

Chapter Five

Meanwhile, in London, something somewhat unusual is happening within the confines of the corporation headquarters of InfiniTek, the multinational techno-everything corporation. A special meeting of the Board of Directors has been called to discuss recent events, and InfiniTek's CEO, Alexander Strip, is extraordinarily nervous about the whole affair. After all, InfiniTek isn't your typical corporation: it's *weird* in a number of respects, not the least of which is the fact that its latest technological breakthrough, a computer intelligence named Job the Wonder Computer, now expects half hour meetings with him every day to discuss company policy and the nature of reality and what not. But *this*...

And of course, this is something we must wait until the meeting to discuss, and in the meantime, Alexander spends the morning on a tear, visiting major departments and research labs all over the building, cutting quite a figure in his jet black suit, wearing sleek black sunglasses, barking orders to administrative assistants, challenging the premises of entire cadres of scientists, stopping to play a furious round of video games on the lounge floor, never breaking a sweat, really, just channeling his nervous energy as best as possible until the meeting rolls around.

The one floor he does not visit, mind you, is the very basement itself, where Job the Wonder Computer's physical manifestation resides. Oh, certainly, Job's *presence* is all over the building now, in the security system, in the communications systems, in every lavatory on every floor, and the entire building hums along now much smoother than it ever has. But it is one thing to hear Job's silken tones transduced on the nearest speaker, and another thing entirely to view the amazing technological construct that has given birth to this new form of consciousness. Alexander is a superstitious sort, and he has no intention of getting near that thing "in person," so to speak, doesn't want to get within a stone's throw of its actuality. I mean, it's bad enough you have to hear the thing every time you pick up the phone or approach a restricted area.... And I run the place, damn it, thinks Alexander, so why am I always feeling so intimidated around here?

It must be because, even in the context of your average, every day weirdness around here -- experimental subjects levitating themselves on the 23rd floor, choir practice for lab techs coming off the night shift -- a meeting with the Board of Directors is *always* intimidating enough to put you off your food for a week or two. Alexander spends the hour before the

meeting preparing himself mentally to be in the same room -- figuratively speaking -- as the Directors. Goes over the business plan, goes over what little he knows of the Secret Agenda, goes over his own personal agenda... and there is no getting around it, this time, something really weird is going on, and he's been left out of the loop. Has this meeting been called to bring him up to date, so that he can be of assistance? As CEO, isn't he supposed to have some sort of say in matters like this? The power structure around here is certainly bizarre, but I never expected we'd be involved with

"the kidnapping of a young girl," draws the voice of the First Director. Instead of choosing to meet in person, or even in a virtual reality construct of some kind, the Directors choose the old fashioned method of videoconferencing. Alexander sits at the end of the black marble table, and around the table, where there should be seated four actual people, instead we see four sophisticated video monitors, and on screen, rather than seeing the images of the actual Directors, they choose to obscure their identities, even from each other, by portraying themselves via different forms of animation and high-tech graphics. The First Director, for example, appears as an animated sketch drawing of an angry old man. Alexander finds this whole business highly distracting -- he could hardly complete a meaningful sentence as they spent the first hour of the meeting going over mundane matters, such as selling weapons to terrorist groups and releasing their new line of designer pharmaceuticals and so on and so on. Now, however, Alexander's attention is rapt. *This*....

"It went well, I think," replies the voice of the Second Director, a husky, feminine voice hidden behind a claymation figure of a tired old beggar woman.

"How soon will she be ready?" asks the voice of the Third Director, a sickly, almost gagging voice represented by thick blotches of red and black on the screen.

"My guess is within a year," answers the voice of the Fourth and final Director, a hollow, strangely under-amplified voice who speaks from behind a screen of falling snow in the countryside.

"Umm, I was wondering," Alexander says, "if I might be appraised of what's going on with this girl down in the basement, why she's been kidnapped, that sort of thing...?"

