

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A week from this Friday, around 6:30 pm, Laurel is on an international flight to London, England. Courtney sits on her right, Cohen sits on her left, and none of them are paying any attention to the in-flight movie, you can be sure.

A strange sense of calm is competing for space in Laurel's psyche with an alarming sense of apprehension, and at the moment, she is content to let those two emotional states battle for dominance while the rest of her attempts to sort out the implications of what's about to happen. "The initiation," Courtney tells her, "will be like nothing you've ever before experienced in your life. It will take you entirely by surprise. It will overwhelm and exhaust you, terrify and humiliate you. But it won't destroy you -- it will only fill you with a sense of purpose, a blessed power." And there is a contradiction present, Laurel knows -- they will attempt to fill her with a sense of purpose, a blessed power, even without describing the true nature of the mystical society known as the Circle. After all, a novice initiate such as herself can hardly expect to be clued in on all the grand secrets of an organization that is hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years old, not after a mere months and months and months of study. Yet she senses within Courtney, at least, a deep excitement, a feeling that the Circle itself is on the cusp of something quite grand and quite amazing; and Laurel knows for certain she is a part of this now. Her training over the last several months has made her strong in spirit, given her the ability to survive seeming cataclysm (avoiding this which sundry pool of quicksand that devastated others in her sphere), and most of all, taught her how deep her own spirit runs, how mesmerizing life can be, how awesome her own gifts are. The actual ritual work which she and Courtney and Cohen embarked upon, arcane and magical and seriously potent, the hours of study into all forms of Christian mysticism and philosophy, and her triumphant return into the Dreamtime have all combined to give Laurel a confidence, and a dedication to Courtney's cause (however mysterious it may be), that almost escapes her own understanding.

As the airplane crosses the ocean, every tiny bubble of turbulence sends a tiny shock wave through Laurel's system -- it would be such an enormous drag, she thinks, if I were to get this close to initiation, to culmination, and then crash into the ocean for some stupid reason. And when she falls asleep on the flight -- anticipation being its own factor of exhaustion -- she does not, strangely enough, slip peacefully into the Dreamtime, but skirts the periphery for a few hours, wanders restlessly and unaware through random scenarios and scenes. Her concentration is elsewhere now, and even the mild expenditure of energy required to burst into lucidity cannot be spared. There will be no last minute conference with her friends in the castle tonight.

Cohen, meanwhile, will face his own test upon arrival in London. The Circle is clearly aware now (after his adventurous arrival in the Dreamtime) that Voices have penetrated his psyche; and Cohen knows full well that the Circle will attempt to purge these Voices from his brain before allowing him to initiate as a member of the Circle. It's a purging he certainly welcomes, and he is thankful that at last he will have the support and attention required to make him whole again. Still -- this means he will likely miss Laurel's initiation ceremony, he will likely miss her descent into the testing ground, he will likely not hear of her success or failure until long after the test is complete. They are prepared for this, or so they think -- the connection between them is tight, but should they survive the coming days, the bond between them will be that much tighter. He keeps the Voices at bay with colored threats and whispered taunts. The Voices, for their part, seem content to leave Cohen be, almost as though they do actually fear the power of the Circle, almost as though they actually wish only the best for these young humans who play such desperate roles in the Earth's Melodrama.

And Courtney, too, feels the keen and merciless pressure of the situation, knows full well that Laurel's successful initiation into the Circle depends in part upon the training she received from Courtney. At the most pivotal moment in the history of the Circle, one person, she herself, was chosen to set into motion full Awakening -- and if Courtney has not prepared Laurel to the utmost of her ability, then the Awakening will fail, and the Circle's hundreds of years of work will be destroyed in one fell swoop. It is an almost criminal irony that so much energy and so many

lives can rest upon the nascent link between these two women, Courtney and Laurel -- but there it is, the events have transpired according to Fate's plan, and all Courtney can do now is Hope.

As the plane circles Heathrow preparing to land, a fleeting thought crosses Laurel's mind, a moving snapshot of a conversation she once had in her treehouse, a conversation with a boy who would soon be her first true love. "That religious stuff is pretty ludicrous," Gary says, and she replies, almost angrily, "In first grade, you have the capacity to decide that religion is ludicrous?" And he, finding himself suddenly on the defensive, says, "What I mean is, there's so much of it. They stuff it down your throat." And she leaps on him, says, "Sounds to me, though, that the very idea of a religion is that it's such a beautiful concept, this idea of God and the Messiah, that there really shouldn't be any kind of limit as to how much they can stuff down your throat." It now strikes her how deliciously naive her sentiment was. If there is a church on the horizon, it is likely corrupt, and she knows that now; the core mysticism that once was present among the followers of the Messiah has been dampened down over time, liturgized and sermonized to a flat, bloody pulp. She saw in Gary the despair of one who was taught faith by rote rather than by inspiration, someone who studied it in books instead of lived it in his life. In a very deep way, deep and strange and sad, Gary's death must have set her on this path, she realizes, must have forced her to question the notion that she was alone in this world. There may not be any divine deity out there, and there may never have been an actual Jesus Christ who died to save our sins, but there is definitely more to life than furious depression and flailing, desperate passion, and of course, quicksand -- if nothing else, the dreaming itself proves that.

And this spiritual kernel which has grudgingly begun to show fruit (thanks to Courtney's patience and skill) surprises her in a soft way. There is a door that seems to be opening inside her, and she is asking questions now that she never thought to ask before. She wonders for a fleeting moment if this is what it means to grow up -- looking outside herself for the first time, fully and truly evading the swamp of self-pity that could have swallowed her and realizing that for all of life's pain and struggle and ridiculous assaults on reason, it is still a mysterious and magical gift that we are even here to begin with (Messiah or no Messiah).

They arrive by limousine at an enormous mansion outside the city limits, shortly after the sun has set. Laurel still remembers clearly her first

impressions of the house, the awesome sense of foreboding that rose up in her throat at the sight of what was *clearly* a haunted house if there ever was one, with gargoyles on the ledges and spooky yellow beams of light playing across the facade, casting bizarre and sinewy shadows all over the house, the front lawn, the driveway. As they climb out of the limo, Courtney takes her hand, says, "I won't be seeing you for a while. Not until the initiation, and then, I won't be able to talk to you like this. Not like a friend." And Laurel sees in Courtney's eyes the glimmer of sincere and wonderful Hope that she's never seen anywhere else, and for a moment, the ominous foreboding of the house fades away and Laurel sees right through to Courtney's purest intentions. "When you're ready to begin," says Courtney, "come knock on the front doors. Don't worry -- they're not as forbidding as they look." Laurel smiles, and the two embrace quickly, tightly.

As the limousine drives off, Cohen slips up behind her, wraps his arms around her waist.

