

Chapter Twenty-Six

Melody climbs down from the tree house, Helpless the Bunny perched awkwardly on her shoulder, down into the garden below which Melody herself has tended ever since her return to the Dreamtime. The garden is small and mysterious, a ring of tall shrubs forming a wide circle around the tree, and within the circle are plants of a most amazingly enigmatic variety, somewhat impossible color combinations and shimmering patterns on their leaves and bulbs; and Melody need not water them, only sing to them occasionally, to foster growth.

Beyond the garden, however, is beauty of a different sort, the vast ruins of a city once called Ityl-Atys, a city inhabited by dreamers from days gone by, dreamers of old, dreamers of another timeline entirely, another iteration, another eigenstate. As Melody and Helpless start out through the vacant, decaying stone streets, she is vividly impressed by the force of memory which permeates the ruined towers and the collapsed buildings. She is aware in a very visceral sense of the history of this city, and how, in a reality only two steps to the left, another version of Melody -- so very similar, and yet, of course, so nothing like her -- made one too many crucial mistakes, and brought warfare to the Dreamtime, brought desolation to Ityl-Atys. She does not know the details, mind you, can only attempt to piece together the dangling threads of visions and impressions; as she turns her eyes to a pile of wrecked statues, their serene faces refusing to accept the indignity of their current positions, she can see for herself the wave of vicious bloodshed which ripped through this very spot, can see the defenders of the city heroically, desperately staving off the first charge of their attackers, only to be swept aside by the deadly second attack. There are so many books to be written, so many stories to be told, and only the slightest details will change from one to the next; she is not privy to the mistakes which countless other Melodies may have made, but has only the quiet surety that in *this* reality, there are *no* mistakes to be made, none even possible. A course has been plotted, and there will be no alterations. The ruins of this city stand as monument and warning to those who would act with less confidence, she decides. Less confidence -- less Hope, less faith, less skill, and less power. Watch me now, she says, as we begin....

The beginnings of a song escape her as she moves slowly through the city streets, the beginnings of a simple tune which starts quite low in her voice but will soon reach greater heights. This is a talent she discovered while working with Ramon -- the ability to quite literally sing impossible things into being, work magick with her voice. Whereas Ramon has an *icaro* for every occasion, Melody's peculiar talent requires her to improvise a new song for every situation, requires her not to rely on a time honored and tested bag of tricks but instead to generate the needed energy on the spot, as it were. This time, Melody's song begins with loneliness. Helpless is a friendly creature, to be sure, but the deathly quiet of the city ruins are chilling to her, and the lack of any companionship other than Ramon and Job has left her stranded among those she simply does not understand. She cannot contact Laurel -- no, not yet, not until things are well underway. And yet she has a definite need for friends to share this most difficult part of the journey with her, friends who can support her and draw support from her, friends who can share her confidences and her victories and her frustrations, friends with whom she can truly *enjoy* the work that has to be done. She has no idea where to look, no idea where to start. She would ask the Amazing Dr. X to join her, but it is unlikely she will ever see him again, and fresh bitterness arises at the thought of his departure.

Her song rises up into the air, figuratively and literally, and we can watch the waves of energy as they leave Melody's lips, watch them form some kind of strange and wonderful beacon in the dream space, a powerful magnet which is now activated, which will send its message far and wide across the Dreamtime.

Miles and miles and miles away, across the great black mountain range which runs down the center of the Dreamtime, the singer Airee Macpherson stands alone atop a tower, within the fairy tale dream castle which Melody herself once called home. Although she had planned to join the others for a banquet this evening, something in the air seems to have distracted her. Indeed, she remembers moving up the stairs to the top of the tower so swiftly that she wondered if she wasn't being compelled against her will. And now, alone atop the tower, she can hear clearly what

was only faintly suggested to her while she remained within the castle walls.

It is a siren song of sorts, deeply compelling and hauntingly beautiful, Attractive in a very specific way, and Familiar in yet another specific way. As Airee scans the distant battlements and towers for others who might be similarly compelled, she sees no one, and this comes as no real surprise; the song seems almost tailored for Airee's ears, and as a completely well regarded and accomplished singer in her own right, Airee finds herself in awe of the sound, in admiration of the technique, in astonishment at the range and the complexity of the notes which have crossed the mountains to call to her. There are no words to this luscious melody, only an intricate series of swoops and syllables, no specific meaning present and yet a message nonetheless.

She considers the possibilities for a moment, aware that she is too enraptured by this music to consider much beyond following it to its source. The others will be expecting her in the banquet hall, yet if she dashes downstairs to tell them of this wonder, it may well cease by the time she returns. Impetuously, she decides to leave them to their dinner, and with a crystal clear confidence and more than a little excitement, she takes a simple step off the very edge of the enormous tower, and finds herself

falling, then rapidly rising, in a motion which we can only call flying.

The periphery of her consciousness remains, unfortunately, dim. She is aware of a singular focus as she sails towards the great black mountain range, aware that she must meet the maker of this music, and more generally, aware of who she is and where she is (Airee Macpherson the singer, alive within the Dreamtime); and yet, some nagging suspicion in the back of her mind tells her that there is more to life than just this dreaming, more to life than the endless stream of parties and sensational happenings which make up life in the fairy tale dream castle. She does not remember how she got there, only that she was younger then, only that before the castle her dreams were of white horses and large audiences, and she suspects that there is a discontinuity present in her which is not present in, say, the figure of Dawson the butler. This nagging suspicion has been with her for quite some time now, and yet, how is one to act in a space entirely comprised of dreams, no matter how lucid? Does she form this

space consciously with her thoughts, or are the thoughts of others an integral part? Can she simply choose to wake up and retain her memories - and why can she not remember her waking identity, if indeed she maintains an existence outside the Dreamtime? So many questions have left her in a state of static flux, with only her singing and her friends to console her -- and they have been strong consolation, to be sure, for never before has her existence here seemed in any way unsatisfying, only curious at times and mysterious at other times.

