

Chapter Eighteen

"Am I going to see you again?" Melody asks.

"I'm in no position to predict the future," replies the Amazing Dr. X, "but I have a very strong feeling we'll be seeing each other again quite soon."

Months into her journey of recovery from the past, Melody is no longer the vacant and confused youth she was when the Amazing Dr. X rescued her from the halls of InfiniTek. There is a serene assurance in her now, a sense of place in the world, an inner pool of strength that provides her with fuel to face the challenges of Ramon's healing. Dr. X has personally led the physical side of her recovery, involving strenuous exercise to rebuild her weakened muscles and get her heart into top condition. She took to this difficult work without complaint, finding in the exertion a kind of meditative state that allowed her to physically work through her tension and her fears. Meanwhile, on more than one occasion, his presence has comforted her during the most intense of Ramon's visionary confrontations with her; he has been a stable figure for her during Ramon's healing, providing support as she entered bizarre and impossible territory.

Unfortunately, he is long past due to return to Adriana the sorceress, deep within the bowels of the hollow earth. And Melody is finding the situation difficult to understand....

"You work for this woman?" Melody asks.

"I work *with* her, yes," replies Dr. X.

"And she's a sorceress?"

"Yes."

"Who lives in the bowels of the hollow earth?"

"Yes, that's it exactly."

Pause.

"Well, I swear, Doc," she says, "if it's not one thing, it's twenty-three others." Pause. "And just what is a super hero like you doing working for a sorceress who lives in the bowels of the hollow earth? Or is that too ridiculous a question?"

"It's hard to describe, actually," he replies, "in terms that you'll appreciate." Pause. "I mean, she's no ordinary sorceress."

"I should hope not!" exclaims Melody. "The very *idea* of sorcery pretty much *precludes* ordinary, doesn't it?"

"Right, sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"Anyways, can't you just tell her to wait?" she says, changing tactics slightly. "I mean, we've only got another month or two here before I'll be ready to head back to America."

"She's a very impatient individual."

Pause.

"And jealous?" she asks.

"Jealous?" he replies.

"Yeah, jealous," she says nonchalantly. "As in, you've been spending all this time with me, a young American girl, when you should be spending time with her, a powerful sorceress."

And knowing Adriana, thinks Dr. X, this could be *exactly* why she urgently summoned him back to her cavern below the surface. Never mind that Adriana and he no longer relate to each other on any kind of "romantic" level, and never mind that Melody and he never have related on any kind of "romantic" level; it would be just like Adriana to assume he's involved in some kind of Lolita scenario and then endeavor to punish him. (Damn it all to hell, some days it just doesn't pay to be a super hero....)

"That is not," he says, "outside the realm of possibility."

He watches her shrug slightly, and then she says, "You better tell me something before you go."

"And what's that?"

She looks up suddenly, pierces him (in a way) with her eyes, and says, "How come you rescued me?"

Long pause. That question, he realizes, gets right to the heart of the matter. At issue is her right to know everything that concerns her, versus his and Adriana's right to withhold what they fear will be dangerous to her, and thus, dangerous to them. Further, is it even safe to tell her what they know (what we *assume*, he corrects himself) is her present and future situation? How will she handle the information? How will it affect the way in which she pursues her approaching future?

He is, however, unable to avoid her (piercing) stare, which seems to be compelling him to simply answer her question with honesty. Not so difficult, now, is it?

"We decided that your situation was intolerable," he says.

"We?"

"Adriana and I. We decided that your kidnappers had an unfair advantage over you at that stage in your development, and we endeavored to even the odds."

Pause, as she digests this, ponders her next question. He certainly has no desire to *offer* her anything; Adriana's going to kill him for this as it is.

"How did you even know I'd been kidnapped? Why did it matter to you that it was me they'd kidnapped?"

"We'd been watching you for a short while before they kidnapped you. The dreaming that you shared with your sister... the fact that you could share your dreams attracted our attention."

"And that's probably why my kidnappers wanted me as well. But... what makes you their opposition? Why was it important for you to rescue me? What kind of 'advantage' did they have?" Pause. She is methodically working her way through the facts she has. The only thing she's missing is the kind of pristine self-awareness that will someday *make* her. She doesn't sense her own depth; she is unaware of her own potential.

"We are their opposition," says Dr. X, "because 'they,' whoever they are... are not from here."

"Aliens," she says, nodding. "I suspected as much."

So casual, as though *the very idea that there are aliens on this planet is not inherently awesome and tremendous, frightening and staggering*, and he asks, "Did Ramon tell you?"

