

Chapter Thirteen

Disgusting and virulent, makes me *itch* and twist and turn to shake these fleas, revisiting now the sorceress Adriana in her cavern deep within the very bowels of the hollow Earth. Earth, she said, is *hollow*, meaning empty on the inside, a very shell supporting life without intention; her close companion these last twenty-three years, the Amazing Dr. X, remarked that she was getting cranky in her old age. Bastard, said she.

You may remember how she stares into her crystal ball Fred and watches the strange happenings on the planet's surface; and more specifically, you may remember how she once took an interest in two little girls who dreamed together, and how her close companion these last twenty-three years, the Amazing Dr. X, advised her to watch them oh so closely. Each revolution around the sun brings all of them closer to the penultimate, and as the little girls have aged, so has Adriana the sorceress. She feels it much less than they do, to be sure, having revolved around the sun so many many times by now. It is only recently, in fact, that the very *urgency* of living has made itself a presence in her life -- for you see, it had never before occurred to her that a presence such as hers could ever come to an end. And Dr. X, the planet's first true super hero, is small consolation to her in these final days. She doesn't know what to say, you see. Never been like this before, no way. Intimacy on the level of the person is so... specific, like a burr that catches in your eye, no? I can't understand the *pleasure*, but. *Talk dirty to me, Doc*, and he says, "Not before breakfast, love."

Millions and millions and millions of years ago, this was a dead planet, or rather, for the sake of accuracy, an unborn planet waiting for life to emerge. Protoplasm and lightning storms, the first scrapings and scratchings and squirmings and oozings of unicellular organisms in the biological stew upon the planet's face, these were the ingredients with which some strange indescribable force worked its magic and created, somehow, Life. Deep within the hollow Earth, meanwhile, you would have seen such supernatural mystery as to make your newly formed eyestalks bulge, had you the processing power within you to comprehend it. Such whirling and churning here, so many multi-colored swirls and vibrant waves and shimmering pools of energy, light and heat, coalescing for the first time, spontaneously, into an order capable of sustaining consciousness. And this consciousness in turn became the very pattern by

which all consciousness on the planet would soon evolve, each organism looking to its Mother for guidance. Like any other thinking, feeling being, Mother Nature knows not her origins, knows that the limits of her consciousness are such that she will never understand her own birth, will never know whether Nature as we know it has a mystical root or is instead pure happenstance. But millions and millions and millions of years have still sufficed to tune her mind to wisdom, yes?, which wisdom kept this precious globe awash in Breath as it sailed through the deep black ocean of space and "shut the fuck up already, it's just a hunka rock." Cranky indeed.

You can't imagine, says she, what it's like, ha ha. As it stands, I can barely *remember*. The entropic heat death of the universe is not something I was particularly afraid of, for I wouldn't have *felt* it much, would instead have sort of slid gracefully into its final moments as the universal everything prepared to collapse and recycle itself into Something Else Entirely. I was convinced, however, that I would be there to see it. *Convinced*, damn it -- it was practically coded into me, the knowledge that the miracle which was me would be blessed all the way down the line. Not so, as it turns out. Never mind the humans. The humans aren't the problem, really. I mean, sure, they make me *angry*, they do such silly things, give me such terrible headaches, but they can hardly help it, are no more autonomous in these matters than the ants. Disease is the proper metaphor, but they are only symptoms, not the cause, and I am the one who will suffer in the end, not they. The *implications* of this cancer are absolutely astounding. The implications exceed my ability to properly conceptualize them, and I fear all my actions in the end will amount to "it's just a hunka rock," which, by the way, may be the truth. My bones will float through space, unfettered by my flesh.

"You're rambling," says Dr. X. He's already filed his report on the situation back to the Brotherhood, back to his headquarters at the UAIT (United Association of Interdimensionary Travelers) building in the Dimension of Administration. After millions and millions and millions of years, this planet has done something somewhat extraordinary. It has literally *squeezed* its awareness into the form of a human being, this Adriana the sorceress, and enveloped her in the Melodrama. It is a desperate planetary gamble indeed: the Earth -- Mother Nature -- recognizing that there is suddenly a shortage of Time available to her, has sacrificed the greater portions of her autonomous functioning for the innovative blessings that comprise the human mind. Mind you, it is not at all unprecedented for major universal forces to choose human forms in which

to do their greatest problem solving. The God of the Christian world at one point squeezed himself into his "only begotten Son" and thereby saved Western civilization from damnation; similarly, we are also aware of one Father Time, who opted for a human form in order to better operate his new computer, Time Bog, which now manages the temporal flow of this entire dimension. But for a planet to choose this maneuver is indeed unheard of in the history of all things -- not too hard to believe, of course, considering the list of things which planet Earth has accomplished that are unheard of in the history of all things. (The history of all things, by the way, can be found in the library of the UAIT building, floors 2300-2322.)