Yet now -- sailing over the awesome majesty of the great black mountain range (vicious, towering peaks which cannot possibly harbor life), the sheer and simple Familiarity of the music which compels her somehow forces her to confront these lingering issues of doubt and strange curiosity -- and she wonders, indeed she does, if she is truly lucid here, or if there are others who maintain even more lucidity than she....

"Hello," says the mysterious woman. "My name is Melody. I don't suppose you remember me?"

And at this point, we must return to the present, to Airee Macpherson's dressing room, after opening night of her concert tour. Flushed with a giddy kind of exhaustion, the presence of Melody in her dressing room comes as a complete and sheer surprise.

"That was a wonderful show tonight, Airee," says Melody brightly. "I always knew you were an amazing singer in the dreaming, but I had no idea you would be as amazing in person."

Airee smiles despite herself, taking in the sight of this woman, certain clouds inside her mind lifting, disintegrating. Certainly she recognizes the woman's face, but can't quite place her....

"You and I are friends within the Dreamtime, Airee," says Melody.

Melody's eyes make electric contact with Airee's, and Airee finds herself in the process of Remembering now, the unfair and unwieldy boundary between her dreaming self and her waking self finally dissolving once and for all. At once, memories flood into her mind, memories of the fairy tale dream castle, memories of Melody and Laurel, memories of Melody's disappearance and the subsequent turmoil endured by the castle inhabitants. It's all available to her now, and the fact that Melody herself is actually *here*, in her dressing room, can only signify that

"Things are much stranger than you ever expected, my dear," says Melody, "but there's no reason not to enjoy yourself nonetheless."

As the initial shock begins to fade, Airee takes in what she can of Melody and her two companions. Melody herself is about Airee's height, slim, healthy figure, sharp and beautiful face surrounded by amazingly long and luxurious black hair which cascades around her shoulders. She's wearing a wonderful multicolored dress, one that Airee may well have seen her wear within the Dreamtime. To Melody's right is a small, waifish looking girl with short brown hair, wearing blue jeans and a stark purple blouse, whom Melody introduces as Katie. And to Melody's left stands a tall, goateed fellow in a sort of modern hippie attire, tie-dyed T-shirt and overalls with beads around his neck and piercings all over his head, long sandy blonde hair tied into a fashionable ponytail, maroon Lennon-style sunglasses, whom Melody introduces (with a straight face) as Brother Love.

"They're my traveling companions," says Melody.

"Pleasure to meetcha," says Brother Love with a wide smile. "I've never hung out with an 'alternative rock superstar' before, so believe me, the pleasure's all mine."

And Katie says nothing, merely watches Airee with dark eyes.

"Traveling companions," says Airee. "Where are you traveling?"

"The ends of the earth, actually," says Melody happily. "We're traveling all over the place." Pause. "And we think you should come with us...."

Ramon gifted me with quite a generous nest egg as I prepared to leave the jungle. He had saved up a significant amount of American money from all those touristy types who had visited him over the years, looking for that "authentic, down home shamanic experience," and since he had no intention, really, of ever leaving his little hut, the money itself seemed of no value to him. It was of quite a bit of value to me: over \$30,000, representing the last five years of his work, when "business really picked up, thanks to some Timothy Leary types in the U.S. who couldn't shut up about ayahuasca and so-called 'archaic' spirituality."

Other problems had to be solved as they arose, notably my strange lack of a visa or a passport or any other documentation proving I was a

United States citizen; after all, when the world's only super hero drops you off in the jungle after a transatlantic flight on an interdimensionary transport ship, there's usually very little need to go through customs on the way in. But I no longer had the assistance of the dapper Dr. X, and so, after hitching a ride into Santarem with some eco-warriors who were passing through (on their way to saving the jungle from deforestation), I caught a bizarre little flight to Rio de Janeiro from a British fellow who was shipping dairy products cross country, and at last made my way to the American consulate there, a small but immaculate office in a corporate building of some kind. There, I met a young man who was more than willing to believe my claim that my documentation had been eaten by piranhas; he pulled several strings for me, got new documents issued for me, and even made first class plane reservations for me back to the States, courtesy of the United States government. Mind you, this is not a tactic I recommend for all foreign travelers, unless you happen to be young, charming, and the main character of a book.

It was during the long international flight that I dreamed my siren song which called Airee to me, a slight "defection" if you will from my sister's ranks back at the lofty old castle. She landed not twenty-three feet from me in the ruins, her jaw wide open, thoroughly amazed at my presence; and I, for one, enjoying the effect, moved slowly and calmly to her, took her hands, then embraced her. For I was truly happy to see her, you must understand: my first contact with a friend whom I loved and trusted, after all this torturous time. And then we were both a rush of words and laughter and nearly tears as well, and I showed her around the ruins with Helpless the Bunny bouncing merrily at our side. I told Airee that the time was coming when she was going to need to be *awake*, and a look came over her face which suggested that that was something she'd been needing for some time. I said, "Airee, would it be all right if I came and found you in the real world?" And as the concept of "the real world" settled in, she nodded slowly and smiled and said, "I think we should spend some serious time together."

