiah might visit us again?"

Dr. X quite noticeably looks away.

"But," continues Father Time, "with the proper technology, with the proper approach, perhaps the Archetype can be Activated by someone on Earth."

"What does this have to do with Melody?" Laurel asks.

"The Archetype needs a human form in which to incarnate," replies Father Time. "I believe they intended Melody to be that person."

Silence follows, the kind of silence that can only follow when the human embodiment of Time itself tells you your sister was intended to be the Second Coming of the Messiah. She feels like crying, but doesn't have the energy -- mostly she feels cold and grim, like a cemetery where all her Hopes are buried.

"It makes sense," Dr. X says. "She demonstrated via her dreaming that she had access to other planes of existence, and could deal with the supernatural without folding. She wasn't raised a Christian, so she didn't have any preconceived notions about the Messiah or about the Second Coming. And of course, she's a woman, which is integral to the part of the plan which involves humiliating the Christian Church."

"How did they..." Laurel begins. "I mean, what 'technology' were they going to use?"

"Allow me," says the smug Voice of Gale. "While all of this mystic Melodrama was taking place, down through the centuries, you humans weren't alone on the planet Earth."

"Oh, *man*," says Cohen softly. "There's *more*..."

"In the universal community," says Gale, "Earth is a bit of an anomaly, as it turns out. It is, quite literally, the only planet where intelligent life has not yet left its solar system, the only planet where intelligent life still believes it is *alone* in the universe. In fact, humanity's *ignorance* in the face of incontrovertible evidence is astonishing. Other races, other species, have been using planet Earth as a tourist attraction since the very dawn of time itself."

"Not quite," Father Time murmurs.

"It was just an expression," Gale replies. "At any rate... the Circle began developing an actual, specific *ritual* for calling this 'Messiah' Archetype back to Earth. They ran several trial runs after the ritual was initially developed... this was back in the late 1800s. They were experiments, basically, aimed at lesser Archetypes. And what they managed to accomplish in those early days was... *contact*."

"With aliens," says Laurel.

"Indeed," Gale replies. "If 'human' is a term for your race, then in your language, 'shadow' is probably the only appropriate term for theirs. My own race has never been able to communicate with the Shadows, but they seem to have taken quite an interest in the Circle, for one reason or another. They've been seeding the Circle with advanced technology for a couple hundred years now."

"Melody was drugged by Mrs. Wormwood," says Dr. X. "When we finally decided to throw out the policy of nonintervention, I immediately went to rescue her. She was being held at the headquarters of

InfiniTek, a global technology corporation which is actually a front organization for the Circle. The drugs were apparently designed with her nervous system in mind. Their plan was to brainwash her, terrify her with apocalyptic imagery and try to convince her that her destiny was to become a sort of Antichrist figure. They *knew* she would resist, and they knew that when they *did* Activate her, she would immediately aim for the exact opposite of what she believed her brainwashing to be, thus aligning her own spirit with that of the Messiah's."

"They tried the same thing on me," says Laurel slowly. "During my initiation. They tried to convince me that Melody was going to become the Antichrist."

"Of course," says Cohen. "After Melody escaped, they must have decided you were the next best thing." Laurel cringes at those words. "And they wanted you to believe that *she* was the Antichrist so that if Melody ever did manage to, somehow..."

"...Activate *herself*," Dr. X finishes, "you would resist her with every bit of strength you had."

"This is too fucking much," says Laurel. "We're just kids. We aren't--"

"Courtney is just a kid, Laurel, and look at what she almost accomplished," Cohen interrupts. "She almost *had* you."

"It's not about age," says Father Time. "It's about energy. And there's new energy sweeping the planet, Laurel, you must face that now."

"There's more than just 'energy' sweeping the planet," Laurel replies bitterly. She turns to Gale, says, "What the hell else is going on, Gale? Why are you even here?"

Gale is momentarily taken aback by the force of Laurel's question. Recovering quickly, however, she replies, "There's a war in outer space, Laurel." Long, long pause. "It's headed this way. Earth is intended to be the final proving ground."

"A war?" Laurel says, almost a whisper. "Why...?"