"I know you're ready for this," he says.

She takes a sharp breath.

"I *think* I'm ready for this," she replies. She won't know until the very last minute, it seems.

"You're ready," he tells her. "More so than I am."

"That's not so hard," she teases, and then, he spins her around, and she is looking up into his face, into a solid mask that is slowly dissolving for her, the sheen of cool with which he normally covers himself slowly fading, and she sees now, reads it on his face, feels it in the touch of his hands as he pulls her closer to him, that they are closer friends than she ever expected. They are linked so inextricably, these three, that her initiation is almost a fait accompli. How could she fail, when to fail would mean losing them?

"We have to go," Courtney says. "They're waiting for us inside."

"I'll see you soon," is all she can think to say. He leans forward and kisses her quickly, nervously, and then soon they have vanished around the side of the mansion, leaving her alone on the driveway, face to face with an architectural monstrosity, beautiful in its own macabre fashion.

"When you're ready to begin, come knock on the front doors."

Countless infinite moments pass as Laurel stands in the driveway uncertain, before she eventually finds the courage to climb up the stone

stairs to the giant doors. There is an enormous golden knocker on each door, and she lifts one and brings it down against the door three times, knocking on wood for luck, of course, her hand betraying no small amount of nervousness on its own.

The doors slowly creak open, and for the briefest of moments, Laurel finds herself astounded: there are twin girls, no more than twelve years old, standing in the doorway before her, and she almost has the sensation of staring into a mirror as she and Melody did together when they were children. The sensation quickly fades, however; clearly these two bear no resemblance to the Melody and Laurel of an earlier day. They wear gorgeous purple robes tied tight around the waist, and their hair is long and straight down their backs; they wear no makeup, but Laurel still believes she sees a certain glow in their faces, a heightened kind of glamour. They motion for Laurel to step inside, and she does; as the doors swing shut behind her, the sensation of being trapped rises up and is quickly put down by her intellect (this is no time to panic).

"My name is Angel," says the girl on the right. "This is my sister, Maria. We will be your attendants for the evening."

She follows them silently down a long, elegant corridor, the two young attendants leading the way and moving with an eerie precision. As her mind races viciously, the only detail she thinks to take in is the artwork on the walls, absolutely mesmerizing paintings that seem to have three-dimensional qualities of a sort, seem to represent some kind of wispy, black, shadowy creatures that actually seem to be moving within the frames of the paintings themselves. It's a completely impossible effect, and yet the closer she looks, the more convinced she is that there is no hidden technology involved -- these are simply some amazing paintings, and she will have to accept them as they are.

"All of these paintings," says Angel, "were created by the mistress of the house."

"Who is she?" Laurel asks without hesitation.

"You'll meet her soon enough," Angel replies. The other twin, Maria, the silent one, tilts her head back toward Laurel, but Laurel cannot read her expression.

They lead her up a stairway and down another long corridor, this time facing back the other direction. There are tapestries on these walls depicting completely astounding scenes of heaven and hell and a multitude of worlds in between; the effect of all this artwork seems to be cumulative in a way, for she finds herself more and more noticeably affected by each successive image, each successive message. The slow and steady pace of

the twins ahead of her is just slow enough that if she concentrates, she can absorb and remember each panel of what seems to be a dramatic, unfolding story of some kind -- and just when the story's ending should arrive, they instead arrive at a set of double doors.

"This is your room," says Angel. Maria and Angel each throw open one of the doors, and allow Laurel passage into a small antechamber, a dressing chamber. On the far side of the room is another, larger set of doors. A fire is quietly burning in a fireplace on one wall. A large mirror on the other wall startles Laurel as she notices herself in it; her appearance is stark and fearful, and she is jolted out of a certain stupor by the sight. Within moments the two twins are no longer a mystery to her; they are *her attendants*, and she is *the initiate*. They remove her street clothes for her while she stands patiently in front of the mirror, and then she is led to a small bath in a hidden recess of the antechamber. Her face is scrubbed of all its makeup, and her body soaks in a luscious bubble bath, with the twins attending to her with sponges and rose scented soaps. After the bath, she is toweled dry next to the calm, warm fireplace, and her hair is given a thorough combing. Then she is dressed in a simple, ceremonial white robe, tied tight around the waist, which falls to her knees and features billowy open sleeves. None of them speaks during these proceedings; Laurel can feel her energies coming into alignment, can feel herself approaching a state of mental preparedness that seems to surpass anything she has experienced before, in training with Courtney.

Finally Angel and Maria lead her to the doors at the far side of the room. She is almost ready to open them, when she remembers a small but important detail. Returning to the closet where her street clothes are stored, she finds her black bandanna, and wraps it tightly around her forehead, covering completely the physical scar left by Gary's act of violence against her. When she returns to the doors, she can see a series of questions in the twins' eyes, but she has no intention of addressing them now.

"Inside this room is your altar," says Angel quietly. "You will meditate alone, on your knees before God, until the stroke of midnight comes and the rites of initiation begin."

And then the silent twin, Maria, gives her a sharp look, and asks, "Do you believe in God, Laurel?"

And after only the slightest of pauses, Laurel replies, "We shall see, Maria. We shall see."

The doors close behind her, and now Laurel is alone.

She is in a vast, empty chamber, pitch black except for a pool of illumination in the very center of the room, where sits what seems to be a small altar of some kind. A narrow shaft of light across the floor highlights a path from the closed doors to the altar, and she begins walking slowly and deliberately down the gleaming pathway. The floor underneath her feet is solid black, as are her surroundings; the mysterious beams of light are precise and in no way penetrate the darkness around her.

The altar itself is a simple wooden affair, unadorned in any way, and a black cushion rests in front of it, upon which she instinctively kneels. Floating in midair directly above the altar is a modified crucifix of some kind: the shape of the cross is centered within a circle about one foot in diameter. She can see no strings or wires holding the symbol above the altar; she suspects it may be a projection of some kind, perhaps a fancy hologram or some such, but she decides against trying to touch the image to confirm her suspicions. Better to leave the illusion of a floating object for the time being.

The stroke of midnight... by her estimation, that could still be five or six hours away. In terms of quiet solitude, that's not a long time, not a long time at all. She knows that the term "meditate" has all sorts of fancy connotations in other contexts, knows that the aim, if there is such a thing, is to quiet the brain, calm the mind, bring consciousness to a state of stillness, a state of thinking about nothing, or no-thinking at all -- but for some reason, she does not feel the desire to turn her mind in that direction. In that stillness, she tells herself, lies complacency. Especially here, and now -- such stillness could be a trap, designed to catch her unawares. No, she decides -- in these five or six hours, I will *sharpen* my mind instead. I will prepare myself fully, gather my strength and my passion, I will buttress the province of my mind against deception and manipulation. They will try to break me at some point, I am sure of that -- try to wear down my resistance, catch me offguard, force me to behave as instinctively as possible. How much do I trust myself? How well do I know myself? Her eyes close as she rests on the cushion, not to sleep, but to better search herself. Her center, that place within her which houses the core of her spirit and her identity, is resonant, sending calming signals throughout her body and mind. Her time with Courtney has taught her that she *does* trust herself, and she *does* know herself, as well as can be known at this time; she is in her prime these days, no longer shrouded by a cloud of youthful

angst and sullen pride. Should they somehow strip her down to her barest, they will still find strength. They will still find *her*.