"Actually," she says, "as I've thought about it... as I've been introduced to crazy shit like super heroes and their space ships, and ayahuasca trips... I suppose it was inevitable that aliens wound up a part of the mix, eh? And so the question must be, are they friendly or mean or just plain misunderstood?" She laughs brightly. "Until we know for sure, it would be a mistake to assume they're 'eee-vil,' right? I mean, I'm certainly glad you rescued me, but... who knows, maybe that was an elaborate ritual of greeting, all that 'torture.' You never can tell."

Yes, he thinks, this is some heavy brand of optimism she's burning into herself out here in the jungle. Absolutely remarkable, and wonderful to see; compelling, too. As in, I believe I have to agree with her. I just *have* to.

"But," she says, "I'll just *bet* this sorceress friend of yours can't *stand* the idea of aliens."

Dr. X's eyebrow arches up above his hairline, and he says, "Oh?"

"Uh huh. Sorcery... that's basically earth magic, right? Using the natural energies of the earth to create miracles... I mean, 'basically' is a bad word, but the point is, her strength is found in the heart of the earth -- hell, she lives there, doesn't she? Whereas, *aliens*, with no connection to earth

whatsoever, are entirely outside the realm of her influence. She's got no language with which to communicate to them."

Ohhhhhh, *man*, is Adriana gonna kill me for this, he thinks.

"And what makes you think you know so much about sorcery?" he asks.

She shrugs, smiles: "Taking ayahuasca is quite a trip."

"You think ayahuasca is like sorcery?"

"I think sorcery is a silly word," she says, "and I think ayahuasca is pretty fucking magical." Pause. "Anyway, it's not so bad, I believe, that there are aliens among us. It's about time, really. I mean, your sorceress friend is going to have a hard time, because she's so heavily rooted to the earth. But regular humans like you and me..." She smiles. "Well, like me, anyway... there's no reason whatsoever we should be stuck here on this planet, when there is an entire universe to explore."

Such big ideas... he hasn't even managed to leave yet, and already he's beginning to miss her, which, he must admit, is an unexpected development. Can't always cut yourself off from an emotional attachment with the swiftness and agility required by circumstance. Sometimes, you just ride the roller coaster, amen.

"Maybe the aliens will take us on a ride in *their* space ship," she says, and he can tell she's quite Hopeful they will.

"Maybe you won't want to go where they're headed," he says.

"Maybe," she says. Then she grins fiercely and says, "Maybe I'll take over their ship."

He rises and offers her a hug, a small gesture considering the extent of his concern for her, and then he says, "Let me give you one small piece of advice before I leave."

"Of course," she replies.

"I know this is going to sound preposterous, and I know you probably aren't going to like the idea one bit. But..."

"You don't want me to see my sister, do you," she says.

"No, I don't," he replies. "Not for a while yet. They'll be able to find you again the minute you and your sister reestablish contact. You'll be amazingly--"

"Powerful," says she.

"Visible," he replies. "And you won't have time to learn yourselves before they catch up to you again. *And*, you can be sure it won't be such a simple matter to rescue you if they ever get hold of you again." Pause. "I'm sorry, Melody."

He can tell she's desperate and crestfallen; the question is, will she take his advice, especially after he leaves her and returns to Adriana? He watches a whole range of emotion play subtly across her face, her eyes locked on an obscure point somewhere in the distance (do not establish contact, she thinks, do not allow him access to these feelings, do not provide an opening with which he can expose you, swallow what you feel, and *know* that what he says is true (to *know*, to know with gnosis, a mysterious, deep gestalt realization that not only are the words true, but they are also *resonant* with *who you are* and *how you live*) and living will be difficult without her, but if we've managed this long, we can manage a while longer) which makes connection difficult, but not impossible, even if he simply touches her shoulder and says, "It's for the best," as lame and hideous an aphorism ever to fall from his lips, but there isn't much else to say to a girl who (better not miss him when he's gone, better pretend he doesn't mean a thing to me, because it seems to be my lot in life to make a friend and then watch him vanish (into one from her and him is him, the ideal androgynous Other who has escaped the issues that plague me, such as my attraction to this particular him, can't control such thoughts (he's leaving nonetheless) but rather hope they dissipate) into thin air as my environment transforms itself around me and I) will face the future with such fire as to make those words melt down around us all.

"I had this notion," she says, "that maybe you and I would get to spend some time together, like, hang out together, just do simple stupid things together, after all this metaphysical shit is over," she says, "but it's obvious that that's right out of the question. It's like... it's as though once you start playing the game, you never ever stop, there's never going to be a point, for the rest of my life, where I can simply rest. Where I can simply pretend I'm who I used to be, where I can simply enjoy a given moment for what it is." Pause. "If we went and saw a movie together, we'd probably feel ridiculous."