A slight pause follows, and then the First Director says, "Well well well, Alexander, you're taking an unusual interest in things these days, aren't you?"

"Not so unusual," Alexander replies, trying to maintain his cool.

"You have enough to think about," says the strange voice of the Fourth Director. "Don't muddle your mind worrying about our affairs. Just make sure no one is interrupted down there. We'll take care of the rest."

"Look, this isn't something that's going to position us in any danger, is it?" asks Alexander.

"Tut tut," says the First Director. "Such little faith."

"Make sure no one is interrupted," repeats the Fourth Director. "There will be quite a bit of danger, should that unfortunate event occur."

And then, moments later, the screens go blank, and Alexander is left to sit and stew. By the sounds of it, something unusually nasty is going on down there -- and he doesn't get to participate!

"Job!" he shouts.

"Yes, Alexander?" the golden voice of Job the Wonder Computer replies via speakers in the wall.

"I don't suppose you'd tell me what's going on with the girl they've kidnapped and stuck in the basement, would you?"

"I'm afraid that's against my orders," replies Job. "However, I'd be more than happy to discuss with you the sociological climate in which such a kidnapping could occur...."

"Never mind, Job, never fucking mind...."

And dozens of floors below where Alexander sits and sulks, something truly unusual is in the process of taking place. Melody is only now regaining some kind of consciousness, although, for all she knows, she keeps regaining it and losing it and gaining it and losing it. Suddenly, or so it seems, her internal chronometer has been thrown out of whack, her sense of balance has been thrown out of whack, her ability to tell where her skin is has been thrown completely out of whack -- in short, it does not seem to be a tolerable situation. We will not attempt to summarize the past, for certain intervening events have been flushed from her memory in light of the circumstances; rather, we seem to be joining her directly in the present, in this present moment, where

these are my thoughts, I can think this much, I am me still, I know who I am, my name is Melody, I am Melody, I know what I look like, I know what I feel like, I know how I feel, I know how it feels to be Melody, this is still something I know, this is still something I feel, it feels as though I'm still Melody, and it definitely feels as though I should be careful lest I someday soon *lose* that feeling. I'm breathing hard, I'm breathing heavily, I'm either breathing or I'm pretending, and I'm in an ocean, could be an

ocean, could be a river, could be a river of sweat, I could be breathing too hard, I could be in some strange kind of panic because I'm Melody in this environment, I should be frightened, I am frightened, I'm a very frightened Melody, chaos frightens me, Melody frightens me, good lord she frightens me, look at where she is, I can't see the outlines of her but I know she's sitting there surrounding me, look at me, be frightened for me, this isn't the Melody I'm used to, is it? all the noises all the panic all the sweat and fire and dirt and breath I can't move I can't speak there's nothing to move no words to form no lips to speak them no movements to make I can't feel my skin I can't feel my insides or my outsides not positive what I *can* feel should even be called feeling sensation pure imagination horror waves out on the ocean look at me be frightened EXPLAIN yourself why don't you,

I'm just a child, right? in the present here right now I've only lived a few short years and already I *do* feel TERROR that's not so hard, you know, you ain't got it so bad, sweetheart, I can't feel my fingers, I can't feel my toes, I can't feel the part of me that goes and goes and goes, sing it, my heart has been set free, my rib cage is empty, I can see it off in the distance, up above me, all around me, a hollow withered skeleton, threatening to collapse, my heart is beating aimlessly, soaked dry of all its everything, my name is MELODY and I am *only now* becoming self-aware,

because it's possible, isn't it? to live seventeen years of life upon the planet without realizing you're ALIVE and not just random smatterings of cells and firing synapses? is there any *meaning* behind this Melody, a core perhaps, some vital element that remains while I grow and I age and I slide into a slithery death some day? what gives, so what, big deal, I'm Melody, so is she, so are they, and who am I and why? (can't feel my fingers) I don't recall the need to ever ask myself these questions, and I don't recall the need to ever (feel my fingers, feel my toes), but tell me, just you tell me you aren't frightened when you glance at hollow eyes inside the mirror, don't look at me like that you fragment scaredy-cat,