Her mind turns to others who have propelled her to this place in time and space. A vivid picture of Courtney rises up in her mind's eye, with her bright orange hair and her eccentric dress, always seeming to pull some kind of magic rabbit out of a hat, and Cohen, too; the two of them have been her constant companions these last months and months and months, and she has needed no one else. A brief pang of fear emerges, fear that she will fail this test and never see them again -- and then she is calm again, and confident, as though her fear is nothing more than stage fright, which has its place backstage but will vanish once the curtain rises. And then she remembers how she met them, in the hospital where her mother was, how they came to her as she left her mother's room and escorted her almost immediately into an entirely new world. She remembers her mother quite clearly, remembers how her own mother was too far gone to even recognize her, calling her Melody instead of Laurel, waves of nonsense spewing from her frantic lips. And her father, broken down and hopeless in the hospital lobby, gamely asking her if she'd like to go get drunk together. She remembers her father's reaction when she told him Gary was dead, remembers how his face fell even further, remembers the stark disbelief in his voice, as though he couldn't possibly have imagined a world in which things could go more possibly wrong. She remembers all these things as clearly as if they happened only yesterday, wonders how her mother and father are doing, wonders if her mother will ever return to sanity, wonders if her father will ever return to his former exuberance, wonders if the two of them will ever be happy again, wonders if her family will ever be whole again. Were she in any other situation, tears would pour down her face now; she hasn't thought about her parents in oh so long, has avoided them steadfastly, refused to acknowledge their continued existence, has cut them off entirely because they, too, were sinking in quicksand, and it was every individual for himself, after a while. And of course, she remembers Gary, arrogant and afraid, as jaded on the day he was born as the day he died, remembers how he burst into her treehouse unannounced and demanded to stay with her til morning, remembers his tenderness, his eagerness for the two of them to make a break from Cedar Falls, Iowa, and everything that had ever transpired there, every possible connection to family and home and, of course, religion -- and she also remembers how the Voices destroyed him slowly, remembers his rage as she tried to help him, remembers how he hurled her through the air with

an incredible force, her head smashing against a television set and creating the scar which now remains hidden from the world. She remembers all these things as if they were happening to her right here, right now, in this very moment, and the pain from the wound in her heart is no different from the ghost pain behind the scar on her temple -- she can almost *feel* a trickle of blood oozing from the wound and making its way down her face, salty thickness drowning her eye and sealing it shut.

And she remembers Melody, too. It wasn't so long ago that the two of them were still together, linked even more closely than those little sisters Angel and Maria. It wasn't so long ago that Melody and Laurel were *dreaming* together. It wasn't so long ago that everything seemed to be going so well in the universe. How long ago was it? This she cannot remember precisely. Her mind seems to have blocked these memories away entirely. She doesn't remember Melody's parting words to her in the fairy tale dream castle, she doesn't remember Melody's last words to her the night before Melody was stolen from the top bunk bed, she doesn't really remember what Melody's smile (so different from her own) looked like (only remembers the *idea* of Melody's smile), doesn't really remember how Melody wore her hair (perhaps much longer than her own?) or what clothes Melody liked to wear or what books Melody liked to read, doesn't really remember much of anything, actually, other than the barest notion that she did once have a sister named Melody, and now that sister is gone. And an absolutely frantic sense of panic swells over her, and cannot be stilled -- when her sister Melody was kidnapped, all of Laurel's memories were stolen too, and there is no reclaiming them. Now tears *do* pour down her face, the immensity of her loss rolling over her in enormous waves like the ocean pounding against the beach. This is

a weakness, she realizes slowly, one that they will exploit.

It is too late to put her feelings in order. She didn't expect this. Didn't know that an apparition called Melody would visit her in her most trying time and shatter any illusion she might have had that things would eventually work out for the best. *It is already too late for that*, the faceless image of Melody in her mind's eye seems to say. *It is already much too late....*

Her attention turns to the floating symbol in front of her, the cross enclosed by a circle. It seems to have its own special beam of light trained on it, though it is impossible to discern any source for such a light. The symbol seems to be made out of some kind of heavy black metal, slightly

reflective, absolutely smooth and brilliant, whereas the altar below seems to be quite shabbily constructed, put there almost as an afterthought.

In a different setting, the altar might be a much more revered place than it seems to be here. Much more sacred -- a consecrated place of worship. Here it seems the opposite. Here, the only function the altar has is to point her attention toward the symbol which floats above it. And the symbol itself seems to signify that the circle -- the Circle -- can bind and surround the cross -- the Messiah. Or perhaps -- the Messiah is possible within the context of the Circle, the Messiah *exists* within the context of the Circle. Does the cross flow fluidly into the circle, or does the cross flow fluidly *from* the circle -- is there any distinction? The altar originated as a place for sacrifice, did it not? Is any such sacrifice necessary now? When the Messiah returns, will he again be crucified, or will he this time be triumphant?

How wide must the Circle be in order to contain the Messiah? Perhaps the symbol of the crucifix is not meant to imply an actual, physical Savior, but rather symbolizes messianic energies and intentions. Perhaps the power of the Messiah is spread evenly throughout the Circle. The circle as a shape is of course non-hierarchical, a collection of points whose only acknowledged master is the midpoint -- but in this symbol, the midpoint is subservient to the crucifix. Still -- she cannot shake the notion that the circle somehow envelops the crucifix, *binds* it to the fate of the circle quite specifically. And again she wonders, how wide must the Circle be to accomplish such a thing?

Clear, visible evidence of actual, tangible, supernatural *power* of some kind was demonstrated to her during her training with Courtney. She experienced -- or at the least, believed she experienced -- phenomena and sensations which were not so easily categorized by any rational standards. The Circle's business is miracles. Mystics from all walks of life down through the centuries have made no lesser claims than that such things were possible -- she simply never expected herself to be in a position where such things were a given, were part of an almost routine context. And yet, hasn't she been steeped in the supernatural since the age of twelve -- when she and Melody first learned to dream together? Was there anything specifically *normal* about that?

Is that why she was chosen by the Circle?

The only goal of raw power is to seek more raw power. Do they believe she herself is powerful?