Uncomfortable as hell, wishing for all the world he had a secret identity he could drop into, he says, "I have to go now, Melody. Adriana is a very impatient woman."

"I can imagine," she replies. "If I were Mother Nature, I'd be impatient too. The world is coming to an end, after all."

He gives her an awkward hug and then climbs into his ship. I watch him close the door, see the last vibrant glimpse of his stark white suit before the hatch slams shut, and then, moments later, I watch the space ship vanish, and I am left alone in the jungle once again -- alone with

Ramon, my healer, who must maintain that sacred doctor/patient relationship in order to do his work, leaving me with no one to discuss the nature of my illness, and no one to recommend a second opinion.

"Stop worrying about the plot," says Ramon, emerging from the trees.

"Easy for you to say," I tell him, rising to my feet, fighting back this which wave of heavenly emotion comes sweeping across my foreground. "You've probably read the ending, haven't you."

Adriana the sorceress sits horribly fuming deep within the bowels of the hollow Earth, answering fan mail from the faerie kingdom and listening to loud, loud rock and roll music (the latest hit single from the ethereal vocalist Airee Macpherson, to be exact). Today, however, faerie praises are no match for her essentially black mood, her deep-seated spite and her powerful anger. That bastard super hero consort of hers is flitting about the jungle with a seventeen-year-old, while she sits here on her beanbag throne and fumes, I say, *fumes*.

Her crystal ball Fred beeps twice, signaling a distraction for her on her private line. She snaps her fingers and the crystal ball slides across the floor to her on its sleek black pedestal. While the ball continues beeping, she digs through her coin purse for a quarter, inserts it into the slot on the pedestal's side, and watches as an image resolves in the crystal ball. It's an old, old man, wearing an amorphous gray cloak that seems to blend into his actual body, and his long gray beard and frazzled gray hair are a giveaway that this dude has been around for far longer than the average Methuselah.

"Well, well, well," says Adriana with a token smile, "if it isn't my old friend Father Time. After all these years, no less."

"It's good to see you, Adriana," Father Time replies. "You're looking well."

"Do you realize how long it's been since you've even bothered to visit me?" exclaims Adriana. "I've had this body for thousands and thousands of years now, I don't suppose it would have been too much of a hardship, you old bag, to stop by and see me every couple of hundred years or so."

"I've got a very tight schedule," says Father Time. "Fighting the good fight, and all that."

"What a bunch of crap," replies Adriana. She squints as she peers into Fred, trying to make out Father Time's surroundings. "Where are you calling from?" she asks.

"I'm in the Dreamtime," he replies.

Suddenly, her interest is aroused. "No shit?"

"No shit," he says, practically grumpy about the whole affair. "I'm on my way to the fairy tale dream castle. I've decided to offer Laurel a helping hand. After all, you and Dr. X have already managed to help Melody out of her particular dilemma, so there's no reason not to even out the scales a little bit."

"You don't seem altogether pleased," says Adriana.

"Of course I'm not!" he growls. "The policy has *always* been nonintervention, Adriana. You know that full well."

"Bah humbug," she says with a grin. "Screw the policy. Have you heard what's going down on the surface these days? Are you aware who the major players are now? Things are changing much faster than we ever bothered to predict. We may as well roll with the changes, since it looks as though they'll roll us regardless."

"Yes, I am aware of the strange happenings on the planet's face," replies Father Time. "I wanted to let you know, in fact, that I am starting to share your opinion about the policy. I wanted to let you know that I have decided to take some proactive measures. And I believe I have a few ideas on how to proceed. The Dreamtime is turning out to be a valuable source of information."

"Dear me," says Adriana, "enlighten me."

"The regular world in which humans live is a singular, linear world," begins Father Time. "It's the world you now inhabit, you and your brand new beautiful human body."

"Flatterer," she says.

"Hardly," he replies. "Meanwhile, the Dreamtime is an intersection of billions of possible worlds. It is a repository for every kind of dream. A single dream, all on its own, is not much of anything, really: a smattering of random images with no inherent meaning, a jumble of confused emotions and bizarre experiences. As these dreams intersect in the Dreamtime, however, a space is created wherein order seems to emerge from out of the raucous swirling of humanity's dreams. Imagine, then, a parallel plane of existence, simultaneous with Real Life; and now imagine that this parallel plane, this Dreamtime, not only contains the dreams of Real Life but the dreams of all Possible Lives as well, the dreams of those

eigenstates which did *not* appear in Real Life but *did* appear on some other plane. Real, of course, is an arbitrary term in a model like this. The Dreamtime, then, functions as a hub to which all possible worlds are connected."