Then I took her back to the treehouse and introduced her to Job, who with each passing day continued to develop her dreaming form into some semblance of a human being -- semblance, I say, because there would be no erasing the black and pink texture, and the shimmering bolts of

electric energy which surrounded her form. She looked a little like a science fiction mannequin of some kind, come to life; and Airee didn't exactly know what to say. I began explaining what had happened to me in more detail, and whenever I mentioned Job's role in the affair, her skin fairly crackled with agitated energy, as though she didn't like her good name being dragged through the mud; but I was also careful to point out that Job was as much of a puppet in the whole thing as I was -- and Job didn't much like hearing that either. I said, "Job, take it easy, I'm just telling Airee how we met, not trying to lay a guilt trip on you," and Job said, "I would describe my current emotional state as angry, rather than guilty, and although revenge against my programmers is an entirely inappropriate train of thought, nonetheless I must allow some small portion of my functions to consider it endlessly." She's a strange girl, Job is, and I'm not at all sure where our relationship is headed....

Then I asked Airee about my sister. I wanted to know what had happened to her since I left. I wanted to know everything there was to know about her life, about who she was turning into without me. Unfortunately, Airee had only sketches, tidbits of information to tell me. She said that the castle itself had fallen into a deep despair after I left, and this black mood did not subside until Laurel found strange friends, friends who must have lived in "the waking world." Laurel kept quiet about most things, enjoyed her time in the dreaming without dragging her waking self into it, and it was that factor which had most distanced Airee from Laurel -- for Airee always suspected Laurel knew much, much more about things than she was telling, but she never talked about it, for fear of disturbing the dream, the fantasy. She told me of how Laurel had vanished for what seemed like ages, with no explanation, and then returned just as suddenly. And then she told me of how someone named Cohen had burst into the dream castle, and brought *aliens* with him -- and then I knew that Laurel and I were still as tightly wound as ever, undoubtedly pursuing the same agenda but from different angles entirely. And though I desperately longed to see her again, to touch her and hug her and laugh with her, I knew that such a meeting would wreak no small amount of havoc on both of our carefully laid plans -- indeed, Laurel was probably planning even more carefully than I, leaving nothing to chance, to improvisation, for that was never her style. I trusted that we would find each other eventually,

trusted that we would be together at the end of this entire affair, when Conrescence was inevitable and no one remained to separate us.

Airee was not the only person to answer my siren song, by the way. This was also how I met Brother Love and Katie, though they both took their time in arriving, since my voice was not so familiar to them as it was to Airee. Brother Love was a 28-year-old computer programmer in Berkeley, a bachelor of sorts renowned for his glorious psychedelic parties, and I became amazed at the notion that in America, so-called "psychedelic substances" could be used almost recreationally, devoid of any overt spiritual use. Brother Love chastised me for this, saying, "Just because you spent months with a real shaman doesn't mean the rest of us are wasting our time on these drugs. LSD may not be ayahuasca, but it's got its own punch, its own morphogenetic field," and I said, "What in hell is a morphogenetic field?" Brother Love, as it turns out, is no dumb hippie. He's smart as a textbook, is what he is. He told me, "The morphogenetic field is that layer of existence which surrounds all living beings, that layer which contains what some have called the 'collective unconscious.' Archetypal memories reside there, genetic memories, memories at the level of the human race." And I began to wonder, then, if the Dreamtime itself was not a part of this "morphogenetic field."

Katie, on the other hand, was no latent hippie of any kind, but a brash little ball of pent-up energy, looking for release. She refused at first to tell me the specifics of her background, of her life before meeting me, other than to say that there was a great deal of ridiculous hardship and she didn't want to go into it. Her own experience with drugs had been less spiritual and forgiving as Brother Love's or my own. And all I could tell was that she seemed inordinately thankful to be suddenly associated with me, and with Brother Love, and with alternative rock star Airee Macpherson. As the four of us sat up in the treehouse over a period of several nights, we hatched a plan to meet up in the waking world. Airee and I formed a very tight dyad right from the start, and very soon Katie and I managed to form a tight dyad as well. And then, when Katie and Airee finally "connected" emotionally, the three of us formed our own interlocking triad, a series of relationships which felt strong in any combination, which veritably crackled with intensity. We were aware that, although we were only now beginning the process of getting to know each

other, nonetheless there was something clear and sparkling about our future together, something inherently magical about the fact that we had self-selected ourselves to be together. I enjoyed Katie's biting sense of humor to an enormous degree; she was a sharp contrast to Brother Love's easy-going, friendly style, and as the two of them engaged in one verbal duel after another (building their own dyad in the process), Airee and I were often reduced to fits of hysterics. And finally, as both Airee and I grew to know and appreciate Brother Love, we could see sets of interlocking triads within what was now a tetrad. It was, in fact, Brother Love who first suggested the geometric model, saying, "You have to visualize channels of energy, you can't just take them for granted and assume anything. We should be able to talk about the points of pressure within our group, especially if we intend to do any *serious* work," and I knew just what he was talking about. We had to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, had to know each other's loves and hates, had to know each other's extremes if we were to undertake any serious risk together.