The Circle's power is tempered by a specific ideology -- one which has its roots in the magical workings of a man whose strongest commandment was to love thy neighbor as thyself. The Messiah followed a cryptic path, was sacrificed by an exquisitely stern and righteous Supreme Being so that humanity itself need not be sacrificed. Since then, there have been no burning bushes, no voices from the heavens -- it's as though the job was finished ("it is accomplished") and so it was time for a nice millennia-long vacation. It's as though the Supreme Being was so disgusted with himself ("I just killed my oldest *son* for these people? What the hell was I *thinking*?") that he immediately took out a policy of nonintervention and left the planet to its fate.

How many different mutant strains of the Messiah's message now exist? Can anyone claim direct lineage?

Does the Circle claim direct lineage?

In the absence of the guiding hand of the Supreme Being, is it possible for humanity itself -- or some subset thereof, some mutant strain of the original message -- to attempt to fill the vacuum of power?

Cohen had told her that he would be missing from the ceremony. The Circle was going to try to rid him of his Voices. She couldn't decide whether she liked that idea or not; certainly she wanted the Voices gone from his head, gone from her life entirely, but she was quite afraid that the Circle would leave Cohen more damaged than he already was. They had said, quite clearly, that it was impossible for the Voices to leave, that no doctor on earth could cure the psychic injury that would result in extracting the Voices from a person's mind. Was the Circle powerful enough to heal such an injury? Could the Circle perform such magic without risking Cohen's life?

The Voices had been quiet inside the Dreamtime since their arrival. Each night, while Cohen and Laurel and Airee and the others roamed freely and joyously throughout the castle, the congregation of Voices, led by the one called Gale, spent their time in hidden conversations with Laurel's temporal advisor, Father Time. Father Time was, he said, "gathering information, which I will share with you when the time is right." Only he, of course, could decide when something called "the time" was right.

And Courtney seemed to view these Voices as something akin to enemies. Did the Circle have enemies? Did the Circle have a "goal" of

some kind, that could be opposed by others with competing "goals" and agendas?

The Voices claimed to be aliens. If they are, truly, aliens, might there be other aliens?

Might the Circle know all about whatever aliens were roaming around on this planet? Might the Circle be *aligned* with some of these aliens, just as they are *opposed* to others, such as the Voices?

What, she wonders, would the Supreme Being have to say about aliens roaming around the apple of his eye, planet Earth? Or, has the Supreme Being perhaps abandoned this Earth in favor of other planets throughout the universe? Was the being who sent his only son to Earth perhaps something less than Supreme? Was he, perhaps,

an alien himself?

Was the Messiah an alien?

Is the term "alien" even appropriate? I might be an alien, she realizes slowly and softly. No one else in the history of this Earth has ever dreamed the way I have dreamed....

Aliens are not the issue here; neither is the issue of the Messiah. These things are not my province, and idle speculation will lead me nowhere. The issue is *me* and my own approach to the coming rites, my own spirituality, my own need to survive. I did not have the benefit of religion as a child, as Gary did (no matter how poorly it served him). I have had to struggle and claw and grasp at every tenuous foothold in order to keep my head above the surface of the quicksand. I have no idea at all, at all, what to think about these aliens, this mysticism, these parlour tricks and the way my mind has been blown and blown again. There is an enormous reservoir of love within me, I can feel that much. I was afraid it was going to go to waste, turn rotten after Melody was stolen. And Gary almost drained me -- I was almost buried with him, or so it feels.

Courtney and Cohen are truly my only friends. I don't want Cohen to miss my initiation. I will become a *changed person*, and I don't want him to miss it. I don't want them to hurt him. If they find they cannot remove the Voices from inside his head, what will become of him then?

A quick gasp--

Could the Circle find Melody, if I asked them to?

And all the while, the floating symbol of the Circle above the altar serves as a quiet and powerful reminder that there is indeed magic present here, there is indeed something quite remarkable surrounding me.

In fact... there seem to be *people* surrounding me.

Slowly, I become aware that a large circle of people is now present with me in the room, perhaps has been present with me all along. They wear robes similar to my own, those that I can see, and they stand perhaps twenty or thirty feet away from me on all sides. Soon enough a woman approaches me directly, stands opposite me on the other side of the altar. She is a small, old woman, quite unassuming it seems, short gray hair and something familiar-yet-not about her face. She wears a long, flowing white robe, and when she speaks, her voice is quiet and commanding. Upon her forehead is inscribed the crucifix-within-the-circle symbol in black.

"Rise, Laurel," she says, and I do, despite the pain in my knees and legs. I take a step forward, so that I can see her more closely. She reaches forward to grasp the floating symbol, and as she takes hold of it, somehow, miraculously, it becomes a golden cup, filled with wine, and I see she holds a small piece of some kind of bread in her other hand.

"At the Last Supper," says the old woman, "the Messiah laid his blessing upon the wine and bread, calling it his body, his blood. After the supper was finished, the wine and bread that remained was spirited away by one of his women. Just as the loaves and fish fed 5000, so too has this very same body and blood of the Messiah been kept, down through the centuries, perpetually replenishing itself to feed the true believers."

She offers me the bread, and I take it slowly in my hand. It is brittle and thin; as she watches closely, I take a bite and begin chewing.

"There can be no doubt that this is the flesh of his body," says the old woman, and I agree, for this tastes like no other bread I have ever tasted in my life. I am curiously compelled by the flavor, and would finish the rest of the bread if it were proper -- but instead, I calmly place the remainder on the altar.

The old woman nods, then hands me the cup. I can only manage a sip; the extraordinary thickness of the wine, the salt, the substance, is too much for my taste buds. I manage to swallow, and without hesitation place the cup on the altar next to the bread.

"By taking his body and blood into ourselves, we *become* his body and blood. Each of us shares his pain, and his triumph."

Without warning, our eyes are locked upon each other, and I see a multitude of secrets upon her face. Her expression is inviting in a strange way, slightly challenging and yet warm and comforting at the same time.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

"My name is Mrs. Wormwood," she replies.

And then I am standing alone atop the altar itself, and a procession has begun. Each member of the Circle that surrounds me, one by one, slowly files past to take of the bread and wine, and as they do, each one examines me closely with his eyes.

Some of them talk to me, though I find it hard to concentrate on what they say. Many of them simply stare blankly at me, and I cannot even tell the gender of some of them. There seems to be an endless stream of them, and I must stand here silently as each one passes, as though I have been physically gagged. Mrs. Wormwood is at the very end of the line, and I will likely not see her again for an hour, perhaps two... perhaps longer, as time itself seems to be indeterminate in this place. "Very pretty," murmurs one, "more than I expected." "So young," whispers another, some strange note of awe in his voice. A rare few have the crucifix-within-the-circle symbol inscribed on their foreheads, and I watch nearly every one of them turn their eyes to the black bandanna around my forehead, wondering perhaps if there's anything more behind the bandanna than a shameful scar from my past.

