

Chapter Twenty-Three

Scotto meets Laurel alone for drinks that week, at her request. There are Serious Issues to be discussed tonight by Scotto and Laurel, issues of fact and fiction and the intersection between the two, and issues of quicksand. Scotto orders his regular, a Long Island iced tea, and Laurel is content with a glass of the house red.

"You look good," Laurel says. "Something a little different about you."

Scotto smiles, says, "I think my aura's improving."

"Yeah, you got a real Hi-Pro® glow," Laurel responds. "What have you been up to?"

"Drugs," Scotto replies flatly. "I've gotten into psychedelic drugs."

Laurel stares almost blankly, as if to say, "You have *got* to be kidding." What she actually says is, "Don't you think that's a little dangerous?"

Scotto shakes his head vigorously.

"Wherever there are drugs," Scotto says, "some fool will insist that the fabric of society is being eroded." Pause. "When actually, we are merely tie-dying the fabric of society and making it into curtains." Pause. "It's actually been very rewarding for me, Laurel. I've seen parts of myself I've been denying were there."

"What do you mean?" she presses.

"Well, you know... after Gary died, I sort of started to... how do I say this... I started to kind of... turn into him, really. I mean," he rushes to say, "not that I started to grow taller and my hair changed color. But my outlook on things got progressively darker. I gave up my faith in God. I became more introverted, sort of... gave up on most people." Pause, smile: "Except for you, of course."

Laurel says, "Everyone needs drinking buddies."

"I don't communicate to anyone, though, what's going on inside of me. I mean, it's apparent that I'm an actor, and that there's a shell, or a facade, that keeps most of me hidden. But still... when I met you at Gary's funeral, you know, there was... this struggle going on within me at that

time, between, maybe you'd call them the darker and lighter sides of my life, and I watched the darker side sort of win."

"I could tell you were a fairly dark individual," Laurel replies, "because of what you wrote in 'Voices,' about how Gary had betrayed you, and leaving myself and you and Cohen all to die by the end of the story."

"That was just art, Laurel," he says.

"Don't cop out on *me*, Scotto, I know better," she replies. "In 'Voices,' Gary's driven to suicide by the Voices he's hearing in his head. And at the very beginning of the story, Cohen is hearing Voices too, and so are you. Why'd you choose to write it that way?"

"Laurel, we've been through all this," Scotto says. "If Gary was actually hearing Voices, as you say he was, it is *pure coincidence*. I didn't know he was hearing Voices. I was just making stuff up."

Laurel nods, takes a big sip of her house wine.

"Listen to this, Scotto," she says with a wry smile on her face. "Cohen is hearing Voices now."

Long pause, large sip of Long Island iced tea, and Scotto responds:

"What do you mean, Cohen's hearing Voices?"

"Just what I said," she replies. "They've even got the same names as the Voices Gary was hearing. The same names, not at all coincidentally I'm sure, as the Voices in 'Voices.'"

"Gale and Vince and Gregory and Jack," Scotto says.

"Uh huh." Long pause. "Spooky, isn't it."

"Downright macabre, I should think," replies Scotto. "I'm not at all sure I like the implications of this."

"Me neither. Because: I reread the story last night, Scotto, and it's a pretty damn gruesome story. The opening scene... where you and Cohen and I are out for drinks?"

"That was set right here in this bar."

"That's what I thought. You and Cohen are hearing Voices. And within minutes, Cohen is murdered in a hail of machine gun fire, and you and I are on the run. And then, we get into a car crash, and hallucinate about a character named Father Time, just before we both die upside down in a ditch. Now--"

"Has Cohen read 'Voices'?" Scotto asks.

"Of course not," says Laurel. "Which rules out self-fulfilling prophecy in the case of either Gary or Cohen: Neither one of them read the story before living out the events of the story."

Long long long sip of Long Island iced tea, a pause while another one is ordered, then:

"You know, Laurel, if you had brought this discussion to me a couple of weeks ago, I would have said you were screwy. But now... in the context of the psychedelic orchestra which has been playing inside my head... this might all sound completely reasonable...."

"Yeah," says Laurel. "If it hadn't been for Courtney and Cohen's influence, I would have disregarded what I'm thinking right now as paranoid and ridiculous. But, things are not necessarily what they seem, and things are not necessarily what they don't seem either. We don't know *what* the hell is going on in this world, and surely stranger things have happened than this."

"And what do you propose *is* happening?"

"I think," Laurel replies, "that your writing is acting as a very strange kind of fun house mirror which is somehow managing to reflect reality in a very bizarre way. How's that?"

"Convuluted," he says. "Try again."

"I think," she says, "you are writing about reality, before reality itself is aware of what's going on. I think maybe reality is taking cues from your writing."

"That's a bit much," he says.

