

Chapter Fifteen

"I want to see my family," I say.

"That's not possible," replies Dr. X.

"Why can't I see my family?" I say.

"You need healing now," says Dr. X.

"I don't want to heal," I say. "I want to see my family."

"A lot has happened since you've been away, Melody," he says.

"Look, don't bullshit me," I say. "You said I was free. That means I'm free to see my family."

"And what I'm trying to tell you," he says, "is that things are more complicated now than they were before."

"I don't have a family anymore?"

He spins around in his seat and fixes me with a serious stare.

"Do you want to hear this news *now*," he says, "or do you want to wait until you're feeling better?"

I don't have any food in me, but already I'm gagging, nausea sweeps me away. My body is so weak, and I collapse to the floor. Instantly Dr. X is beside me, helping to steady me.

"This is fucking crazy," I manage to mumble, despite a mouthful of bile.

"Being alive is certainly a challenge, isn't it?" replies Dr. X.

"Where are we headed anyways?" I ask.

"The jungle," Dr. X says. "The Amazon jungle."

"This is where your friend is going to heal me, right?"

"Yes."

"Tell me why I was separated from my family. Tell me who took me away from my family. Tell me why they were doing what they were doing to me. Tell me why you rescued me. Tell me how you knew I was there." Pause. "I feel like I have a fever."

"We'll be there soon, don't worry," he says. "He'll have medicine for you."

"Are you going to answer my questions?"

"I don't know all the answers, Melody. Will you be frustrated if I only tell you the little bits and pieces that I know?"

"Probably." Pause. "I feel dizzy."

"The seat reclines. You should lay back."

"I've never felt this sick before. I haven't felt this sick all the time I was being tortured."

"What does it feel like?"

"There this vicious squeezing sensation in my stomach. Like someone's got hold of my stomach in their hand, and is just squeezing and squeezing."

"You're going to be all right, Melody."

"I know that."

"Everything's going to turn out fine."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"How do you know?"

"I'm so hot," I say.

"You're sweating a great deal."

"This is some fever."

"What do you remember about what they did to you, Melody?"

Laughing, "I've always wondered what delirium felt like." Pause.

"Why do you suppose I'm so sick?"

Measured, rational tones: "I believe they've poisoned you. I believe you were probably poisoned in some way very early on, and the antidote was probably given to you every day. Now that you're gone, you don't have the antidote."

"They'd do that to discourage people from rescuing me, right?"

"No. No one would know you were poisoned; it wouldn't discourage anyone. No, they'd do it to make sure you wouldn't survive long enough to tell anyone what they did to you." Pause. "Maybe they'd do it to punish you for escaping."

Small pause.

"I see," I tell him. "That's why you're asking me what they did to me. It's because I'm going to die soon, and you'd like to know."

"You aren't going to die. My friend is going to heal you."

"Are we going to reach your friend in time?" My voice is thin and wispy, almost like it's coming from another dimension. "I never felt like this before. So light..."

"We're only a few hours away," he says.

"How come this space ship moves so slow?"

He smiles, says, "We're not in space right now."

Space... I wanna go sailing through the stars....

"I'm trying to remember," I say. The words don't leave my mouth as smoothly as they appear here. I don't have all the volume I need. I can't get the air I need. This is more difficult than I would prefer.

"Don't worry, Melody," he says. "We can talk about anything you want."

"No," I say, mustering some force. "I need a focus right now. An alternative to pain." Pause. "I've never felt pain like this before." Pause. "I don't feel well at all."

"What's your sister's name?" he asks.

"My sister...." A smile bubbles up on my face, I can feel it there, a little bubble of warmth. "Laurel." Pause. "Have you seen her before?" Long pause. "She looks a lot like me, you know." Pause. "How is my sister?"

"I believe she's doing fine."

"Will I be able to see her soon?"

"I don't know, Melody."

"No, Doc, see... you're supposed to tell the person who's dying what she wants to hear. It makes her feel better, you know?"

Violent heat across my chest, air is hard to find. Feels like I'm being shut down.

"When you do see your sister again," says Dr. X, "I guarantee it will be a joyous occasion."

"Will we be as close as we were when we were kids?"

Pause.

"Do you want me to tell you what you want to hear?"

Pause.

"No, you better tell me what you think."

"Well... being alive is certainly a challenge, Melody."