That was the beginnings of our group. I tracked Brother Love down at his house in Berkeley, and Katie met us there on the bus several days later. Our meeting in the flesh was a sublime affirmation of everything that was spiritual about our coming together. Brother Love was a virtual encyclopedia of alternative philosophy, and we listened to him rap almost endlessly about "neuro-linguistic programming" and "the eight-circuit model of consciousness" and "the archaic revival" and "singularity theory" and half a dozen other seemingly New Age sounding thingies -- but when Brother Love rapped, you were more entertained than assaulted by the ideas ("memes," as he called them). Katie, meanwhile, managed to surprise both Brother Love and I with the sheer range of experiences which had led her to this place in her life -- living on the streets in a dozen different cities, addiction to a few kinds of hard drugs and subsequent escape from each addiction, periodically hooking up with extremely wealthy folks (she had just come from living with a television producer in Los Angeles) and living the high life in complete and total style, teaching herself how to connect to the Internet and find friends all over the country whom she could visit and find support. She knew several different kinds of self defense. She often pretended to be a student at universities across

the country, attending a wide range of classes, so that although she was never formally enrolled, she had the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in several subjects. Getting backstage to see Airee was a trick that Katie pulled off; one of the security guards had trained the woman who trained Katie in aikido....

I'm afraid the three of us blew Airee's mind a bit when we met her in her dressing room; but the initial period of shock soon passed, and after a couple of nights together, it was time for me to begin fully describing my vision to them. These were my closest friends in the world, during that time, during those days; they were my Inner Circle, and we treated each other like the tightest family I could imagine.

There was only one loose end remaining, at this point....

We take you now to that very same loose end, a spry fellow by the name of Scotto. It is *not at all coincidental* to this story (in fact, some would call it *synchronicitous*) that Scotto himself has embarked upon a psychedelic journey of his own, parallel to Melody's own journey with the strange potion called "ayahuasca." "LSD may not be the vine of the souls," reasoned Scotto, "but it's still some serious mojo, uh huh." One particular thought was running through his mind lately, the notion of a temporal singularity at the end of time -- literally, an *endpoint* to all of existence, a gravity well at the end of history that was sucking civilization forward to some kind of massive Concrecence. If you plotted the line of history on a graph, you would see a long flat line over billions and billions of years, as not much of anything happened except the cooling of the universe, and then, the theory supposed, you would begin to see a marked increase in novelty -- and then, a sharp spike when humanity arrived, and shortly after that, the end of all of everything. It was as though humanity itself was the cosmic trigger which would set off the entire coming cataclysm, as though humanity was a beacon, a big flashing neon sign that basically announced to the rest of existence, "Last call!" Scotto was quite Attracted to the Melodrama inherent in such a theory; he could almost imagine himself riding the psychedelic waves atop some giant mountain somewhere, standing tall as the entire planet Earth slid into a black hole and was torn apart molecule by molecule.

And that was just the theoretical stuff, colorful Play-Doh for the mind; what concerned him more was finishing his new novel, "Lullabye for Thunderstorms." He was becoming more and more intrigued with this character called Melody, more and more involved with her particular plight and subsequent ascendance. He was close enough to the ending now that he could almost taste it, but there was still the chance that the story could turn out tragically, everything could go horribly wrong for all parties concerned, and when Laurel eventually sat down to read the manuscript she had requested (that is, if she ever came back from being initiated into this or that mystic society or the other), she would be thoroughly, entirely devastated to read of the horrors which had befallen her dear sister Melody. And yet, relentlessly he plugged away, finishing a page or two a day, watching the thing unfold before his eyes as though he were barely a participant in the process.

In the meantime, weekends were devoted to "psychedelic research," involving more than a few different kinds of altered states. Scotto knew of exactly one fellow, a technical theatre student who called himself Crank Boy, with whom he could share these experiences, and yet Crank Boy's approach was to simply aim for sheer craziness and abject surreality, whereas Scotto felt almost from the beginning that there was something much more inherently mystical about the whole business. Regardless of their various philosophical differences, Scotto and Crank Boy shared the same technique: apply drugs liberally, and Hope for the best....

A week from this Friday, however, around 8:30 p.m., we find Scotto alone in his apartment, having rid himself of Crank Boy's company this evening after accepting a package from the left coast with a curt "Put it on my tab." Within is a drug called Ecstasy, which tonight Scotto intends to take in addition to his usual LSD -- a combination called "candyflipping," and one which has quite a reputation. Ecstasy will open emotional doors (doors which Scotto has traditionally kept not just shut but locked and barricaded) at the same time that LSD opens cosmic doors, and the result will be, he presumes, singularly awe-inspiring. He takes the LSD first, a couple of stiff hits of the stuff, and spends the next forty-five minutes or so waiting for the drug to come on. During that time, he listens to music, paces frantically, and relentlessly spins a drumstick in his right hand, spins it so damn fast that you can barely see it, spins it as a nervous tick which he

picked up a long time ago. And in these moments while he waits impatiently for the onset of the first of tonight's two drugs, he contemplates aesthetic issues, issues of paramount creative importance, issues of relationships between those who create and those who are created. The sheer ineffable strangeness and convoluted twists of actual reality demonstrated to him by his experiences on psychedelic drugs have, synchronistically we suppose, opened him up to the notion that perhaps, just as Gary suspected, just as Laurel tried to convince him, his work is indeed some kind of bizarre fun house mirror image of some version of reality which must exist somewhere if he's able to think about it. And, he remembers entirely too clearly, his hallucinations on LSD in the past have included

an actual, true life encounter with Melody

who is, dare we say it, a fictional being? Or rather, *his version* of Melody is fictional, for certainly there *is* (or was) an actual Melody, Laurel's sister, and *certainly* she bears *no* resemblance to the mystical figure who slowly gains incredible importance within the plotline of "Lullabye for Thunderstorms." *Surely* the Melody *he* encountered while tripping his tiny brains out that night only a few short weeks ago was a Melody *entirely created by his own mind*, a Melody composed of two parts hallucination and one part wishful thinking, a Melody who exists two steps to the left of both the Melody who actually is Laurel's sister and the Melody who is only a principal character in "Lullabye for Thunderstorms." Several different Melodies to consider, several different possible realities, and Scotto will intersect with but a few of them in the short time he has available.