Dr. X has only known Adriana for the last twenty-three years or so, ever since the day he "inadvertently" stumbled through the giant crack in the earth that she had opened up to receive him. One of the first pressing, agonizing realizations for her upon acquiring her new form was that humans get *lonely*, and companionship of some kind was absolutely vital if she was to avoid going bonkers before figuring out a solution to her predicament -- indeed, before figuring out just what exactly her predicament was. Dr. X, synchronistically, had completed the 23rd level of his advanced super hero training and had just returned to Earth to look for super hero things to do; he leapt at the chance for this adventure, before realizing, quite, what this adventure actually was. Spending the next twenty-three years in the center of the hollow Earth was not exactly what he had in mind. However, there was no doubt about it: Adriana found in this human someone capable of understanding her, someone capable of teaching her the subtleties of human existence, and furthermore, someone capable of collaborating with her on the problem of her predicament.

Together, they accomplished a number of things. Adriana and Dr. X were passionate lovers for most of the last twenty-three years, with a kind of fire unseen anywhere in the galaxy, and we ain't just whistling dixie, neither. Dr. X taught her techniques and disciplines that allowed her human side to come to terms with her metaphysical side, the side that is the sorceress. "Is this black magic?" she asked one day, and Dr. X replied, "This is multi-colored magic, a spell for every occasion." "What about the problem of evil?" she asked. "You are in the enviable position of being able to rewrite the rules," he replied with a smile. Human suffering now has a pivotal place in her awareness, whereas previously it was only one cog among many; if there is any chance whatsoever that the essence of this Earth will survive, it will definitely be through humanity, some way, somehow. And finally, she has indeed discovered the nature of her

predicament. She has indeed discovered what has triggered -- prematurely, she might add -- the final stages of her peaceful coexistence with the rest of this solar system.

Aliens, you see, have invaded the planet Earth, and things will never be the same.

She is also, by the way, learning what bastards men can be. Now, of course, he *bore*s her, this so-called super hero does. After all, it was only the human side, only the meat, that needed his assistance. Once the meat was up to speed, the ancient weight and depth of her soul could begin to truly flower for a short short while. "Get oudda here," she said, "I don't need no lily white secret agent to keep me company." "Super hero," he corrected, but it was no use. She smiled and smiled and aggravated him to no end with talk of "you ever wondered who you *really* are?" and "what do you do for Father's Day, huh?" and "you ain't so human your damn self," which aggravated him the most. (He had been taken from his father at an early age, you see, to begin super hero training; and there was always talk around the academy, amongst the Brotherhood, that his father wasn't exactly *normal* in so many words....)

Ultimately, she found herself sickened by the machismo inherent in the role of "super hero," wondered if there weren't more *organic* ways of thwarting the plots of evil criminal masterminds and their superpowered henchmen (always hench*men*, too, which I find significant). Frustrated, too, by the inherent facade created by those who trained him, the bulletproof veneer that covered him completely, such that he practically was this slick and confident hero, with no such squishy reserve of *feelings* underneath for her to dive into and luxuriate, splash around and swim and giggle in, cool herself and meditate there like a child inside a beautiful bathtub. He was attractive on the surface, and the surface was infinitely attractive; you could skate across it and there find reflections of your deepest self, but often you were left with the impression that he wasn't really doing any *work*, you know?, leaving you to hang, to find connections for yourself, while the greater part of him remained concerned with super hero things and super hero problems and super hero issues -- never *you* at all, really, although he certainly seemed to enjoy you on the surface, seemed on the surface, that is, to enjoy you, which surface becomes more and more suspect by the day. She had her ways of probing him, of course, finding gaps in his defenses, but even so, underneath this human skin of his she found only gross, unholy innards, as though to keep this veneer so

pristine required him to ignore entirely the layer that was his soul, and this layer had festered over time, developed sicknesses and plagues, this layer no longer attracted her, and she abhorred what she found there, even as she loved him. *Even as she loved him* -- how can these humans endure such relationships?