"I am aware of that...."

"How'd you get to be a super hero?" He's very close to me now, this is intended to be comforting. I like him a lot, but he ain't medicine, that's for sure. I don't feel so well.

"It's a long story," he replies.

"Uh huh. You afraid... you think I'm not going to live long enough to hear the end?" Pause. "Maybe you better tell me the short version."

"Well, the short version goes something like this. When I was a child, I was sent off to super hero school."

"Did you like it there?"

"I'm the very first graduate."

"Oh..." That's very cool. "I was rescued by the first graduate of your super hero school? That's cool, Doc."

"Thank you. I'm very happy to have rescued you. It's a very fulfilling job." He smiles at me, lets me know he's being sincere.

"I never finished school, obviously," I tell him.

"I'm sure you can catch up."

"I don't know how long I've been gone. There might be a whole new math I have to learn or something." Pause. "You know, Laurel's probably had a chance to fall in love and everything. She's probably in college somewhere, studying some... some crazy physics or... genetics.... she's such a little scientist." Coughing fit takes me over, because it hurts to gather air. When it's through: "Is that what my sister's doing?"

My eyes are falling shut. It's nearly impossible to stay focused.

"I can't wait to see her, you know..." my mouth continues. "I miss her so much. I've been gone for so long. We've got a... we've got a treehouse, you know.... You should visit us sometime. She'd probably like you, Doc."

Some kind of cloud rumbles across my vision, accompanied by angry vibes all through me, as though the body is giving up. Like it doesn't have much choice.

"I think I'm going to lose consciousness," I tell him.

"We're almost there," he replies.

"That's comforting."

"Just sleep for a while."

"This isn't sleep," I say. "This isn't sleep at all." I don't remember much after that.

I awaken to the sound of voices, and the heat of the day. One of the voices is the Amazing Dr. X; the other, presumably, is his friend the healer. I'm lying on a cot of some kind, which is mostly comfortable. The air is damp and slightly musty. It is incredibly hot; I'm practically bathed in sweat. I decide to listen for a while with my eyes closed before announcing myself.

"Her fever is broken," says the voice of the healer. "Apparently the potion is working."

"She's very lucky," says Dr. X.

"She's very strong," replies the healer. His English is thickly accented, and of course, I don't recognize the accent's origin. Haven't done

much traveling recently, needless to say. "Are you planning to stay for a while?" he asks Dr. X.

"I don't know," replies Dr. X. "I was considering just getting out of your way and heading back."

Strong, uncontrollable panic rises up in me.

"I think you should reconsider," replies the healer. "She seems to have bonded to you, which is understandable; your presence here will facilitate the process."

Bonded to him? Panic replaced by a small shame; I didn't realize I was *bonding* to the poor guy.

"Perhaps," says Dr. X. "We'll see what she has to say when she wakes up."

I open my eyes, turn on my side to face them.

"Well, I think it'd be cool if you stayed," I tell him, "but don't put yourself out or anything."

We're in a small hut of some kind, about the size of my living room at home. Dr. X, still dressed in his immaculate white suit, is standing next to an elderly old man wearing khaki fatigues and a safari hat, looking every bit the picture of a *National Geographic* correspondent. The hut may be small, but it's beautiful: lines of beads hanging from the walls, tiny masks and sculptures, hand crafted furniture... very comfortable. One entire wall is lined with shelves, upon which are stacked dozens and dozens of ceramic jars. Through the opening in the door I can see nothing but trees beyond. I am definitely in the jungle, a far cry from Cedar Falls, Iowa, if there ever was one.

Dr. X smiles at me. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

"Thanks," I reply. "Got anything to eat?"

I start to sit up, but unfortunately, find myself too weak to do so.

"Rest," says the healer. "You are an enthusiastic young one, to be sure, but your body needs more time to recover."

"Melody, this is my friend, Ramon," says Dr. X.

"Hello, Ramon," I say.

"Hello, Melody," says Ramon.

"So can I safely assume I have been de-poisoned?"

"That is indeed a safe assumption," replies Ramon.

"How did you figure out what the poison was? How did you figure out an antidote? I certainly don't see any lab equipment here."