And then Angel and Maria, my twin attendants, take their turn at the altar. Angel smiles proudly up at me, and I manage to return the smile, relieved at the sight of *any* recognizable face. She whispers, "You look beautiful," and I whisper back, "Thanks, so do you," which comment she seems to appreciate. Maria, meanwhile, manages only a sullen stare, with an undercurrent of malice that I simply do not understand; she seems to be staring right into my core and finding me lacking in some crucial element, perhaps some element of faith. "You don't believe," she whispers, and although I am taken aback, I manage to reply, "You believe too much." Soon enough the two of them have finished their turn and are already moving away back into the procession.

More souls filter past, but I become impatient; it seems as though nearly a hundred individuals have visited this altar, to take of the body and blood, and to examine me while they can. I waver between self-consciousness and self-confidence, having never been the object of such attention before, having never faced such an intimidating audience before.

Though each member of the procession takes their share of the body and blood, still there is always enough for the next member, and I must confess I am convinced this can no longer possibly be the province of simple sleight of hand.

And then a strange old man stands before, one I definitely recognize, though I know not how. He smiles a big smile at me, and his crooked teeth remind me exactly who he is.

"That's right," he says, "it's the Reverend Clive here. Perhaps you remember me from your gentleman friend Gary's funeral. I presided, as you recall?"

I nod slowly, unsure of the implications of this turn of events.

"Just wanted to let you know, sweetheart," he says with a strange version of a leer, "that we're all rooting for you. I think it's just lovely, the way a young, unsaved soul such as yourself can so impressively avoid the deepest pits of hell by siding with the opposition, if you catch my drift. Remember, sweetheart, with just a little faith in the Lord God Almighty, all things are possible -- even things no one wants to think about, let alone see walking and talking on the face of this great Earth."

I'm slightly shaken as he walks away -- it is too great a coincidence that the pastor from Gary's funeral is now here, sharing this moment with me. But I am distracted soon enough by still more whispered comments and almost unwanted stares and glares; I am ready to prove myself *now*, yet still I must wait. And then, as if things weren't strange enough...

Another man appears before me, this time young and handsome, with jet black hair and pure white sunglasses. At first, he seemed to be wearing a robe, just like everyone else, but as I look closer, I see he is wearing an immaculate white suit.

He leans forward and says, "Hi, Laurel. Listen, if you need help getting out of here, just let me know. I'm a super hero, so I can definitely lend a hand."

"A who?"

"The Amazing Dr. X. Mother Nature sent me. No one else knows I'm here, because I'm *in disguise*."

"Mother Nature?"

"Uh huh. She's worried about you. These Circle cats are creepy, so watch your back." Pause. "I'm the same super hero who rescued your sister, so you can definitely trust me."

Pause.

Rescued my sister?

But before I can say another word, he is gone....

My mind quite literally reels, but there is no time for contemplation. The procession is almost over. Second to last is Courtney herself, suddenly before me with a solemn seriousness I've never seen in her before. She doesn't say a word to me, simply offers me a neutral expression, as though she dare not let her feelings about me get in the way of her judgment of me. I want desperately to hear an encouraging word from her, but none are forthcoming; still, she takes her time with the body and blood, so that we might have as many moments together as possible. And then, just before she moves on, she whispers, "Cohen's doing fine. I think we cured him," and I can't help but smile. She returns my smile, quietly, and moves away.

And then Mrs. Wormwood herself is before me once more. The procession has ended, and the Circle of people has reappeared on all sides. It seems my time has come.

"Are you ready, Laurel?" she asks quietly.

And the only answer I can give is, "I don't know."

She smiles a genuine smile, pleased by my response.

"We will find out soon enough," she says, almost jovially.

And then the room goes black, and suddenly I am no longer quite where I was before....

I believe the blood of the Messiah was spiked.

As soon as the lights go out, I am aware that there has been a significant shift in my perceptions; multi-colored swirls and patterns fill the air, and it becomes increasingly apparent that whatever drug was present in that cup will likely hammer away at my defenses, attempt to remove any resistance whatsoever. The sensation is quite mild at present, but even as I stop to think about it, the altered state of consciousness deepens a little more, a little more. I'm too surprised by the darkness to move; and after a minute or two of silence, I realize the altar itself has been slowly descending down some shaft or another in the floor, so slowly that the feeling is quite eerie, as though I am somehow falling through space and yet the playback is in slow motion.

A kind of wrenching sweeps over me as the altar suddenly stops; I drop to my knees, almost sick to my stomach, trying to shake the swirls out of my eyes, the confusion out of my head. Within moments, I'm blinded by a series of lights which suddenly appear, illuminating a small hallway. I take a quick, hopeless glance up the shaft and see only darkness up above

me. I can't shake an ominous foreboding gloom which seems to be -- well, Melodramatic, for starters, but also pretty convincing.

Scrambling upright, moving rapidly down what appears to be an inordinately long tunnel of some kind, with torches on the walls periodically casting creepy shadows across enormous cracks in the earthen tunnel walls. I'm running, and I'm terrified, and my heart pounds so fast it wants to burst, but something inside me propels me forward with greater and greater urgency. There are, periodically, keening wails in the air, moans of epic proportion which echo all around me, and I would find them humorous if this were, say, a Halloween style haunted house that you go to for cheap thrills -- but here, the effect is likely just as insane as it sounds.

And I know I'm being watched -- somehow, in some way, perhaps there are cameras trained on me, or perhaps they are observing my energy on the astral plane, or perhaps they put electronic bugs in my robe. It feels as though there are a giant pair of eyeballs floating in midair behind me, is what it feels like. I turn to look, but they quite cleverly manage to avoid being seen.

I run faster then, imagining myself as a blur on their television monitors, imagining myself as a sharp streak of lightning on the astral plane. They are going to have *work* to keep up with me, that's for sure, giant floating eyeballs or no giant floating eyeballs.

I round a corner, and suddenly find myself in my own living room.

It's the living room of my house, back in Cedar Falls, Iowa, way up in the hills, away from all the trouble. I come to a complete stop, heart pounding (ba-BUM ba-BUM ba-BUM, etc.), covered in sweat, and apparently "tripping my tiny brains out," as my buddy Scotto the psychedelic ranger would have said. (If only he could see me now, ha ha....) The pictures on the wall, of me and my family over the years, the piano against one wall, the end tables and easy chairs, the television set playing some daytime talk show, and of course, the sofa.

And sitting on the sofa is my father, holding a bottle of some kind of whiskey in his hand. He notices my arrival (through what is now a wall behind me) with a slight raise of his eyebrow.