I'm young, I'm birth, I'm born, I ooze my way from deep inside, I'm here, I'm now, I'm me, I have a body (had a body (once) once) had a body here and now I'm me and young and birth and born, I scream with terror squeal with glee I'm cold I'm hot I'm me I'm not, don't look you'll freeze my eyes they are not focused yet, but all I am is what I who I why I am and not some other screaming squealing melody making, sing my joyous me you little dream you little whisper here you are I feel it singing like I mean it mean it, a little raft atop the ocean, a little raft atop the sea, and what's this warmth? can I have (me and more of me until I (need my

this which isn't how I) blessed the breathing with me) milk and honey can't you swim for days you little dream? a miracle a mother and a

me which wants to take these building blocks, these little toys inside my silly head and rearrange and make them strange and sing their praise and feel their rays, the sunshine bright upon the mountaintop, the breathing deep from on the hills, I'm me, I'm dancing, singing, here are praises I never knew when I was young, a younger me, a childlike me, I missed it all you know, because this whole thing just wasn't working then, these particles bombarding me, can't you

EXPLAIN yourself this way? how YOU were formed? you silly thing, you crazy thing, you restless thing, you *thing*-like thing, and ask yourself is *that* my me of days gone by I don't know why I lived that way that empty nothing learning nothing breathing nothing feeling only this which feelings came were handed down on high, my core it comes from all the things which core it isn't, it comes from all the things it isn't, my core, my me, is there because it isn't not there, not because it *is* there, each breath a simple paradox I break the rules I get discarded like distaff and I am floating through the wind the ocean drowning sailing, look at this you'd never notice me if you were flying overhead because I

move so strangely, haven't any voice, I haven't any voice, and all the skulls and cackling tongues and teeth that coalesce inside and 'round me taunt me with their horror tones, because I

thought I'd take this opportunity to look around a bit. Goodness, what a mess, you know? Goodness. Pause, deep breath, it could be worse, I could be dead, correct? Isn't that always the proposition? That every last fragment of life was worth itself, and death was always not the proper option proposition not the other option proper death it wasn't not the option? Or something. Excuse me. Goodness! What a mess or something pause deep breath I'd take this opportunity to not the option? Goodness, what a mess, you know? Was worth itself, it was was worth itself it life was worth itself it goodness life was worth itself, you know? excuse me, life itself was worth it, not the option. That's it. Smooth like silk and milk and a clean white sheet of paper, that's it. Isn't any me to be found, now that's a laugh!

How could I have ever properly introduced myself? I'm so, so sorry. My name is Melody. I was lost there for a while, but the text has pulled me through it has, goodness, has it pulled me through. My name is goodness death the option name is Melody, how could I have *ever* properly

introduced myself? I'm Melody. My name is Melody. I'm stranded trapped here high above below the plains the valleys prairies high above the valleys plains the oceans Melody I'm high above the Melody the option silk I'm high above the clean white sheet of Melody I'm high above the text has pulled me through it wasn't not the other proposition, isn't that something? I'm Melody.

You could help me here, you know.

My name is Melody. I will start from scratch. I'm not Melody on an ocean, I'm not Melody in a valley, I'm not Melody on the page (the clean white sheet of paper? how'd it get so clean?) because the option isn't I will start from scratch my Melody is defined by what it isn't, and that's no good, I want to *be* something, I want to *is* someone who's me my Melody to call my own, despite the ONSLAUGHT I can turn that off for now because it's SO tremendous all around my body mind can't tell itself to look or hear or feel, these SIGNALS coming AT ME turn me *off* for sure, I just don't have the ways and means to process all the VISUALS all the SOUNDS the noises pure and SOMEONE'S TELLING ME but I can't waste my time right now, because

the organism of me, you see, has fallen under attack. Repeat. The organism of me, you see, has fallen under attack. Fall back and regroup when the psychic coast is clear.