Gale sighs deeply, as though she is suddenly, surprisingly, emotionally affected by something quite distant. "We can't communicate, Laurel. There are too many of us, speaking too many languages... But we can all seem to speak English. We can all seem to appreciate humankind's strengths and weaknesses. Every known race in the galaxy is sending

representatives to Earth. Over half of them have already arrived, and are simply biding their time, quietly working in the background -- as *my* kind have been. I have told you before, Laurel, how our Voices possess a network of many thousands of humans across the planet."

"Yes, you've told me," Laurel says, her voice drowning in derision and sorrow. "I've seen the effects first hand, remember?"

Gale leans forward suddenly, is close enough to Laurel that they feel each other's breath, and Gale says,

"We wanted Gary's *help*, not his self-destruction. Don't you understand what's at stake? If we could just *convince someone to listen to us...*"

"And do what?" Cohen says softly.

Gale takes a deep breath, her eyes locked on Laurel's.

"You *must* build your space ship *soon*, Laurel, if you intend to leave this place before the final battle comes. You, Laurel, you alone have the resources at your disposal, here in the Dreamtime. You alone, Laurel, can ensure that humanity survives the coming Concrescence... for there is no telling how humanity will be used and abused as pawns and weapons of war. We -- my kind and I -- came here first to give you a chance to *escape*. When the war comes, we have no chance of surviving. We aren't a powerful race, we don't understand violence in all its forms... all we wanted, Laurel, was to communicate with *you* in a way we could never communicate with so many others. We thought... we thought the sacrifice of a few of your kind and a few of our kind was *worth* it. Please, Laurel... please understand. We wanted only contact. We wanted only communication."

Laurel's eyes are locked on Gale's as well, and it is a staring match which she is losing, her resistance draining away as Gale's words slowly and simply unfold. Laurel doesn't understand violence anymore than Gale does, as it turns out. Laurel doesn't understand much of anything these days. But she understands that her sister is *alive*.

"Where's Melody now?" she asks Gale quietly.

"I don't know," Gale replies. "I know she's busy, though. I know who you can talk to. A young writer by the name of Scotto... perhaps you remember him?"

Laurel nods.

"Talk to him. His book, 'Lullabye for Thunderstorms,' is almost finished. Perhaps he can help you discover Melody's whereabouts and what she intends to do."

And Laurel witnesses a small smile appear on Gale's face, a smile which she is almost compelled to return. It is good, after all this time, incredibly good, that they have managed to communicate. Laurel's eyes turn next to Father Time, the wizened old mystery man whose role seems to be simply to stir up the pot. He too smiles, says,

"Take care with the time you have left, Laurel."

And she nods again, aware of the depth, the scope, the magnitude of what is happening around her. She turns, finally, to the Amazing Dr. X, her amazing rescuer, and asks,

"And just who do you think *you* are?"

He simply grins and says, "I'm the second son of the Supreme Being, Laurel." Pause. "Well, you don't think he stopped at just *one* son, did you?"

Dr. X climbs out of the hot tub, his white suit completely dry and immaculate, as though it were impervious to absolutely any elemental distress.

"I'll be back soon," he says, "now that I know the way here. I have to say goodbye to someone before we leave this place." And with that, he simply vanishes into thin air, a dimensional traveler who knows no bounds.

Laurel turns to Cohen and whispers in his ear, "I think we need to find Tanner Mildew. If anybody around here can help us build a space ship, it's gotta be the boy genius."

Courtney sits alone inside a small, dark board room, deep within the halls of InfiniTek, the shiniest building in London. The pictures on the wall are pastoral scenes, hardly calming under the circumstances. She knows full well the reprimand that is headed her way, knows that it would have come immediately had it not been for other extenuating circumstances. Laurel and Cohen are gone, and she is truly alone within the Circle, a pariah among her peers for having failed with Laurel. Her depression is deep -- she has, after all, compromised and betrayed the only

true path she has ever known in her years and years of life. It is always darkest just before dawn.

Undoubtedly, her mother is going to be very upset.

Soon enough, Mrs. Wormwood joins her, sits at the far end of the room and glares for a long, long moment, long enough to make Courtney's spirit wither entirely, as though she were born worthless and grew even more so with the passing of time.