"Laurel," he says, a little too drunk to feel surprised. "I didn't expect to see you home again."

"Dad," I manage to say. And then, blurting out: "How's Mother?"

"Well," he replies, "she isn't getting any better, you know, and I'm not working these days." We stare at each other for a long moment then, saying nothing in particular and wishing the silence were something less than entirely, thoroughly awkward.

"You want a drink?" he asks.

I shake my head, but move toward the sofa anyway. I have a hard time recognizing him, his expression and demeanor having changed so much over the last months and months and months. So haggard now, so beaten... it's hard to imagine him as he once was, full of life and some measure of happiness. And the thought comes to me immediately that I am certainly responsible, in some way, for this. I abandoned him in his time of need. I didn't care what happened to him, so long as I myself survived. As I sit, he says, "Don't get too comfortable, Laurel."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means, you left the nest, and I don't think I want you back."

Stunned silence follows, multi-colored swirls dripping from every pore in the room, and then he says,

"I mean, look, you could stay out in the treehouse if you felt like it, but... I'm pretty much through with taking care of other people."

And that is *not* what I wanted to hear from this man.

"Dad, listen, I can explain--"

"No, you can't," he replies quickly, almost but not quite angrily. "And I don't care. You abandoned us when we lost Melody, and I don't feel as though I need to forgive you for that."

There's a long, scalding look which passes between us, and then he sighs and says,

"At any rate, we loved Melody more to begin with."

Pulsing, throbbing, *pounding* in my head as the features on his face seem to bend and mutate according to some unseen rhythm. As I absorb this final bit of information, I cast a cold hard shadow across the room, feel something inside me turning once again into stone -- and as I look around the room, refusing entirely to have an emotional reaction to his words (despite the agonizing pain of a knife thrust deep in my back), I begin to notice how it isn't quite my living room after all, how parts of it are vague and lacking detail, how a torch is visible here and there, how the television set isn't playing talk shows at all but rather features something unspeakably horrible and profane. I turn back to my father, catch the absolutely lost look in his eyes for the last time -- it was easy enough to abandon him before, it is easy enough to do it again now.

I leap to my feet.

"Where are you going?" he asks plaintively.

"None of your fucking business," I respond.

And then, once again, I am running....

And it's not that I am being pursued, it's just that the sound of my own heavy breathing begins to sound like a chorus of sorts, and I am almost *certain* that not all of those labored, vicious breaths are *mine*. Still and all, I careen relentlessly forward, through clouds of viscous danger and emotion, around corner after corner in this strange labyrinth of doom, ignoring the synaesthetic waves of screaming colormusic. I may well spend the rest of my life here -- but I will be *damned* before I will be *broken*, and the whole Circle better know it.

Soon I am dodging hospital gurneys and carts full of medical instruments, up a few flights of stairs and down a few more hallways, past startled nurses and interns and attendants, not once losing speed until I've arrived in the psychiatric ward. At that point, I allow myself to walk instead of run. No sense rushing the inevitable, after all. I feel grim and indisposed, I feel shallow and debatable, I don't feel much like Christmas at the moment and I certainly don't feel like Easter.

My mother's room is on the left, but the door is locked. I peek through the tiny window and see her lying there asleep, restrained on her bed in a depressing little cell. "Excuse me," I say to a passing doctor, "how do I get this room open? I'd like to talk to my mom."

"You don't," he replies, stopping next to me. "She's under restricted visitation. Only family allowed."

"I'm her daughter, Laurel," I reply.

He pulls out a chart of some kind from his voluminous white doctor coat, scans it briefly, then says, "Sorry, the only daughter I have listed is named Melody."

Pause.

He starts to walk away, and as he does I silently and smoothly pilfer a set of keys from his pocket, and casually flip him the finger as he heads off out of sight. Then, quick as a shot, I unlock the room and duck inside.

She stirs as I enter, opens her eyes slowly as I approach her bedside. As I sit, she struggles to focus on me for a few moments -- and then her face veritably brightens up like an enormous incandescent lamp.

"Melody!" she whispers tightly. "Is that you?"

Pause.

"No, Mom, it's me," I reply. "Laurel."

I see a wave of confusion wash over her. She says,

"Laurel who?"

"You had *twins*, remember?" I tell her. "I'm the other one. The one who *isn't* Melody."

Pause.

"So Melody's still missing?"

"Yes," I say, "Melody's still missing."

She sighs deeply and says, "Then I guess I'm still crazy."

Burning anger wells up inside me, self-indulgent crap has always pissed me off. I say,

"You got no right to be crazy, Mom. If anybody shoulda gone crazy, it's me."

"Flightless hummingbirds are singing old black magic outside my window, can you hear them?"

Oblivious to her raving, "I was so much closer to her than you were. I lived with her for nine months inside your *womb*, don't tell me you're still crazy. I *dreamed* with her for five years, Mother, and when she left, it nearly wrecked my world."

"The tremendum smiles when you want it to, sweetheart, I wanna be wrapped in bubble wrap and popped cell by cell..."

"AND I'M STILL DOING FINE, MOTHER, DIDJA EVEN NOTICE THAT?"

No, of course not -- because I abandoned the pathetic creature and left her tied to a bed in a loony bin. Still and all -- choices is choices, and I wouldn't be here now if I'd stayed to take care of her. That shoulda been Dad's job, right? These two deserve each other. I got no time for remorse.

"Will you untie me, Melody?" she asks. "I want to hold you close to me one more time before I fall asleep."

"No," I reply, "I'll tie you down *harder*," tightening the straps til her hands turn blue. She doesn't seem to notice. I get up to leave, make my way to the door.

"When are you coming back, Melody?" she asks.

And I tell her, "Not til the end of the world, Mother. Not til it's all over."

Moving once again...

...through a strange and murky marsh, a dark and dismal collusion of water and vegetation. Enormous dragonflies hover nearby, and there are no hanging torches, simply fireflies with giant bulbs. I can't run here, for fear of being tripped by tangling, grasping vines, and I must be careful as I plod through the trees, or else bushes and leaves will grab hold of me, smear sickening stickiness on my bare legs and arms.

And soon I stumble upon a pool of quicksand. Here is where I find Gary, alone and sinking rapidly.

"Hello, Laurel," he says, almost as though he'd been expecting me.

"Hello, Gary," I whisper, fighting off the sudden shock that wants me.

"I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing here," he says, more than a little sarcastically, the quicksand up to his chest.

"Looks like you're drowning," I reply.

"Don't suppose you could lend me a hand?" he asks.

I reach out to take his hand, and he reaches toward me, but he is painfully out of reach. I shudder and take a breath, every part of me suddenly wanting to hold his hand, to hold and touch his entire body, but no amount of stretching will put me any closer.