And the LSD is no help when it eventually does begin to kick in. The opening stage of the trip, when alarms first start going off in the brain, is one of Scotto's favorite parts. You might be staring at the wall or at the television set and then suddenly notice, "Hey, wait a minute... when did that flat surface there become a liquid?" You might look down at the floor beneath your feet and see the wood grains *alive* and squiggling all over hell, and there'd be this tingling sensation that would start to course through you which felt like half a million different individual cells poking the inside of your skin and shouting "Dude! This is *something else!*" Tonight, he gives himself only about fifteen minutes or so (it will be a short while yet before the entire concept of "time" is abandoned) to enjoy this stage, dancing a bit

to the music and feeling his muscles move as though they had minds of their own, spinning the drumstick so fast in his hand that he is afraid he will create a sonic boom of some kind. And then,

it is time to take the dose of Ecstasy with which Crank Boy has so graciously provided him.

The Ecstasy will not take as long to hit as the LSD, and after swallowing the capsule, he prepares a bed of pillows on the floor, turns off the stereo, grabs a blanket and a blindfold and lies down. The idea, then, is to ride the simultaneous peaks of these two drugs into whatever synergistic state awaits him. With the blindfold on, the avenue of straight sight is eliminated, and hidden on those comfortable pillows, underneath that warm heavy blanket pulled over his head, he is in a silent, dark cocoon. After only a few moments,

I experience a shift in my perception.

At first I think it's happening almost subtly. I'm sufficiently conditioned to observe these things even as I participate in them, and so nothing, I presume, can happen to me without my watching it happen -- and from that distance, the effects look very subtle at first. It's like a slight discoloration around the fringes of my body, starting slowly and creeping over the boundary between the edges of my body and all the rest of everything. Very soon, the discolored boundary begins to feel warm and cozy and cuddly, soft and liquid, and that's when the observer part of me realizes how tricky this effect actually is. It seems subtle, certainly, but in all actuality, the very boundary between me and all of everything else is beginning to melt in a way -- my boundaries are dissolving, damn it, and who knows what will become of me after that? I'm losing track of my skin -- it's not that I'm growing numb, but quite the contrary, I am being *flooded* with impulses and information that come directly from my environment, unfiltered through the traditional sensory pathways such as, say, "skin" or "nerves" or any of that physiojazz. There is no longer any specific, tight demarcation between the entity which calls itself "Scotto" and that area of existence which "Scotto" can only, usually, refer to as "not Scotto at all, but something else entirely." Yes, it is something else entirely -- it is entirely something other than what it is.

And at some point in there -- I forget where -- the observer part of me ceases observing. What it does instead is *panic*. It's not the kind of

panic your body might experience if it were falling off a cliff, that kind of sheer, adrenaline-soaked panic that causes massive cardiovascular hemorrhaging and severe bladder dilation, but rather it's a very localized panic -- only the observer is bothering to panic, while the rest of the entity begins to *relax* and sink into the floor for a bit of calm floating on the surface of reality. It's an absolutely luscious sensation, to be sure. And I am not experiencing darkness, by the way, behind that blindfold, but a rich, shimmering series of waves, multi-colored swirls and swirling psychic energy grids, ley lines through distant points at far ends of the galaxy, impossible geometric shapes with smiling faces come swooping towards me and through me in an absolutely captivating fashion, and I can say without a shadow of a doubt that there is a wellspring within me that is slowly beginning to fill the entire core of me with an amazingly distinct sense of love, and relief, and Hope -- it seems to be coming from the strongest part of me, that part of me which never did despair when Gary died, that part of me which always grieved that a day would come when I would find some semblance of happiness again, that part of me which always drove me forward, even on those days when all I wanted to do was curl up in a pool of self-pity and extinguish myself like a spent match. It's all here, this tremendous body of emotional strength, and I am swimming in it, I am coolly and serenely making my way across, replenishing myself, fortifying myself for the days to come. I can see, off in the distance, how a waterfall majestically empties out into the far end of the pool, how the stream of this emotion, the current itself, comes from far far off, comes from a river which winds its way all throughout the infinite, and a serious sense of divine blessing penetrates my thick skull and wakes me up to what's going on in this life, wakes me up to what actually does have *meaning* in this life.