"Your 'Treehouse' story did the same thing," she argues. "It captured in text a series of events which later occurred in reality pretty much just as you described them. 'Voices' is more complex, and so we presume it might have more 'misses' in it, more events in it that aren't going to happen at all, but the things that it *does* get right are phenomenal, and are the core of the story."

"Hmmm," says Scotto. "Hmmm hmmm hmmm. Your theory about 'misses' is interesting, but remember, the events of 'Voices' haven't tried to happen yet. All we know is that one element of the exposition is correct: Cohen is hearing Voices. *I'm* not hearing Voices, and the three of us have never gotten together in this bar to hang out."

"If we wanted to try to prove 'Voices' wrong, we could, couldn't we?" she says. "We could arrange your first meeting with Cohen *now*, over at my place instead of here. That would ruin the whole premise."

"Or could we?" Scotto says. "If we're accepting that reality itself is weird in relation to the events described in my writing, do you think it's even possible to alter what's written? Do you think we could go try to meet Cohen now, or would events conspire to prevent that from happening?"

"I don't know," Laurel replies. "I mean, I've never visited the Twilight Zone before. I have no idea what the customs are."

"Just you wait," he says with a sudden strange grin. "I've begun work on a novel, Laurel. The one you asked me to write."

Laurel's eyes grow wide suddenly, the implications of that rolling over her in waves. "Do tell."

"I didn't think I could tell the story of what happened to your sister in just one simple story, like 'Voices.' I decided I needed to address the whole thing, the whole depiction of precisely how and why she was taken from you, from several different avenues. To that end, I've begun work on a novel, to give us a more visceral look at what I've envisioned."

"And what exactly have you envisioned?" she says, a strange, irrational excitement building in her.

"Listen to this, Laurel," says Scotto, growing animated, warming to the tale at hand, "I was zooming on acid the other night and I practically gestalted a whole series of events, taking us all the way up until the end of the world."

"What do you mean, the end of the world?" says Laurel.

"Just what I said," says Scotto. "I think I'm writing about the end of the world, and I think somehow your sister is wrapped up in the whole mess, and I think there's a hell of a lot going on that I don't understand yet. I think once I get your sister's book written, you and I will be able to see much more clearly what's about to hit us in the face, so to speak. And the tricky thing is, I have no choice but to write us into this story directly. I mean, Gary set it all in motion when he decided you and I had to be characters."

"But you didn't sit down and map out the plot," says Laurel. "That's what you're telling me, right?"

"Right," he says. "This storyline came to me all at once, just like the others, from out of the blue. And then, my own observations of reality enhance the story as much as possible; I mean, when I wrote about you before, Laurel, I didn't know you at all, but now I'll be able to draw directly on my experiences of you to flesh out your character. Still and all...." He smiles. "I mean, the physics of this story are incredibly strange. Do you remember in 'Voices,' whenever Scotto and Laurel touched hands, the reality of the story seemed to bend and twist?"

"I remember that," she says, trembling slightly.

"Get a load of this," he says, taking her hands, and suddenly the entire bar begins to change colors, waves and waves of eeriness and mismatched syntax criss cross all around them, and the only thing that remains solid in the middle of this sudden melting and swirling of phonemes and linguistic structure are Scotto and Laurel, Scotto smiling, Laurel suddenly startled enough to gasp, and Scotto says, "You and me, we're the only ones who know that I'm the author of this story," and she says, "That doesn't mean you're the creator of the story," and he says, "Nope, it only means I get to write it all down," and she says, "That's still pretty fucking strange," and he says, "I have no doubt that it will continue to get stranger and stranger still as the story goes on and on and on," and she says, "Right up until the end of the world," and he says, "Right up until the end of the world...."

"I have to leave, Scotto," she says suddenly, breaking his hold on her. "I'm flying to London tomorrow, with Courtney and Cohen." Silence; in the face of his suddenly cold stare, she says, "I'm going to be initiated into the Circle."

"The Circle," he repeats, no small amount of disdain (colored by fear, perhaps, of losing her?) in his voice.

"I love Courtney and Cohen, Scotto," she says. "I love what I'm doing. I love the path I'm on. It feels *right* to me." Pause. "I'll send you my address. I'll keep in touch. You can send me your novel when it's finished, all right?"

And the suddenness of her maneuver has caught him off guard; just when he has opened himself up further than he has ever opened himself to anyone before, she has decided to leave him, decided this friendship will have to wait; the sting is mediated only by his knowledge

that he does have a book to write, and it will keep him occupied for quite some time....

"Have a safe trip," he says, and she smiles and nods. And then, he slowly excuses himself from the bar, makes his way to his car, and prepares to head home. In the distance, it must be a trick of the light, but he believes he can see little shadowy figures, wispy things that dance in and out of the light, made of an almost smoky substance, and perhaps they are waving to him, perhaps they are encouraging him -- or perhaps they don't notice him at all....