"Maybe there's a vine somewhere you could use?" he suggests.

I find one on the floor of the marsh, but as he grabs the other end and I try to haul him out, the thick dampness inherent to the marsh betrays us, and the vine snaps in two.

"That's not going to work," I tell him, becoming frantic as he sinks in further, up to his chin.

"Maybe," he says, starting to sound a little desperate, "you could take just a step into the edge of the quicksand. Just a step is all you need, then you'd be able to grab me for sure."

"Step into the quicksand?" I ask, an incredulous note in my voice.

"Sure, just near the edge. It can't be that deep just near the edge. Then you could pull me out for sure. Please, Laurel."

But that's how it starts, of course, that's always how it starts, just one simple step at a time and then you're either swimming or you're drowning. Drowning, usually.

"I can't," I tell him, almost mournfully.

"Please, Laurel, please," he begs. "I don't want to drown a second time, if I can help it."

"How'd you get there to begin with?" I shout.

He doesn't answer.

"You put yourself there on purpose, didn't you?" I say, more than a little rage building in my voice.

"Of course not," he says.

"Yes, you did," I reply. "You leapt right in, I'll bet. Thought you could walk on water or some such bullshit."

"Laurel, please," the quicksand has nearly covered his mouth, his head falls back so he can breathe.

"I'm not coming in after you, Gary."

"What about love?"

Silence.

"My love will penetrate the grave for you, Gary. But it won't die with you." Pause. "I'll always love you, Gary, but I'll never in a million years forgive you."

And then it's just his eyes on top of the quicksand, sheer panic and desperate fear, and then those too are gone, then Gary is gone completely beneath the pool, and the surface of the pool bubbles for a few moments and then is quietly still.

I am frozen with vindictive disbelief. No initiation is worth seeing this. And yet,

there is still more to come....

Staggering toward the street, I peruse with no emotion the sights and sounds of devastation. The hollow shells of buildings burning, blown apart by forces unexplained, dot the horizon, and everywhere the charred debris litters the sidewalks, litters the streets. Burning cars and burning people barely grab my attention. There's no movement anywhere, just dying flames and smoky clouds: the inhabitants of the city have long since fled, or else were killed here by an apocalyptic force. I see mounds of mutilated bodies stacked obscenely, gruesome orgies, and the wreckage of their homes and of their livelihoods was deliberate and cool. A ballet of desecration swept its way throughout this city, as though an army, or an angel of ancient death, had marched through here with silent satisfaction and destroyed all evidence of wholesomeness and life, left only stinking cesspools of fading horror that fall upon vacant eyes... like mine.

And all night long I wander through this city of no remorse. There are children stacked on spikes, and mounds of genitals and spleens, bodies with their hands tied tight behind their backs and their heads submerged in pools of gray cement, such wickedly beautiful variation on themes of helpless terror and vicious punishment. And also among the bodies are those who must have tried resisting, those whose weapons were

turned against them in the most vile and sickening fashion, those whose principles brought them ruin, sent them sliding horribly into existential graves. Their monuments are toppled, and their streets are filled with waste. These people fought a holy war here, and justice ruled against them. Still I stagger on throughout the night, the wind a hollow whispering that offers only questions.

And as I travel through the wasteland, ever forward, ever forward, I see a distant speck, a monolithic palace gleaming brightly through the haze. This is my destination. Along the way, I pass the first free living humans we have seen, ornately dressed and occupying booths along the way; they offer sustenance to others like them, offer meat and wine and sex, but nothing there can interest me. Their eyes, however, set them apart from any human I have ever seen, blood red and full of sin. They are lurid, lewd and sickening, stewing in their own filth and depravity, mere shells that barely house intelligence; but they are human, and clearly they are inheritors of the wastelands, kings and queens of the new earthly order. Along the way, an army also marches, patrols occasionally passing me on the road, sometimes with prisoners being beaten, whipped and forced to run, sometimes marching alone in a devastatingly beautiful, insidious synchrony, these demons in human form, men and women of physical supremacy, so tall and striking and awesome in their viciousness and purpose. It is they who target the resistance, smoke out the helpless from their hiding places and skewer them in their holes.

And the territory around the palace itself gives me the most telling signs so far of what has happened here. The prisons by the side of the road hold angels, once mighty beings from the heavens, now shorn of all their majesty, taunted and tortured by actual red skinned demons with horns and terrifying smiles. I witness wondrous angel wings torn from their backs by the bare unflinching claws of their mortal enemies, and the fountains of golden blood that pour forth from open wounds wail miserable hymns to what has been lost. And soon I join the line of those who have traveled from all over the world to worship in this palace of universal evil and contempt. The pillars that hold up the awesome roof are fashioned with human skulls, and the gargoyles on the rooftop occasionally swoop down and ravage helpless pilgrims, evisceration their only chance at prayer. I slowly climb the steps, and notice in the tiles the frozen expressions of horror that the souls of all the damned have left behind. I enter giant chamber after chamber filled with ever more inspiring

brands of sickness and revulsion. I have been called here to *serve* these horrible wonders, and here inside this palace of universal evil and despair, I at last shall find my purpose, I at last shall find our sanctity.

And finally, I reach the blessed throne room of the most unholy abomination. The giant ghastly doors are opened by hideous lifeless golems, and the pure putrescent majesty of the force within the hall is like a searing magnet, drawing me closer and closer still to its direful personality. Once inside, I fall upon my knees in manic ecstasy, not daring to cast a glance upon the power and the glory. But quickly, suddenly, I feel that I am *singled out* and lifted off the ground, hurtling through the air to meet my maker. My head is raised, and my eyes fall upon the most insidious of sights, for there, upon the throne, sits the purely beautiful porcelain figure of the one who has brought me here. She is powerful and ravishing, with long black hair and mesmerizing features, a body naked to the waist and charged with horrific energy, bloodstained lips and a smile that gives her away entirely;

for I know this woman's name, and I know this woman's face. This woman's name is Melody, and this woman's face is *mine*. I haven't time to scream

some part of me resists, and that is good. closes my eyes for me, tries its damndest to shut me down.

"You are seeing the future, Laurel," Mrs. Wormwood's voice intones with silky surety. "This is your destiny, the path upon which you travel."

oh, no you don't. i got something going for me, i'll admit, but you're out of your fucking

"Mind you don't insult me, Laurel, or I will show you the future in paralyzing detail. This is indeed what your sister holds within her, what she has locked deep inside of her hidden core. All her Dreaming has taught her is how to harness preternatural forces for her own satisfaction, to quench her own desires. And this becomes the downward spiral in which she finally brings doom upon the earth. Do you understand the words I'm saying?"

i don't geddit, i don't geddit, shut yer mouth, just lay off already, i'm feeling very sick to my stomach

"I see, however, that the future is too horrific for your present state to comprehend. Perhaps you would like to witness how it happens? See the rise of her totality, the onslaught of the monstrosity that she becomes?"