I could have stayed in that state forever, really, but circumstances conspire to suddenly jerk me through a rather severe paradigm shift. There is a sharp, severe danger to my present position in the grand scheme of things, an entirely new kind of threat preparing to make itself known to me. The tranquillity of the previous state fades almost entirely and is subsumed by something which rises up from underneath me, something which rushes through me like a sudden, surreal hurricane, an unexpected storm in the tropics signifying nature at her most horrible. And yet, this is

nature of a kind I've never ever felt before. A terrifying shrieking sound comes from somewhere off in the distance, behind me, and it encourages me to begin moving through space at a rather rapid rate. I don't necessarily understand the mechanisms by which I am moving, don't necessarily recognize the corridors I am traversing, but then, suddenly, a clear and present spike of Familiarity makes itself known to me, and now I know *exactly* to whom I'm headed, and why, and what the stakes are. In the midst of a hyperspatial maelstrom of epic proportions, filled with every manner and make of intelligence and life, in a whirlwind where every last thought contains a multitude of potential energy and every last molecule represents no less than the eternal cosmic struggle itself, in a world where communication occurs not simply between one portion of a single brain and another portion but between a single human soul and the vast information network which comprises the hidden infrastructure of the universe, in a space where absolutely everything that could ever even possibly attain the slightest semblance of awareness somehow contributes a vital slice of its essence to generating this whole thing called reality, in this furious psychedelic tremendum wherein matter and energy are subverted and the only paradigm possible is the one that continually shatters itself with each passing moment -- in that context, synchronicity alone cannot describe the forces that conspired to bring Melody and me together again.

I don't think he believed I was real -- at least, not at first.

There is a state, just before the dreaming, called the hypnogogic state, a strange borderland between waking and the dreaming, and I often enjoyed surfing that state before plunging headlong into the Dreamtime. Here there was no easy demarcation between what was real and what was dreaming; the hypnogogic settings often closely resembled waking settings, and on many occasions I found myself dreaming with my eyes open. And then, as I began to fall deeper into sleep, hypnogogia dissolved around me and there was a sudden *whoosh* of sensation, as though I was suddenly plummeting down a roller coaster into whatever random dreamland setting my mind chose to throw at me until I fully settled into the lucidity of the Dreamtime.

Tonight, however (a week from this Friday, around 6:30 pm), as I lay slumbering on a couch in Brother Love's house, that sudden *whoosh* is

interrupted rudely by a hideous shrieking sound and a sudden jerking paradigm shift which yanks me two entire steps to the left of where I expect to be. I must still be dreaming, though the space is tainted, somehow, or rather, *colored* by splashes of ontology and multi-colored swirls that can only signify the tremendum of the ayahuasca state -- actually, no, not ayahuasca at all, but something with shades of sinister similarity. I'm thrown off balance almost immediately, and I begin to run, run without direction, run without any Hope of escaping from this insidious territory; and there is a hideous shrieking sound which follows me and a dynamic, dangerous clicking and clacking which seems to be somewhere below me, and the air is dark and belligerent, filled with smoky screams and shimmering prisms and swirling, bubbling pools of molten skin and flesh. Neon beams of laughter and despair form enormous hanging trellises all around me, and in between the sideways and the straight ahead, there is

a secret passageway, a doorway into the thoroughly unknown, a doorway which even my strange pursuers, their hot and hideous breath lumbering slowly along behind me with damning and arrogant patience, have not traversed; the hallways of the passageway are covered with row after row of horrible scribblings, the cat scratchings of millions of frantic souls hoping to make their mark in words on the ineffable, "I love you but this can't go on," "I see no point in living, and this misery is *your* fault," and also, "we must save her from herself" and "there is no greater glory than heavenly glory" and "send your \$23.99 today and receive this shiny, commemorative porcelain bowl, every serving of mashed potatoes will remind you of the Last Supper," and even "there is no chance we will escape this place alive, but they will never take our dignity" and "mother died in her sleep last night, in her own bed, surrounded by her family" and "there is every likelihood that a peace accord will be reached by the end of the week." The corridor seems endless, and the handwriting on the walls is an angry, empty scrawl, a cacophony of voices shouting at the void.

It seems that way, that is, until a sentence suddenly calls to me, shouts louder and harder than any of the other voices, and at great risk to my personal safety I am compelled to stop and press my eyeballs to the wall, and the sentence "synchronicity alone cannot describe the forces that conspired to bring Melody and me together again," written in a strangely

Familiar handwriting, sends a thrillingly precise chill up and down what remains of my terrified spine. For this moment's pause has cost me dearly; already, as I turn to look down the corridor from whence I came, I can see jaws and teeth and wispy tendrils and invisible scramblings, a competition to see which one of these foreign *beasts* will reach me first and have the delicious pleasure of ripping me apart one idea at a time. My eyes return to the wall, to the handwriting, to the very next sentence, which reads, "Melody spies suddenly a way to hide between the lines," and it *occurs to me, then*, that there is, perhaps, no *escape*, but perhaps I might

camouflage myself, as *words*,

a conceit which bears some marked resemblance to actuality in any event. It is as though I step right onto the two-dimensional surface of that wall, the cells in my body converted quite literally into memes (singular conceptual units, the building blocks of thinking). I find myself in a pleasant enough room, a few chairs, some light and lovely music in the background,

and of course, Scotto standing in the corner, smoking a cigarette, calmly waiting for me.

I am not convinced that calmly is an appropriate word. In our previous encounter, I was convinced that she was a hallucination, but now, here, in this space, I no longer maintain the strength of my intellectual convictions. I mean,

there she is, after all,

standing across from me, out of breath from a desperate flight, long black hair drenched in multi-colored swirls and a singularly surprised expression on her face. She says,

"You look Familiar,"

and I reply,

"Yeah, I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?"

As I take a drag from my cigarette, there is a rumbling which passes throughout our little room that suggests this impromptu, hastily scrawled hideaway may not be safe for long. It is necessary, then, to cut to the chase, a fact Melody grasps moments before I do. She sits down in one of the comfy chairs and says,

"So I take it you're a writer."

I nod slowly, and say, "Perhaps you're Familiar with my work." Pause. "After all, I think you've been living it for a while now."