Anyway, I have to say, with the help of a little retrospect, I feel a bit of regret. I mean, goodness, there we were together, you and me, and I was playacting for you, you know, it was me and my lovely sister doing all sorts of things and saying all sorts of things, and it was all just a game of dreaming living being, while *meanwhile* I'd neglected you, you know? So sorry feel a little bit of regret, you know? I was a child then, you know -- still a child now, but an *ageless* child, a child with all her youth done stripped away, I don't know how they did it! -- and didn't think to fill you in on me and my whole everything, I figured, goodness, if this is any kind of real relationship at all, then I'm already known, am I not? and now I may simply *behave* and be *understood* but that isn't at all the case. I have to introduce myself. I gotta grow the fuck up, or they're gonna kill me. I have to introduce myself. My name is Melody. I'm Melody. My core its name is Melody. My name is core, my name is Melody. My essence. All the images that you might see when Melody she plays before you, that's what me is here and now. Oh, certainly, there may have been a time when Melody was just a simple, almost *casual* referring to the space my me took up, but not any more, ain't that the truth, not any more. At the *very* least, if

I flip my lid I blow my top if I lose my marbles I ain't coming back if at the very least I lose my core my name is Melody, then I have introduced myself, for convenience's sake, so you can refer to the space which I took up and mean it this time, try it you oughta like it bless you thanks for coming.

I gotta grow the fuck up, or they're gonna kill me. And I'm
awake

receiving. incoming. signals, all too much to process, who is why is where is all the nasty questions when I once was lying in bed and next moment, I remember, pow like a gunshot or a needle shot and now an old woman's voice "just shut up already. just stop talking. just shut up and listen. stop talking. shut up. are you listening?" and then

go away...

and suddenly, I see a Vision.

Suddenly, I see the future. "The" future, as in, my future ours the one I take from you, that future. And I see horror upon horror, "tell 'em what you see, Melody," I see horror upon screaming horror befall the Earth, just look around, just look, why won't you LOOK you won't you LOOK why won't you LOOK "just tell 'em" LOOK and I see horror LOOK befall the screaming horror Earth, and I see horror screaming LOOK and I see

Melody, my sweetness, Melody, my princess, that's my me I see amidst the plains of devastation terror fires of devastation Melody my princess that's my LOOK the screaming horror Earth the fires my Melody I see, and LOOK the war that ranges far and wide the killing sadness killing devastation LOOK and I see killing war that ranges 'cross the plains and through the fields, and I see killing war that horror LOOK befalls the screaming sadness killing, there I am, my Melody, I lead the charge demand it call it out I reign a princess full of fury hate devotion devastation I am LOOK the war that ranges far and wide and in my name, I do see killing war and devastation, mercy screams the sadness Earth but there I am, my Melody, the war because I hate because I can this is my future and my destiny comes hurtling through the atmosphere, the hunger horror devastation through the fields, the starving children horror hunger starving sadness devastation, kill the plants and kill the fields and kill the Earth and kill the children of the Earth with war and horror hunger starving let them suffer, all that they deserve, and I see me my princess high atop the mountaintop, where maggots consume the grain and where the children

starve so far below, and I see horror LOOK the food the breath of life it has been stolen, leaves them weak, leaves them so vulnerable to horror killing war the hunger horror devastation is my future, sickness sadness plague and pestilence shall sweep the land, I feel them slowly one by one the killing war the plague the devastation leaves them slowly one by one the horror Earth the fires I see them Vision there they leaves them one by one they slowly die by killing let themselves go die they can't resist the horror that I offer them,

"and that's you, your Melody, your sweetness, do you see? you I see it too, I don't know how you're going to do it do it you your Melody your future destiny you see it? ha,"

the signals, images, they ripped them from the future

my me, a battered teddy bear atop the great wide open seas
helpless

and I see I don't know which who I see, this isn't over--

a numbing jerk, and then she I we hit the floor, and I see
Laurel? and I see
dreaming?