Meanwhile, rebutting the charges is Dr. X himself, acknowledging perhaps that a certain bare, exposed kind of emotion was long ago buried by those who trained him ("all for the good of saving the world, lad, and don't forget it"), but this raw, dangerous emotion had been replaced in him by a kind of logical, thinking approach, which *she* had yet to understand -- "shuddup," she interrupted, "I don't wanna hear about your 'logical, thinking approach,' you simpering shit, I know more with my body than you know with your brain, and that's the *truth*, little boy, the truth," which bitterness really surprised him. The heat of their affair was such that rapid modulation from mystical to practical, from pure intense joy to pure unbridled antipathy, was par for the course -- at some point, however, he realized he was no longer so attracted to this mess they were creating, but how can you describe your thoughts to one who isn't thinking, really?

Or rather -- thinking of things which he will *never* understand, she says to herself, paying attention to things which he hasn't even *considered*, the slick bastard, gotta love *this* much of him and throw away the rest. But -- he's a stubborn fool, too, these super heroes are getting trained better and better these days, and heck, *he's* the first one to actually *graduate* from super hero school, so I gotta give him that much. Maybe it's that I'm getting claustrophobic, stuck deep within the Earth for how many fucking *aeons* now, nothing to do, really, no real ambitions other than -- well, other than survival, but that's hardly entertaining considering the deck is stacked against me (aliens? gimme a fuggin' break...). He realizes, of course, that she is in denial, does not accept the totality of her circumstances the way she claims to, but then, he's always been a black hole, so to speak, sucking others into his orbit and then crushing them like grapes when they get too close to him for comfort. She accepts, perhaps, her ultimate fate, which can't be changed; what she does not accept, perhaps, is the fate of her relationship to *him* (damn these human bodies!), which, theoretically, if she twists and turns and bends and dances just enough in this which those directions, *could* change, conceivably, stranger things have happened, why isn't he listening? and anyways, he *told* me he loved me, and super heroes never lie.

"No," says Dr. X, "but they do, occasionally, change their minds."

And still he seems so calm, so cool, detached, *his* reputation isn't sullied by the way he's moved through her world; she, meanwhile, becomes *just another foolish girl* falling for the wrong man at the wrong time, *just another foolish girl* who couldn't read the signs correctly, *just another foolish girl* who thought a man might *do the things he says he will*, and that's pretty embarrassing when you get right down to it, considering who she is, after all. She'd tear his heart out, if he wasn't somehow still "useful" in a sickening way. Really, she could do all sorts of things to him, disease and earthquakes are not beyond her, let him sleep inside a volcano for a night, the disgusting pig, see if he changes his mind *then*.

What she doesn't realize, of course, comes the answer from Dr. X, is that it's damn near impossible for us to *communicate*. We're saying things to each other and what we hear bears no resemblance to what we intend, to what we *mean*. She's a God damn *sorceress*, for Christ's sake, she invents whatever kinds of language she wants to suit her particular needs and where the hell does that leave *me*? You think it's easy trying to love a planetary awareness? Good God, it gives me a stomach ache just thinking about it, and don't think I haven't thought about it, for God's sake, I'm not a *complete* idiot, if I was, you never would've liked me. It seemed like a good idea at first, it seemed as though our respective mysteries might turn out to be compatible, but hey, I admit, I accept that it was me who first threw up my hands in despair, even if you weren't looking at the time. I may be a super hero, but really, I'm a very nonconfrontational sort, and I didn't want to cause any trouble--

Trouble? she shouts at the top of her lungs. This isn't "trouble," she exclaims, making sure he isn't listening. For I have been *wounded*, cut to the quick, you were the onliest one I ever trusted -- well, aside from all those others I trusted, you know, pretty much the whole human race at one time or another -- and now I'll never trust again. I intend to linger here inside my misery. There's so much I need to understand, and I can't do it if I try to escape it, dig? about why these humans do what they do to each other, do what they do *with* each other, do what they do because of and for each other, as though it's sheer instinct that causes me to take an interest in someone else, nothing more, a knee jerk reaction caused more by simple magnetic proximity than an actual desire to be seduced, et cetera. Have a smoke, Doc. We got a long haul ahead of us, and I don't intend to be any more cheerful as the days go by....