"You're beginning to sound like a flake, dear," says Adriana.

"So what? Big deal," he replies. "Anyway, the reason I haven't visited you in so long is because I believe I've been trapped in a different eigenstate for a while. Not trapped as in 'I can't get out' but trapped as in 'I don't even know I'm not where I'm supposed to be.'" Pause. "Do you want to hear a story?"

"Oooh, yes," says Adriana, who always wants to hear a story, yes indeed.

"Imagine a giant city in the Dreamtime, a giant swirling city called Ityl-Atys..."

"What do you mean by swirling?" she asks.

"Swirling, as in, the streets are never in the same place two days in a row, and the buildings are constantly moving. The streets are filled with dreamers traveling to and fro and here and there, and there is a constant steady hum of excitement. There is a tower in the center of the city, and that's where I was staying when Melody arrived...."

"Melody? Our Melody?"

"Not our Melody precisely. One of Melody's counterparts from another place and time, from another story, from another iteration. But Melody nonetheless. In this story, her sister Laurel had been brutally murdered, and she was left alone to face the universe. And in this story, Melody's enemies invaded the actual Dreamtime itself, fought a terrible and vicious battle within the city walls, and devastated Ityl-Atys. Melody barely escaped with her life. In that story, Melody's Earth was subsumed by her enemies, and she lived out her days in fear. She had a child named Lily who was intended to be her savior, but naturally, your children never turn out the way you expect them to, and we never heard from Lily again."

"Why are you telling me this story?" Adriana asks.

"At the end of time," replies Father Time, "when all planes collapse into the Dreamtime, ripples from nearby planes will begin resonating across our own, and soon, there will be no boundaries between them. You and I are going to be woefully unprepared for that day, Adriana. I'm talking about the end of Time! I'm talking about the emergence of the *Dreamtime* as the primary plane of reality! Can you fathom the implications of *that*? Mere minutes after one Melody is banished entirely

from the ruins of Ityl-Atys, another Melody is on her way in, creating a garden, replenishing the land... What if they had *met* each other there, instead of just missing each other?"

"Umm," says Adriana, "all of physics would collapse?"

"If you're not going to be serious about this--"

"I am being serious, you ninny. What you're suggesting is that very soon the impossible is going to begin. As the end of Time approaches, all these poor humans won't have the first clue as to what's going on, and mass chaos will ensue. Reality as we know it will be transfigured by the emergence of the Dreamtime, and hopefully, some time after that, New and Improved Reality will settle in."

"Something to that effect," Father Time replies. "And it isn't just humans who are going to be befuddled by the coming conrescence. You and I, Adriana, are going to be just as confused and terrified as everyone else."

Long silence.

"Well, I don't know how I feel about *that*," says Adriana.

Another silence.

"I would have liked to have told you earlier," he says.

"You know, I *miss* you," she says. "I don't have anyone at all to talk to anymore."

"What about--"

"Dr. X is cute, but he's also a typical human. You can't really trust him, and anyway, his perspective is all wrong." Pause. "I don't like these long-distance relationships."

Father Time sighs. "Before we had these bodies, we didn't mind long stretches of time."

"Human forms are certainly educational, but having one for thousands of years is certainly a drag." Pause. "When are you coming back?"

"I'm not sure. I need to stay with Laurel for a while. She's going to need some assistance in the coming days." Pause. "You know I don't like this course of action, Adriana. We should have stayed out of things. We should have let them run their natural course. Who's to say it isn't our meddling that will be the cause of all the problems?"

"And who's to say," she replies, "that our meddling hasn't already solved half of the problems? This 'policy of nonintervention' has gone too far. I was opening my fan mail from the faeries today, and you wouldn't believe what's happened to faerie society over the last couple hundred

years. Do you have any idea what electricity does to a faerie? It's insane. And it seems like every other year I get an angry letter from the centaurs, bitterly complaining about having to live underground just because the humans have gotten all 'rational.' And *now*... now there are *aliens* on the planet's surface, and there are dreaming, thinking computer intelligences... there are people using strange drugs to access all kinds of bizarre energies and states... there are wars covering half the planet and starvation covers two thirds of it... And all this time, we've simply let ourselves sit back and watch."

"I know, I know," mutters a tired Father Time, "I have heard it so many thousands of times. Everyone blames *Him*, as though the problems are His instead of the world's. The greatest gift He gave the world was freedom, and now we're asking Him to take it back... I just don't like it one bit. And there's one question you haven't asked me, Adriana."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You haven't asked me how I know Time is coming to an end."