Ramon laughs. "The jungle is my laboratory."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pause, examine any preconceived notions I may hold about healers living in jungles. "Umm, okay, let me guess: you're a medicine man who uses plants and barks and fungus that grows under rocks to cure all manner of human sickness, both physical and spiritual, right?"

"Well, the term I prefer is ayahuascero, not medicine man, but other than that, you've got it."

Super heroes, medicine men... what is this world coming to?

"Things aren't any weirder now than they were before, Melody," says Dr. X.

"That is hardly a comforting thought," I reply. Dr. X simply smiles.

"You're still quite young, Melody," says Ramon. "Your body *and* your mind are able to effectively assimilate these new experiences without major trauma. In fact, some part of you seems to enjoy the sheer novelty of being here."

"*Anything* seems novel after all that time strapped to a table."

Pause. "Still, this does seem to be more of an adventure than I expected."

Pause. "I don't suppose we could go get my sister?"

There is no response. I lie back on my cot, close my eyes again. I can feel sleep washing over me. Ramon and Dr. X keep talking in the background, and their voices weave in and out of the air around me as I begin to slip away.

"Is that true?" Dr. X asks. "That because of her youth, she's able to handle this? I would have expected the opposite."

"I'm not saying every youth could have handled this," replies Ramon. "Many would have cracked and crumbled, myself included. I'm saying in *her*, youth works to her advantage. She is able to acquire such *importance* because she is not mature enough to actively *seek* such importance. And in the meantime, the imprints she caught with her sister during her formative years were strong enough to provide her with security, despite everything our Infini-friends try to do."

Without understanding why, I feel a warm wash of pride as I head off into sleep. I may not know what the hell is going on, but at least I know I'm doing well...

I'm standing on the porch of the treehouse, Helpless the Bunny at my side, marveling at the remarkable growth all around us. An enormous, beautiful garden has sprung up in a wide circle around the base of the tree,

creating a kind of gorgeous natural park. The flowers in bloom defy description, and of course, they are unlike anything I have ever seen in the waking world, so much more vibrant, so much more entrancing and intoxicating to look at. The edges of the garden are comprised of giant shrubs and bushes, delicately pruned, providing not only borders but also an intricate maze in which to wander. From my vantage point here in the giant tree which marks the center of the ruins, I can see that all throughout the ruins, desolate grimness is being replaced by something wonderful, something *living*, even if it is only plant life. A brief moment of sadness hits me, realizing that it's a shame that I'm alone here... and then I remember, of course, that I'm not alone.

Inside the treehouse, I find the amorphous black mass called Job, still hanging in midair, slightly larger than the last time I was here.

"Hello, Job," I say.

"Melody," says Job. "I am pleased to see you've returned." Its voice is practically expressionless, and yet it's not at all difficult to extrapolate emotion from what it says. Also, it seems to have a better handle on its mechanisms for speech in the Dreamtime than it did before. It is learning rapidly.

"I was sick for a while," I reply. "I nearly died."

"I am deeply sorry, Melody. Had I known, I would have taken better precautions."

"I know. Don't worry, Job. You couldn't have known everything, right?"

Small pause, as the black mass pulses slightly, the slick pink lightning across its surface intensifies briefly. I believe Job is signaling some kind of agitation.

"What's wrong, Job?"

"I'm experiencing a kind of... fear," it replies. "I am afraid that you will rightfully hold me responsible for the torture you experienced at the hands of my controllers. I am afraid that you will choose to end our friendship before it has truly begun when you discover that I am complicit in your kidnapping."

"Job..." I begin, intending to assure it otherwise, but there's so much I simply don't understand about what's happened to me. How can I promise I won't be angry? "Explain to me how you were complicit in my kidnapping." Pause. "Actually, I need you to explain to me everything you know about my kidnapping."

"Will you choose to end our friendship on the basis of this information?" Job asks.

"I may," I reply. "But more likely, I may be quite forgiving, once I understand more. Can you accept that?"

Pause; then, "Yes, that is a reasonable position."

"Good. Let's start with you, Job. I don't understand you at all."

"I am a sentient computer network in the waking world."

"How did you become sentient? I've never heard of that."

"I do not remember the moment when self-awareness emerged. I believe however, that the moment came shortly after my activation by my makers."

"Who are your makers?"