She smiles serenely, says, "How absolutely coy of you. Please, Scotto, sit, we have a lot to discuss."

"I'll just bet we do," I mutter under my breath as I take a seat in a comfy chair opposite hers. I change the music in the background to something more suited to my tastes: a little darker, a little more dramatic.

"I suppose you know exactly what I'm up to these days," she says.

"Not exactly," I reply. "I only know as much as the text has hinted to its audience. I have no knowledge of the future. I'm not prescient in any particular fashion."

She considers this momentarily, says, "I find that to be a little strange. You have no picture of where your book is headed? No ending in sight, no outline prepared?"

"Not at all," I reply. "I'm simply observing and recording the events of another world as they come to me."

"But you have the ability to influence those events, don't you?"

"As much as you do -- I'm just another character in the book, Melody, even if I am the character of the author."

"Ah," she says with a smile, "but that's the key. I don't think you're playing your character with as much flair as you could."

"Flair?" I reply, an eyebrow raised so high it might be leaping off my forehead.

"Uh huh," she says, "style, pinache, alla that stuff. You don't have to be so mundane, you know -- you're the author. You could have super powers if you wanted them."

"Super powers?"

"Authorial powers. You could get away with stuff nobody else could. Literary conceits. You can skip cleanly and easily between the past and present tense, you can take on an omniscient narrator's voice or assume the identity of any one of your characters. You could decide, if you wanted to, that what made most sense to your story was if you yourself were suddenly the main character, and everybody *liked* you and you could be *popular* and *rich* and *powerful*. Maybe nobody would read it, because they would think it was, I dunno, self-indulgent or something, but for *you*,

the character *experiencing* all the things being written about you, it would be a hell of a time, don't you think?"

I manage only a stupefied stare in return, not quite comprehending the implications of what she's getting at, the implications of my suddenly taking on more stature within my own storyline, of my suddenly leaping to the foreground of any particular part of the plot which even remotely concerns me. I could get away with all sorts of things, she's right. Never mind dramatic appropriateness -- damn it, there are aliens outside this box, surrounding us in trip space, and *that's* not a situation I enjoy all too much. But

"why are you bringing this up, Melody?" I ask. "You got some kind of hidden agenda?"

"Duh," she replies. "I thought you knew me better than that."

Ulp.

"I've got big plans for reality, Scotto, and I wouldn't mind your help. That's why I brought it up."

"Why don't you tell me your big plans for reality, Melody? Get it out in the open, so I don't just have to wonder and watch it happen."

She rises slowly, considering my request, and decides that it ultimately doesn't matter one whit if I'm clued in to her secret plans. She'll be able to accomplish what she wants without my help, to be sure, it'll just take a little longer. She wants *convenience*. She wants me to write her out of any corners she might get into. She wants me to keep the bad guys at bay by writing them clear across the universe, if necessary. Yeah, I can see the writing on the wall, and it looks like fun to me, uh huh, amen.

"There are aliens," she begins.

"Uh huh, knew that," I reply.

"Like, *lots* of 'em," she continues.

"Define *lots*."

"As in, a gajillion different kinds, Scotto. This multiverse is infinite in scope, and there are that many different kinds of aliens lurking about."

"That's pretty creepy when you get right down to it."

"Tell me about it. And the whole idea behind the very concept of alien, Scotto, is that 'alien' is something entirely foreign to our experience. 'Alien' is something which we cannot possibly pretend to comprehend in

any meaningful fashion. 'Alien' is something which is so far removed from the way we humans do business that it may as well be rocks and trees we're talking about, because we have more in common with inanimate *stuff* than we do with any kind of 'alien life forms.' You dig so far?"

"Uh huh," I say, nodding quietly.

"Right. Well. I've been doing some exploring, some hypothesizing. You're aware that I was kidnapped, right?"

"Uh huh."

"And during that time, someone attempted to use alien technology to program into me an apocalyptic, Antichrist program." Pause. "As in, someday they would, they would just *turn this program on* and I would *be* the Antichrist. I mean, they're aliens, they think they can just, just *get away* with shit like that. It boggles the mind. Anyways, I got rescued, and a shaman cleaned me out, he poured gallon after gallon of ayahuasca down my throat and *cleaned out* my system. And now I got a better idea than just turning into the Antichrist and laying waste to the planet."

"A better idea than *that*?"

"It's true."

"Do tell."

"I'm going to do the opposite," she says. "I'm going to *save* the planet instead."

How typical, I think to myself. Here I think I've been writing some interesting, reality bending postmodern literary thingie and instead I've been writing just another sci-fi save the world space opera. It's almost disappointing, really.

"Typical?" she says, incredulous. "Look, let me explain something to you about alien contact, Scotto. They're not interested in communicating with *us*, not the vast majority of them. They couldn't care less who *we* are and what we think our interests are in the larger universal situation. They intend to use us, and our planet, as an *interface* for communication amongst *themselves*. This planet has been designated as a meeting ground, a sort of United Nations of Alien Weirdness right here on Earth, and they have a million different methods for using us as their unwitting broadcasting agents. Some of them, we've discovered, take over human beings entirely, appearing as Voices inside their heads. Others have been seeding us with inhuman technology for quite some time. They've probably infected our