"Mother," she begins softly.

"Be quiet," Mrs. Wormwood replies instantly. "Speak when you are addressed, and only when you are addressed."

Yes indeed, her mother is *quite* upset.

"I want you to know, Courtney, that although the burden of shame for this horrible chain of events must inevitably fall upon you, I personally can sympathize with your position. It is the second time that Amazing bastard has interfered with our plans, and you had no way of anticipating his presence. We *all* must accept failure for that. But," she says ominously, drawing a very serious breath, "had Laurel been better prepared, she never would have agreed to such a rescue. Had Laurel been properly attenuated to you, Courtney, you could have held her here. You could have used that boy you had at your disposal to *keep* her here, instead of watching them both escape. I expected a great deal more from you, Courtney, and I am entirely disappointed."

Courtney's head falls quite low. She is not worthy of self-pity, she realizes, having damaged the Circle so severely.

"Still and all," Mrs. Wormwood continues, "you are nevertheless the brightest of our pupils."

Courtney allows her eyes to rise.

"We cannot send the elders into the world," says Mrs. Wormwood. "We cannot risk their loss. They would be seen by our enemies, would be attacked mercilessly by the hounds of the devil. And yet... Melody is still walking free out there somewhere, unaware that our programming lies latent within her. She thinks her shaman cleansed her... how little does she truly know. So young, so awesomely naive and powerful..."

And then Mrs. Wormwood leans forward, a gleam in her eye, smiles at her daughter so brightly that Courtney cannot help but suddenly see Hope, and Mrs. Wormwood says, "Courtney, *you* must find Melody

and Activate her. It falls to *you* to rectify your mistake. You have *one final chance* to bring us the Messiah, Courtney. And I want to know -- tell me with all the honesty and passion of your convictions, Courtney -- will you this time be prepared?"

Courtney does not hesitate. It is a matter, after all, of life and death -- of afterlife and the avoidance of death.

"I will," she says softly, firmly.

"Good," says Mrs. Wormwood. "I know not how we will find her. Job the Wonder Computer can tell us that she still dreams, but cannot pinpoint her location on Earth."

"I have an idea," Courtney says. "I may be able to find her."

Mrs. Wormwood's eyebrows raise, but she asks no questions.

"Excellent, Courtney. You must leave immediately. Before you go, I will give you the words with which to Activate her." Pause. "If she is not truly the Messiah, these words will instead *destroy* her."

And then, in that room, Mrs. Wormwood speaks to Courtney ***words that cannot be recorded in this text***, and Courtney memorizes them immediately, absorbs them into her psyche.

They stare at each other then across the long black marble table, no longer master and disciple, but once again, after so much time, mother and daughter. And Mrs. Wormwood says,

"Be careful, Courtney. Be careful, my child. You are God's greatest blessing to me, and I love you."

And Courtney allows herself a small smile, and then she leaves the room.

Mrs. Wormwood is suddenly all business, pressing a button on a nearby intercom, saying, "PowerSpike! Listen up!"

And the voice of Paul Mortstone, a.k.a. PowerSpike!, Britain's greatest hacker, is suddenly online: "Let's hear it, Mrs. W."

"Begin reprogramming Job the Wonder Computer for battle."

"For battle?" PowerSpike! asks, more than a little surprised.

"For battle in the Dreamtime, PowerSpike!," replies Mrs. Wormwood.

PowerSpike! hesitates, then risks offending her, says, "With all due respect, Mrs. W., Job is now too sentient for me to risk screwing with her fundamental programming. She's her own being now."

"Don't give me that crap," Mrs. Wormwood replies. "She's a computer, and she belongs to us. If we can't destroy these twins on Earth, we'll destroy them where they sleep, and Job will be the one to lead our army -- do you understand me, Mr. Spike? Am I making myself clear? Begin reprogramming *immediately!*" And with that, she shuts off the intercom, unwilling to listen to any more protests from her star computer genius.

Oh yes, thinks Mrs. Wormwood, the time has very nearly arrived. Soon enough there will be more mayhem than anyone knows what to do with -- anyone but she herself, that is. She laughs loudly, then, for no one but herself, and quickly leaves the room.