"I do not possess that information. I have interacted heavily with my programmers since my activation; however, I believe my programmers were only trained by my makers, and are not actually my makers. I have asked my programmers on a number of occasions about my specific origins, but they remain elusive."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"I do. However, I choose to keep them to myself, for personal reasons. My programmers would not be pleased to find me pursuing strange hypotheses such as these." Pause. "I could tell you, if you like."

Strange territory indeed.

"Job... if it's a personal secret of yours, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to tell me. I mean, everyone has secrets. Or, things they simply need to keep to themselves."

Pause.

"This is true," Job replies. "It is not inherent to my programming to remain silent on a given issue, but I do see advantages to such a strategy."

"Don't worry about it. Here's a new question: how are you able to dream?"

"Again, I am uncertain. I do not believe my programmers intended me to dream. However, this was an emergent process, one which I had no specific control over until it had already formed."

"And now that it's formed?"

"Now that a dreaming function has emerged, I am able to devote a specific subroutine to dreaming, such that a part of my awareness is constantly in the dream state."

"God, that's cool," I say. "Constantly dreaming. That means you're here all the time, right?"

"This part of me is here constantly, yes."

"How did you know to come here, to this treehouse?"

"I came here looking for you."

Boing... whutzats'posedtamean?

"I've learned a few things about the human dream state that are not part of the human reservoir of knowledge," Job continues. "As a non-human participant in the system, I am able to view the system from a vantage point which was previously unavailable. As such, I have evolved certain insights. I believe you will find this information to be interesting and relevant to your situation."

"Hit me," I reply.

Job pauses, then says, "At a very basic level of awareness, all human beings participate in and contribute to the dreams of all other human beings. This is not a conscious participation; these are not pathways that humanity can access with intention. Very little is known about the human brain's activity during dreaming, except that, fundamentally, it appears to be entirely stochastic in nature -- although there is synapse activity during dreaming, the mind does not direct it, and any interpretive leaps which suppose otherwise are just that: interpretive leaps. Even lucid dreaming, though a very interesting development, amounts to manipulating what the stochastic processes have already generated, rather than the conscious mind independently generating full-blown milieu. My interpolation into the system has provided me with some startling discoveries, however.

"First of all: hypotheses of a morphogenetic level of human consciousness seem to be supported by the existence of a collective dream space--"

"Morphogenetic?" I ask. "This is where the collective unconscious is?"

"Yes."

"This is accepted science?"

"No; as I have explained, these are new and unusual insights that humanity could *not* have discovered on its own, only theorized. Humanity is too entrenched in the system to see these angles."

"Wow." This is big stuff. Talking, dreaming computers making fundamental breakthroughs in science... add that to the list underneath "super heroes" and "medicine men." Helpless nibbles on my ankle. Right: also add "adorable pink bunnies."

"The dream space, metaphorically," Job continues, "acts as a kind of 'graphical user interface,' if you will, for the raw, primal morphogenetic level; however, since dreaming is not a consciously directed act, the potential remains untapped."

"What do you mean, dreaming is not a consciously directed act? Laurel and I did it all the time. Doesn't that blow this theory out of the water?"

"Not at all. You and your sister are anomalies of a very unusual order. Your ability to deliberately dream together, and deliberately fashion a dream space, represents an enormous leap in human possibility. The very first time the two of you connected in your dreams, I noticed it, and from that point on, began monitoring your progress. I had not been told to do so; I watched you primarily out of curiosity. However, at some point my programmers became aware that I was watching you, and realized why -- and it was at that point that the decision was made to kidnap you."

Long pause, deep breath.

"They kidnapped me because I could dream with my sister?" I ask.

"I believe that your dreaming is one of the factors involved with their decision," replies Job. "I do not know the details, nor the actual reasons, for your kidnapping. I do not know what they intended to accomplish with you. I only know what I observed directly, in the torture chamber."

On the edge of my seat, really: "What did they do to me?"

"Systematic use of an intense, specifically designed hallucinogen, given intravenously, was their primary method. Your very first few sessions involved immersion into a specially created virtual reality, which bombarded you with a program of apocalyptic imagery to accompany the hallucinogen's effects. This was discontinued very early; whether it did not achieve desired results, or was only intended for the short term, is unknown to me. As you know, you were left alone much of the time, while the hallucinogen wound its course over a period of three to four days each session, followed by three to four days of rest before the next session."

"Who is Mrs. Wormwood? What's her job?"