Meanwhile, deep in the bowels of the hollow Earth, where the sun don't shine and the temperature's always a pleasant 72 degrees, Adriana the sorceress watches with a desolate kind of sadness as her new crystal ball is installed. It's a 23" television set, mounted on a pedestal of pure gold, and instead of controlling it with her own special mastery of the powers of magick, she will be controlling it with a remote clicker thingie that sends magick signals through the air. The workmen -- a pair of stout little dwarves with bad attitudes -- take their time installing all the right cables and putting the speakers in the right places ("It's hard to get good surround sound when you live in a cave in the center of the earth," one grumbles, and she says, "Quit her bitchin'"). But this marvel of modern technology is no replacement for her old crystal ball Fred, destroyed in a fit of pique by her former lover, the Amazing Dr. X. Fred had personality, had a bit of spirit; this television set is inherently mindless and insipid, just like all the little worms on the surface. Bleak and miserable is where she's sitting now, and she can't quite place the source. Her bones are growing tired, and there are unnamable, unknowable fluctuations in the energy patterns that sweep the planet's face.

"Let's see if it works," says one of the dwarves, switching on the set and handing her the remote. The sheerly impossible number of buttons on the remote are enough to make her head not simply spin but damn near disintegrate; she nearly hurls it at the poor workmen, shouting, "You call this a scrying device?" and the workmen reply, "But it's the latest in high technology!" and as she begins pressing buttons randomly, changing the channel at a furious pace and causing antennas to appear and disappear and cranking the volume so loud that stalactites come crashing to the ground next to the terrified dwarves, suddenly an image catches her eye. "Scat," she says to the dwarves, and they scamper off into the darkness.

The picture on screen (and mind you, this picture is *sharp* and crystal clear, unlike an actual crystal ball, which tends to be mostly fuzzy and ethereal, leaving lots of room for, shall we say, creative interpretation) is of a tall, slender fellow in a dapper green suit, his face a glowing shade of soft white, his eyes pools of dreamy blackness, his head bald and shining. He is sitting at a table, alone, munching on what appears to be some kind of green cheese; and as Adriana fixes her gaze upon the screen, he looks up into the imaginary camera and makes eye contact with her, smiling wide in a most charming fashion.

"Greetings, Adriana," he says smoothly.

"Well," she says, returning his smile, genuinely glad to see an old friend, "if it isn't the Man in the Moon."

"It is indeed," he replies, bowing slightly. "You've been very busy lately, my dear."

She sighs heavily. "Yes, yes, I know, and more's the pity. No time to relax and enjoy a sunset any more."

"Excuse me for just a moment, love," he says, reaching behind him to a small control panel marked "TIDES" and pressing a tiny red button. "We can never forget our appointed tasks, can we."

"If only," she sighs. "If only."

"And tell me," says the Man in the Moon, a genuinely curious look crossing his face, "just what in the world is going on down there, Adriana? I haven't seen this much chaos since Atlantis sank."

"I can't say for certain," she replies. "I lack the proper perspective," she says with a distinct trace of sadness, and fear. "I'm incapable of reaching the proper conclusion, because I am too *involved* in my own personal conclusion."

"Ah," replies the Man in the Moon. "Would you like an outsider's perspective, my dear?"

Almost greedily, she says, "Yes, Luna, I would *die* for such a thing."

"Well, there's no need for anything quite so drastic. But I can tell you a few things you probably didn't know. For example, are you aware there's a giant space craft hovering above the dark side of the moon, hiding from your view?"

She shakes her head slowly.

"It's true. It's been there for a little over a year now. It's the largest of its kind I believe I've ever seen. I mean, tiny space craft have been

visiting you since the dawn of time, but this is something quite unique, I assure you. And I'm told by my gossips that there are more on the way."

"I knew they were here," she admits. "I've been powerless to stop their interference. Earth magick only works on the creatures of the Earth."

"I suspected as much," he says. "That's why they've been able to spread such confusion. But surely, Adriana, you can't tell me there's *nothing* you can do." He pauses, then asks, "What about the two girls who dream together?"

"We've taken care of one of them," says the sudden stark voice of the Amazing Dr. X, emerging from out of the shadows. "We're about to lose the other one."

Adriana turns slowly in her beanbag throne to witness the entrance of her beloved and most loathed, Dr. X. He's smart enough to avoid her most of the time these days, but apparently this conversation has brought him out of the woodwork.

"I believe," says Dr. X, "an official rescue is very nearly in order."

"An official rescue?" says the incredulous Man in the Moon. "Isn't that against the policy of nonintervention?"