Perhaps you would like to visit her in only a few years time, when she is first beginning to wreak her devastation upon the population of the planet? All this can be arranged, Laurel. All this can be arranged."

"Why are you doing this to me?" I ask.

"Because," replies Mrs. Wormwood, "when the resistance comes, you will recognize *her* face, too...."

"I don't know what you think you're going to accomplish," she tells me.

I fix her with a steely glare, a glare that only just betrays the depth of my fear, and I say, "Someone has to stop you, Melody. I'm the one who can."

She laughs despite herself, despite her desire to be polite.

"Listen to you," she says. "So pompous, so self-righteous. Such a know it all. You were always such a know it all." She doesn't mind giggling at the memories, even to my face.

"We're organized, Melody," I say, knowing I speak now for the Circle, "just like you. We've trained, just like you. And something else, too: I know you so much better than you know me. You've been away too long. Your premises are faulty. And the whole thing is going to collapse on top of you, if you don't *listen* to me."

"I've had enough of listening to you, frankly," she tells me. "I'm giving you a chance to participate in something thoroughly amazing and purely wonderful, and you spit in my face and have the audacity to question my vision. I don't need it any longer. You aren't my family any longer. I sincerely doubt you ever were. And I'm no longer in the mood to be kind to you."

"My sentiments exactly," I reply. "Consider this my only warning, then."

"I'll consider myself warned," she replies with a mocking grin. And as I turn to leave her presence, she tells me, "Your dreams are about to come true, my dear. It's such a pity I had to dream them for you."

And then, I am alone, lying on the floor before the altar, wracked with enormous pain. The hall is empty, save for me, the altar, and the floating symbol of the crucifix-within-a-circle.

This is the final stage of my initiation, I know it. I'm dying, and I must save myself. A shooting, searing pain burns my forehead. And if I live, I face the spectre of what my sister will supposedly become.

Supposedly?

Supposedly. For I find, as I lie there dying, that I don't believe a fucking bit of what I just saw. Whatever the Circle is, it's a hideous monstrosity. And if they had *anything* to do with my sister's disappearance, there is going to be some *serious* hell to pay.

Labored breaths now, surging pain in my stomach, in my chest.

There is no one with me now.

Melody *must* be alive. Mrs. Wormwood is not to be trusted. The Circle will never possess me.

I will destroy them if I must....

I see a white speck slowly descending from the ceiling. I am immobilized by my pain, can only watch the speck slowly grow larger, descending by a rope, resolving into the shape of a human being in an immaculate white suit, who lands next to me.

"Greetings," he says. "Remember me? I'm the Amazing Dr. X. I'm here to rescue you."

"Melody..." is what I say.

"Yeah, I rescued her too. She's a wonderful woman."

He starts to help me to my feet, and as he does, he explains,

"We have time to escape, but not much. It's sacrilege for any member of the Circle to enter this space until the initiation is complete, but once we leave this room, they'll be looking for us."

"How do they know the initiation is complete?"

"Simple," he says. "The wine you drank was poisoned. The final stage of the initiation is for the initiate to heal herself, or die. This way, unworthy candidates don't live to tell tales about the Circle." He grips me tightly about the waist, grabs hold of a small device at the end of the rope, and says, "Hang on."

"Wait!" a voice shouts from clear across the room. We are already ascending slowly, but as we do, I can see Courtney, standing several feet away, committing an act of sacrilege, watching me go. "Wait!" she calls. "We need you!" And I can see that she is crying, and she shouts, "I need you, Laurel! Please!" But it is too late. We are sailing into the air, and the forlorn figure of Courtney grows smaller and smaller and smaller.

I'll miss you, Courtney. I hope you survive the days to come....

We arrive on the roof of the mansion. The moon is bright, and illuminates the entire scene; members of the Circle, not sure of our location,

are already scouting the manor grounds for us. All Courtney has to do is sound an alarm to give us away, but so far, we are undisturbed. Across the roof, I see a gleaming white space ship parked and waiting.

"Is that yours?" I ask.

"Uh huh," he says. "It's an interdimensional transport. It's called the X-Travagant."

"Cool," I say, as he helps me toward it.

"Are you going to live?" he asks. "I know a medicine man who could clean out your system."

"I'm doing fine," I tell him, and it's true. The techniques Courtney taught me are working quite well; the poison is mostly neutralized, and I simply need a few days rest to fully recover.

"You don't mind being rescued, do you?" he asks.

"Nope. Everybody needs a helping hand every now and then."

"You wouldn't rather be a member of the Circle?"

A deep intake of breath, a solemn sigh, "I can't believe what I almost got myself into." Pause. "I can't believe what I'm giving up."

The door to the transport opens up, and we are about to climb inside, when we both simultaneously realize someone is behind us. Turning slowly, we see

Cohen, standing several feet away, tall and extraordinary, a bloody bandage wrapped around his head. From this distance, I can't quite make out his expression. Before he can say anything, I say,

"You have to let us go, Cohen. I'm not staying in the Circle."

And he replies,

"I don't want to stop you, Laurel. I want to come *with* you."

Pause. "I love you too much, Laurel, to lose you now."

A cool, sweet breeze blows through me, and then I am embracing him tightly tightly and he is placing me inside the transport. Dr. X is in the driver's seat, and Cohen and I sit entangled in the back, and we kiss and kiss for all that we're worth as Dr. X prepares to take off.

"They cured you of your Voices?" I ask.

"They did," he says, pointing to the bloody bandage.

"How did they do it?"

He pauses, then asks, "Have you ever heard of trepanning?"

I shake my head.

"Never mind," he says. "I'll tell you about it later."

"This could be a little hairy," says Dr. X. "I can't take us into another dimension until I've reached a certain height, and I don't know

what kind of defenses this place has. Fasten your seat belts, kids, and please extinguish all smoking materials..."

We rise up slowly into the air, headed for the clouds, smoothly and calmly, my hands intertwined with Cohen's, and then

Everything happens in slow motion, after that.

A *laser beam* strikes the back of the transport, tearing it cleanly off in a swift and hideous explosion. The front of the transport, powerless, begins plummeting toward the earth. Dr. X in the front seat turns toward us, a terrified look on his face. We are in free fall, granted a few extra seconds of life by the sheer dumb luck that the laser struck the back of the transport instead of the front. Cohen's voice rises up in an awful scream, and I clasp his hand tightly, tightly. And then, my other hand reaches out for Dr. X's, and I have him too.

And I close my eyes, and turn on my power,
and moments before the wreckage of the transport hits the earth,
the three of us escape into the Dreamtime.