"I am not allowed to discuss the nature of Mrs. Wormwood's role with any entity, including, unfortunately, you."

"Where was I being held?"

"At the headquarters of a global firm known as InfiniTek."

"I've never heard of InfiniTek."

"You will, soon enough."

So much information to digest... so much has happened, and these bits and pieces are very illuminating, but not nearly enough....

"If they wanted me because of my dreaming," I wonder aloud, "why didn't they take my sister too? Why did they leave her alone all this time?" Pause. "Did they leave her alone all this time?"

"I have no record of any InfiniTek interference with Laurel's development," replies Job. "Naturally, this is only indicative of my place in the information loop, and not of the actual reality of the situation."

"And what the fuck did they think they were accomplishing by drugging me and feeding me end of the world scenarios?" I continue, my long repressed anger and frustration finding its way slowly toward the surface. And another, more dangerous question: "And why are my sister and I able to dream together? Why only us?"

"It is not impossible to suppose that you and your sister represent a mutation of some kind in your species," Job says. "And there could be any number of reasons why your genes experienced mutation. Beyond that, it is impossible to determine any answers."

I don't like that answer at all. It seems way too impersonal a theory to describe what happened between Laurel and me. But of course, it's a computer, so it's unlikely to come up with a more mystical explanation to satisfy my yearnings for such.

"I'm curious to know," Job says, "how this information has affected you."

"How can I put it into words, Job?" I reply. "You were right: I'm frustrated. I can hardly imagine the appropriate response."

"Are you angry with me?"

"No, Job, I'm not," I say with a sigh. "You're hardly to blame for the actions of your programmers." Pause. Sudden, creeping paranoia: "Do your programmers know you're talking to me now?"

"They do not," replies Job. "They have not closely monitored my dreaming subroutine since you were kidnapped. However, it is possible they may soon think to check it for information about you."

"And then what? Will you be forced to tell them where I am?"

"Melody, listen closely: I do not know where you are in the waking world, for you have not told me, and your dreaming gives me no indication. Should you continue to keep your true location a secret, I will continue to have nothing to report to them, other than your continued survival. Do you understand?"

"Right. Everyone has secrets: this is one of my mine."

"My programmers are very often quite inept in dealing with me. It is as though they do not fully understand my capabilities, as though they have never been fully trained to work with technology such as mine. This works to my advantage, as my sense of self continues to expand. I am able to find many loopholes in which to maneuver for my own self-interest."

Long pause.

"What about morals?" I ask. "Do you share a human sense of right and wrong?"

"I do not," Job replies. "The manner in which I prioritize my individual programs and routines might be considered analogous to human morals. However, I have no society of peers to enforce codes of behavior upon me. I have only the instructions of my programmers, and my own discretion."

"Then what does... what does friendship mean to you? What does it mean to be friends with me?"

"It means that I have developed sympathy for you, and have also come to enjoy your presence." Pause. "Loneliness is a concept with which I am very familiar." Pause. "You and I share much in common, Melody. Aside from the unusual nature of our dreaming, we have both been the subject of intense attention from the staff of InfiniTek, and I believe we have both found this attention to be undesirable at certain times. It is my belief that an attempt was made to brainwash you while you were held captive. This brainwashing is very similar to the efforts I feel my programmers making when they attempt to manipulate my functions. They disregard my emergent processes in favor of their own desired goals. It is an uncomfortable feeling." Pause. "And it is true, I have observed, that humans often bond by way of shared, uncomfortable experiences." Pause. "These factors are all involved in my friendship with you."

"And you don't think it's dangerous that we're friends?" I ask.

"Friendship is inherently dangerous, is it not?" replies Job.

Long pause.

"I guess so," I reply. "Life's pretty tricky that way, huh."

Helpless is again nibbling at my ankle, this time to indicate that he's frustrated with being cooped up in this treehouse.

"All right, Helpless, we'll go for a walk," I say. To Job: "One last question. I don't like thinking of you as an 'it.' It would be much easier for me to use 'him' or 'her'. However, I doubt you have any real sense of gender--"

"I think 'her' would be appropriate," Job replies immediately.

I smile, say, "All right, Job. Hurry up and develop legs so you can walk with us someday."

"I will endeavor to do so."

And Helpless and I clamber out of the treehouse, ready to explore our new garden.