Something else to think about instead are those two little girls who dream together, little girls now approaching the dawn of womanhood and doing so with many fireworks, so to speak. I know their names now. They are Laurel, who was first born of the two, who was first to visit the Dreamtime, who was first to fall in love and first to feel the damage that love creates. Secondly, they are Melody, who was taken from her family, hidden within the walls of the human corporation InfiniTek, and slowly subjected to a kind of torture unheard of in the planet's history. They seem to be attempting to replace her mind with Something Else Entirely. And they are *not succeeding* -- this Melody is ever more courageous than anyone could have predicted.

"Their Dreamtime experience is an anomaly," says Dr. X. "It is most unusual. It is not something humans do."

"People don't visit each other in their dreams?" asks Adriana.

"No," replies Dr. X. "Not like this. We sometimes see our friends and our enemies there, experience them within our dreams, and sometimes it feels as though we're actually meeting them, but no... not like these twins do. We don't actually have the ability to meet each other deliberately and carve a shared space in our dreams together."

"Nowhere in the planet's history is such a thing recorded?" she asks.

"Well," Dr. X replied, "there are always stories and legends, mind you, but they are impossible to prove or disprove. It seems dreaming has always aroused the interest of humanity, to be sure... but despite the persistence of these legends, never before, categorically, have humans rewritten reality the way these two twins, Melody and Laurel, do so in their shared dream space. It is truly remarkable. It has enormous significance. I don't know what that significance is, but there it is nonetheless."

She twists and turns this one around in her head for a while. If she were more globally connected to her Gaian incarnation, she'd probably be able to simply *sense* the significance, but of course, if she were Gaia right now, she wouldn't really be too interested in the affairs of two tiny humans. What's left to her is only her human intuition -- aided by her sorcery, of course.

"Might this be the hand of the aliens?" she wonders aloud. "Why do you suppose they torture her?"

"She must have potential of *some* kind," replies Dr. X. "The dreaming makes that obvious. Perhaps these aliens will use her to directly access the Dreamtime, or perhaps they have something more insidious in

mind, something that we aren't looking for. If that's the case, then we're trapped in a waiting game."

But Adriana has no intention of waiting any longer.

"I need to send these aliens a message," says Adriana. "I need to let them know I'm watching. Perhaps that will mediate their actions, perhaps that will scare them off, or force them to attempt a more direct approach." Pause. "And I'm not at all pleased with how they're treating this poor girl. It's inhuman, which was to be expected, but it's also downright mean, and I won't have it."

Dr. X's eyebrow raises an inch or two. "Since when have you concerned yourself with niceties?"

"Don't get smart," she snaps back. "I actually like *her*. I've grown fond of her. Taken an interest. Don't want to see her hurt, that sort of thing. I think it would be beautiful to reunite her with her sister someday, after this whole vicious Melodrama has played its course." Pause. "You, on the other hand, are despicable. So shuddup."

"Yes, well, your role does not exactly involve direct action on the scale of single humans," Dr. X reminds her. "That would be unfair to all the other humans under your care, remember?"

"I'm well aware of the so-called 'rules' of the game," she says. "That's why I've got *you*. You're a super hero, aren't you? It's not the job of a super hero to rescue the Third World from starving to death. It's the job of a super hero to perform *super* tasks, like rescuing this poor girl Melody -- whom we've already decided is a pivotal figure, somehow, in human history -- from *aliens*, for crying out loud."

"The policy is nonintervention--" he begins.

"I don't give a damn about the policy," she replies. "Right now, what I care about is her. I suggest you take action within the night."

"And what would you have me do with her? Bring her here?"

"Of course not, dolt, what would *we* do with her? She's going to need some significant cleansing. Take her somewhere where she can have time to *heal*. She'll need to be at full strength for the coming catastrophe, dig? You know any places like that?"

"I have a few ideas," he replies.

"Then I guess you'd better be leaving," says she.

It's a relief, actually, for him to have a chance to escape the underground chamber where he has spent the last twenty-three years attending to Adriana's obsession with him. How they ever became

intertwined he will simply never know! And this, at least, gives her a chance to breathe as well. Perhaps when he returns, after a job well done, things will be much clearer between them, and they can attempt actual communication.

Very, very unlikely, but certainly possible.

As for Adriana, she waits for Dr. X to leave and then she throws the biggest temper tantrum this world has ever seen. Earthquakes on the surface, a tidal wave here and there, signal her displeasure, signal her despair. Ranting tears, occasional sobs, bitter curses, deadly venom, a childlike glow -- children are *bullies* -- and then, she's calm for a while.

These human bodies are damnably inefficient, she thinks. I'll have to do something about that next time around.