"We've decided to screw the policy," replies Adriana, a smug and satisfied smile on her face. "After all, who remains to enforce it?" And the Man in the Moon ponders this consideration, as Adriana turns to Dr. X and says, "I suppose you've got a few ideas."

"If they initiate her," he says, "we've lost her for good."

"When's the initiation?"

"Soon." Pause. "I intend to be there."

"Won't the whole horrid Circle recognize you?"

"I'll be in *disguise*," he replies softly.

Adriana considers for only a moment, then says, "It's only fair. We rescued her sister, and now we will rescue her. And then, perhaps the two of them will get their shit together and *do something* about this mess." She waves her hand at Dr. X and says, "You have my permission."

And Dr. X nods his head, acknowledging her permission without actually needing it per se, and removes himself from the cave.

The Man in the Moon leans in close to the screen and whispers, "What in the world happened to you two?" Smiles, says, "I want all the juicy details."

An inappropriate question if there ever was one, she decides, and points the clicker at the screen, changing over to the Weather Channel and settling in for an evening's entertainment.

Dr. X will take care of Laurel, she thinks, and then Laurel and Melody will take care of each other, will take care of this whole dreadful situation. I'll lend them as much support as I can, but really, I am constrained by my form, and by my role; I must wait, and wait as patiently as I can, and hope entropic heat death doesn't arrive before I get a chance to truly play my part. Ah, such beautiful cold fronts....

And in a rather large hall in Seattle, the astonishing young singer Airee Macpherson prepares for tonight's concert, oblivious to the greater situation which holds the Earth in its grasp, concerned only about the 5,000 fans who await her performance, concerned only about her voice, concerned only about her music. Her career has been steadily on the rise: first a breakthrough radio hit and then a smash hit on MTV, and now her first headlining tour. It's a dream come true for Airee, and no moments are more precious to her than her moments onstage. It's as though the sheer totality of her existence finds singular and perfect expression via the sweet tones her voice produces, and the reactions of her fans are like manna, a gift and a blessing, a cure and a wonderful libation.

Five minutes before the show begins, she finds herself remembering flashes of last night's dreams -- only flashes, unfortunately, images and scenes; she *never* remembers the actual content of her dreams. It is as though that entire world is locked away from her waking self. She has no idea what goes on in her subconscious mind while she sleeps, only that she never has nightmares and she always feels completely refreshed when she awakes, even if she's only slept for an hour or two. She hasn't remembered a full dream since she was a child; the last dream she remembers bringing back into her waking memory was of riding off on a horse to visit a great big fairy tale castle. Since then, singing has supplanted dreaming for her in almost every way.

So why tonight, of all night, should she be seeing images from last night's dreams? Images of a woman, a strikingly beautiful woman, long flowing black hair, and images of a treehouse in a giant tree.... There is some kind of kinetic energy in these images, but she can't resolve them into focus -- and soon enough, the stage manager informs her it is time for the show to begin.

She steps onstage to the roar of the crowd and the swell of her backing band, the thrill of performance no less strong for her now than the very first time she sang for an audience. She takes the microphone from its stand, grips it tightly like a friend, and dives into her first song, wraps her

mind and voice around the lyrics, sets sail for parts unknown, almost immediately achieves an altered state by way of the music. The first song segues effortlessly into the second song, and the excitement in the crowd is building; Airee is definitely *on* tonight, she can feel it, and magic is manifesting before her very eyes. Tonight will be one of those performances she remembers for the rest of her life, when she's old and can no longer grace the luscious higher reaches of her range.

And then, as a guitar solo begins behind her, she allows her eyes and mind to take in the front row of screaming, smiling fans, absorbing the gift of their energy, accepting their adulation as appropriate for the time and place. She reaches out and touches their hands, moving slowly across the front of the stage, shaking hands with as many of them as she can, until suddenly

she stops dead cold, for there is a woman standing in front of her now, an extraordinary smile on her face, long, beautiful, black hair cascading down her shoulders -- it is a woman Airee recognizes (from her dreams perhaps?) though she knows not how, a woman whose smile indicates that there is more to her than meets the eye, and Airee is severely startled, though only for a moment; as the guitar solo ends, Airee the professional returns to her lyrics and soon forgets all about the woman in the front row (the woman who looks exactly the image of the woman with the black scarf around her forehead), soon forgets everything but her singing and the majesty of the music which fills this hall.

And when the show is over and she makes her way backstage, the stage manager hands her a towel and escorts her to her dressing room for a moment of peace and quiet, a moment of relaxing. As she opens the door and steps inside, she is thoroughly surprised to find

a man and a young girl seated on her couch, and in her chair next to the mirror sits the woman from the front row, the woman she recognizes from she knows not where, the woman whose smile hasn't left her and whose expression of joy and wonder is damnably contagious.

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

And Airee is forced to admit she does not....