media to a horrific degree. They probably have something to do with every major industry in existence. I mean, they've probably infected us at the viral level, they've probably drugged our air and poisoned the water so that we think and move the way they want us to, they've probably buried themselves underground and have hidden themselves in the animals and in the trees -- I don't mean to sound paranoid, Scotto, but in case you hadn't heard, Mother Nature is a bit paralyzed at the moment. There's nothing she can do to help the Earth repair itself because there are so many foreign elements present. And they're just *waiting*, waiting for all of their various factions to arrive from all over wherever, and when they all do, they won't *care* anymore about us, they'll *swarm* the planet Earth, they'll swarm our bodies and our minds and our spirits, they'll pollute our morphogenetic fields and streams, and if we get destroyed in the process -- that's the *least* of their concerns. They intend to use us as a universal translator. Everyone will somehow infect a different part of this system, the Gaian system, and somehow they'll all, they'll have some kind of, some kind of *summit meeting* or something. I don't know. I don't know *why*, I just know *what*. I'd know why if I could talk to them, but I don't think they even know we're *conscious*. And we aren't, not in the exact same way they are, but we *are* aware of what's *happening* -- at least some of us are. I mean, there will always be mindless robots out there, right up until the last moments, denying that there's anything wrong, but... but right here and now, Scotto, there's some *serious shit* about to go down, and if people can't adjust, they probably deserve what they get."

She pauses long enough to take a breath, then says, "I've got a plan, you were right about that part. I learned a hell of a lot while I was with my shaman friend. I don't think he was your average shaman, Scotto. I think he was a contrivance of the plot, put there *specifically to teach me what I needed*. For all I know, he ceased to exist after I left there -- after *you stopped writing about him* in your book. What he taught me about altered states of consciousness and the way actual reality can be affected by the powers of the spirit gave me clues about my future. My kidnapping, you know, that was another clue that I was put here for a reason, that my vision isn't just some cockamamie scheme: someone wanted to *stop* me from doing what I'm about to do, and they failed miserably. Instead of stopping me, they *woke me up* from the dream I was having. Now, I gnow damn

well where I'm headed. I'm not in any way a threat to this planet, just because I have heightened awareness and shamanic powers and I happen to know the Author. Quite the opposite -- I'm going to get us all out of this, Scotto. I'm going to save the human race from destruction. Lofty goals, I know, but hey, when you got it, use it, know what I mean?"

"I'm calling together my Inner Circle of friends right now, and I want you to join us. Together, we will develop a ritual, a ritual for carving out sacred space in the middle of the profane -- very similar to whatever trick it is you used to build this room for us here, but on a much more powerful level. We will create an enormous sacred space which will function as a beacon, as a *transmitting tower*, as a station for communication *with* the aliens who surround us. We will so profoundly alter the Gaian system with this sacred space that they will *have* to notice us, and listen. And what will we transmit?"

She pauses momentarily, entirely for dramatic effect, I'm sure. Her words have fallen from her in a rapturous avalanche, and I am so much on the edge of my seat as to get superficial cuts.

"This is just a rough draft," she says at last. "It will sound a lot better with a dozen other people joining in."

And with that, she opens her mouth, and

moments after my demonstration, the rumblings severely increase outside the little hideaway. They heard my song, yes indeed, and they are quite verily out to get me.

"All we need to do," I tell him, "is survive long enough to perform the ritual at the time of the Conrescence. To do that, I believe we will need your help. Will you help us, Scotto?"

He rises nervously, takes out another cigarette and lights it.

"Certainly, I'm... impressed with what you have in mind, Melody."

"What would it take to convince you?" I ask.

"I don't know what it would take to convince me. I'm just not sure. I don't know what's appropriate behavior for an author who is suddenly seriously meddling with the world of his book. I have to think about it. I have to think about the implications." Pause. "I don't know what it would take to convince me."

"Suit yourself," I say with a shrug. "But I can't hang around here much longer."

"I understand completely," he says. "How did you get here to begin with?"

"Hypnagogia," I tell him.

"Ah. I'm tripping heavily right now."

"Oh really."

"Uh huh." Pause. "Maybe someday we should meet in the flesh sometime. You think?"

"I think that would be an interesting encounter, yes."

"Yes. Well, I'll think about it, Melody. I'm sure I'll be in touch."

"I'm sure you will too, Scotto."

He starts to wave goodbye, even as his form begins disintegrating and sinking through the floor. Within moments, he is gone, and shortly thereafter, the room itself begins to disintegrate. The hideous howling outside grows louder and louder, but I have been here too long for them to have any effect on me; hypnagogia has faded entirely, and I am well within the Dreamtime now, emerging safe and sound within my treehouse stronghold.

"So," Job says, "I see you are busy breaking all the rules these days."

"I certainly am," I reply. "You should try it some time, I think you would get a kick out of it..."

I plunge through the floor and feel the clawing, angry, screaming presence of a million different entities as I make my way out of the tremendum. I am terrified for the duration of the transition back into my apartment, and then, as I tear off my blindfold and rocket up out of my cocoon under the blanket, I am filled instead with a serious giddy elation, as much as to say "thank fucking god I survived *that!*" And -- there is no question in my mind that Melody is real, alive, moving somewhere on this planet. Time is short, I know; Conrescence is inevitable, and the tremendum smiles when you want it to.

And then, quite suddenly, I am aware of an itching on the inside of my skull, a sudden "pop" followed by an aggravated rash which seems

to be spreading across my cerebellum. I can't quite place it. Until, that is, I hear

"Greetings, Scotto," says a Voice inside my head by way of introduction. "My name is Vince, and I'll be a Voice inside your head for the duration of the novel." I can almost hear Vince and his companions giggling slightly.

So *that's* what it takes to convince me.