"Goodness, you're right," she says drolly. "How do you know that Time is coming to an end?"

"Well, I suppose you're aware of what the Circle is doing on the surface," he replies.

Long, long pause.

"They are trying to activate the Messiah archetype," replies Adriana very very slowly.

"Yes, they are," says Father Time. "And do you want to know a secret?" Pause. "I believe they're going to succeed."

Long, long pause.

"Well," says Adriana, "I don't know how I feel about *that*."

Twenty-three minutes after Adriana's conversation with Father Time, Dr. X's gleaming white space ship, the X-Celsior, materializes in the underground cavern, in Adriana's home. Adriana's glare sinks deep into the hull of the space ship; as the Amazing Dr. X steps out of the ship, he can literally feel the waves of burning jealousy and anger rolling towards him, emanating from somewhere behind Adriana's forehead and chest.

"Hi, honey, I'm home," he says.

Moments later, a huge boulder is sailing his way. His super hero prowess enables him to leap aside just in the nick of time, but there is

nothing he can do to prevent the boulder from smashing the X-Celsior where it sits.

"You simpering shit," she says. "I asked you to rescue her, not fall in love with her!"

A giant stalactite suddenly breaks away from the ceiling and begins plummeting directly towards him. He drops and rolls as the thing explodes behind him, then leaps back to his feet with nary a speck of dirt upon his immaculate white suit.

"This has nothing to do with her, Adriana," he replies.

"Oh?"

"You're not upset because you believe I fell in love with her. You're upset because you know I've fallen *out* of love with *you*."

That does it, thinks Adriana. This little pig is going to market, amen. Before Dr. X's amazed eyes, a tremendous Coca-Cola® machine rises up out of the earth a hundred yards away; it is as tall as a building, and the flashing neon "Exact Change Only" is nearly blinding, even through his white-lensed sunglasses.

"You think you're soooooo clever," spits Adriana. "Well, I've got news for you! I'm the REAL THING, Doc, ain't no two ways about it! And you're a simpering shit!" Her anger is bubbling over within her to such a degree that she is unable to form sentences to describe it; it is beyond rationality entirely. Luckily, she is a sorceress; she has no need to use words to describe how she feels, when she can use giant soda machines instead.

A tremendous hand appears in mid air, and Dr. X utilizes his super hero prowess to avoid it as it sails through the air, toward him, then past him and on to the Coca-Cola® machine. The hand forcefully pushes the top button, and within moments, an ominous rumbling fills the cavern. It is the sound of an enormous can of Coca-Cola® slowly descending through the innards of the machine. Dr. X's eyes scan the cavern frantically, searching for an option.

"You just think you're clever," spits Adriana again. "You didn't know what you had! I bet your little virgin on the surface thinks you're the man of her dreams -- won't she be surprised, you *impotent little twit*...."

"Impotent?" shouts Dr. X. "That does it!"

From the dispenser of the machine, the enormous can of Coca-Cola® bursts forth and crashes across the cavern floor, brilliantly red with a white and silver swipe across the side, the word "CLASSIC" sticking in his head with each revolution, and he is left with no alternative but to face the

can head on. It is large enough to smash a monster truck flat, but he fears nothing; and as it approaches, Adriana is amazed to watch him leap directly into the air and land *on top of the can*, now running across the surface of the rolling can, even steering it with his feet! She screams in terror, imagining that she and her beanbag throne will soon be squashed. But Dr. X is a super hero, and would never resort to such violence. Instead, he steers the can in the direction of her prized crystal ball Fred. The can plows into the sleek black pedestal with no regard for its antiquity and magic, and as the ball explodes into a thousand minuscule fragments of glass, a huge burst of fluorescent purple energy fills the cavern, knocking Dr. X from the can and encompassing the entire area. Moments later, all that remains is an echo which reverberates around the cavern for a while, and then suddenly, there is silence.

Adriana stands, nearly in tears, and whispers, "That was my heart you just smashed."

"So what?" replies a dazed Dr. X. "It's not like you were using it."

"You really hate me, don't you," she says quietly.

"No," he says. Pause. "No, I don't."

"I don't believe you," she says.

"So what?" he replies.

"And you were gossiping about me, too," she says. "She knows all about me now, doesn't she."

"I don't think she really gives a shit about you, to be honest," he says.

She slumps back down on her beanbag throne and decides to sob quietly for a few moments. He simply watches her coldly: her betrayer, standing off in the distance and mocking her with his mere presence.

"How did this happen to us?" she whispers.

He pauses for a long, long moment, and then replies, "Who cares?" And that's when she really begins to hate him.