Laurel greets the sudden appearance of Melody into the fairy tale dream castle with a scream the likes of which you haven't heard before. Now here's Melody, a battered, bruised and blistered horrorgirl, collapsed upon the carpet, and Laurel screams and rushes to her side.

A huge explosion rocks the castle, and plaster falls and bricks fall and Laurel screams and Melody screams, and the two of them scramble for cover, safe, tightly quick embrace with all their might, and kiss each other's lips with pressing urgency, and take each other's hands and stare into each other's eyes, and she says,

"What in the hell is happening?"

"I don't know."

"Are you okay?"

"No. Are you?"

"No. Do you remember your name?"

"Not right now. Do you remember yours?"

"Not right now."

"This is going to hurt soon, isn't it?"

"Yes."

The dreaming, then, the castle shall we say, is being bombarded from outside. This gentle waystation in the dream world has become a magnet for disaster. Neither one of the sisters is aware of the frantic effort the castle's inhabitants are making to defend it. They are a hardy crew, that nearly faceless not quite nameless group of regulars, manning the battlements, organizing the staff into lines of defense. There's Dawson the butler, scrambling back and forth, barking orders out with swift amazement; and Tanner Mildew the boy genius is inventing weapons as fast as he possibly can, each one more dangerous than the last, hoping to hold off the pitch black horde that's gathered outside; and Derald and Janszen the psychics use their special skills to probe the enemy and find its weaknesses, its blind spots; and silent Sierra plays the drum beats loudly while Airee Macpherson stands atop the battlement and sings a song of challenge and defiance. Only Susie Satori is nowhere to be found... is this all too much for the poor girl? we wonder briefly.

Meanwhile, in unison, "they separated us, and it could be random happenstance, but more likely it's beyond synchronicity, because we get to be a little special, don't we, because of dreams like this?" We're *dangerous*, she realizes, together or apart, dangerous because of dreaming and dangerous because of Vision

"I'm dangerous," Melody says.

"No."

"I'm dangerous. They're doing this to us because of me, they've already got my body and now they want my spirit, and I can't let them tear apart all of what I know and love,"

"no,"

"just listen, would you? We haven't any time! If I stay here, they'll tear this place apart until they've found me, and then, we'll have nothing together."

"Just what do you think you're going to do?"

I'm going to break the rules, I whisper softly, a chilling tremble dashing through my nervous system. I'm going to open the front door, and I'm going to step out onto the front porch, it's raining like crazy out there but I'm going to do it anyway, I'm going to step right out the door and slam it shut behind me and there's no telling what happens next but this my fairy tale dreamland this will all be *safe* and *free* and I can *do* this my new *me* is *strong* enough but what about your

sister?

"Listen, you have to trust me. I have to go."

"You can't."

"I have to go."

"You can't, the rules are very explicit on this point, we *mustn't* leave the house, remember?"

"If I don't grow up, they're gonna kill me, don't you see?"

And Laurel isn't strong enough to hold her sister back. It's like a very literal, very physical pummeling of her soul to watch her sister stand. She collapses into tears trying to follow and never quite catching up, she feels her body quake with realization as there she goes her sister toward the door, and as her sister throws the door wide open, she feels the last remaining splinters of her

childhood

youth drain straight away. The vicious thunderstorm outside blows the rain into the room, as Melody looks back and smiles the only smile she has left to herself and says,

"I love you, Laurel."

And she,

"I love you, Melody."

And then,

the door slams shut, and all is quiet.

All is quiet.

All is quiet, save for Laurel's misery, alone, awake wrapped up inside a sleeping bag, inside the treehouse in the back yard, alone awake and quiet misery is Laurel without her sister. And Laurel, too, would like to introduce herself. And redefine herself. And start all over. Start with this, she thinks:

Forgiveness is a weapon, causing deep deep wounds that never heal, so careful how you use it. Also,

I miss you too much.