

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Courtney steps out onto the back porch, takes a long pull from a delicious cigarette, listens to the night. Cedar Falls, Iowa, is as dead a town as they come, quiet and simple with nothing to do, the perfect place to concentrate on nothing but work. Hard to believe that they would find Laurel here, of all places — then again, Bethlehem was probably an equally inauspicious site. Strange world; takes another long pull; strange fucking world indeed.

Tonight, she realizes, Cohen might actually get a glimpse of what Laurel's dreaming is all about. She does regret, in a small way, that she can't go with them into the dreaming — not just yet, anyway. There are times when they hang around together, she and Laurel, and she feels almost like Laurel's friend, almost like they are two giddy teenage girls together, enjoying the hell out of whatever happens along. Those times are incredibly rare, though; mostly she feels so overwhelmed by Laurel that it's all she can do to maintain her distance as a mentor. It's very hard to truly forget who Laurel is, what she means to the Circle. She envies Cohen, in a way, envies how he can become good friends with this young woman, because he does not truly know her. His role in Laurel's training, while small, is incredibly pivotal, for Laurel needs confidants now in this time of intense flux, and Courtney, unfortunately, doesn't qualify, as much as she might wish she did.

Another long pull, impatience swirling around her like smoke, knowing that these easy days with just the three of them in a lonely Iowa town will be over soon enough. Perhaps because Courtney is still young compared to her mother, she is more drawn to impatience; her mother's mindset has always been, "These things take time, enormous amounts of time." But enormous amounts of time have *already* gone into the Circle, hundreds and hundreds of years... and Courtney has the fortune of being at ground zero right here, right now, during the time when Activation is imminent! The pressure is sometimes overwhelming, but she feels her mother's blood in her, and that's enough to give her strength. The Circle needs Courtney's youth, and her strength, and her stamina. Still, she feels curiously alone in the middle of all this; she feels the Circle watching her, but she knows that they've placed so much into her hands....

She smokes infrequently enough to still get a buzz from her cigarette, and the rush is entirely welcome, simple pleasures indeed. This is almost too lonely. She longs somewhat desperately to be as close to

Laurel and Cohen as they are to each other. She doesn't like this detachment from the heart of their triad, even as she leads and defines the flavor of the triad. Doesn't matter how many years she herself has been at this business, she still hasn't gotten used to the loneliness. It's more acute now than it ever was. Be with them right now, she decides. This is *your* frustration, not theirs. You can still share this and this and this with them, and if they pass the test, so do you. Friendships will be measured in the end, of that there is no doubt. She puts out her cigarette, sits cross-legged on the deck under the beautiful moon, closes her eyes and clears her mind. As she begins to resonate inside herself, energy accumulating at the base of her spine and slowly rising up, she can feel her two friends in the house, can feel their breathing beginning to settle, and she tunes in to their heartbeats, synchronizes them, and softly begins channeling her energy their direction. Tonight is the night Cohen will learn how to dream with Laurel, at least if Courtney has anything to say about it.

And in Laurel's dreaming that night, Airee stands silently beside her atop the tallest tower as she probes Father Time himself for answers. She asks him, "What's behind the black mountains?"

And he replies, "Let me tell you a story, Laurel. It is a story in which everything went wrong for everyone concerned."

"I don't know if I want to hear a story like this."

"You must, Laurel. You must. On the far side of the beautiful black mountains there was a city, called Ityl-Atys, the most miraculous and wonderful city in all the dreaming."

"More wonderful than my castle?"

"By an order of magnitude, my dear. The city's streets were constantly in motion, shifting themselves about in unknowable patterns, and the inhabitants filled the streets and the shops and the taverns with a cavalier sense of abandon. Into these streets and into this city came a young girl named Melody."

Laurel gasps. "My sister?"

"Not quite," Father Time replies. "Someone very much like your sister. Melody came to the city seeking refuge, and of course, the inhabitants welcomed her in. However, Melody never told them from where she had come, and from whom she was trying to escape. The villains who hounded her had already killed her twin sister in the real world--"

"Killed!" Laurel exclaims.

--and soon these horrible fiends found a way to invade the very dreaming itself to find Melody. Melody's closest friend in the dreaming was an enigmatic intelligence named Job. And in the end, Melody discovered too late that Job was one of her enemies too, though unfortunately against its will; and the enemy army soon invaded the city in search of Melody, with Job as their commander."

"What happened?"

"The city was destroyed, Laurel, and no one ever saw Melody again."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because that story is only two steps to the left of *this* story, the one in which you live, and there are lessons to be learned from their mistakes -- indeed, some say they committed such horrible sins in that world so that you could not possibly in this." Pause. "Beware the coming days, Laurel. Prepare yourself. The black mountains are a long ways away, but the distance is easily traveled nonetheless."

"Can you tell me," Laurel asks, "what happened to my sister in *this* timeline?"

Father Time sighs, turns away from her slowly. Airee takes Laurel's hand, holds it tightly, for comfort. Of all the possible questions in the world, there's really only one question worth anything to Laurel, one story she needs to hear more than anything else. But:

"I'm afraid I cannot," Father Time replies. "I have already risked much simply by coming here, by talking to you at all."

"Risk?" Airee asks. "What kind of risk?"

Father Time chuckles. "My decision to come here was not, shall we say, a *popular* one."

"I get the feeling," Laurel says, leaving Airee's side, pacing the top of the tower nervously, "that there are forces at play here that are simply beyond all possibility of comprehension. That, that... that something *big* and *powerful* and *awesome* is lurking behind the scenes, waiting for the perfect moment to show itself."

"Your intuition is more correct than you know," Father Time replies, "but I can give you no specifics. I can point you toward no particular course of action."

"But you offered your services as temporal *advisor*," Airee counters.

"And I *will* advise you, when you are in need of my particular advice. That time, however, has not yet arrived, and for the moment I am only a spectator to the unfolding drama."

"You're just being contrary," Laurel fumes. "I don't know how much more of this I want to listen to, frankly."

Father Time turns and brings himself to bear, his presence suddenly managing to impress Laurel despite herself.

"Whatever happens between you and your sister," he says, gritting his teeth, his eyes barely masking a kind of pain hidden deep inside, "is none of my affair. You are both beyond me and above me and below me. Of that, I can offer you *no* advice, for the two of you are fated to escape Time altogether, to a place where my words are meaningless." Too much has escaped him; he can barely control himself, his excitement to propel them all toward the end almost too much to bear. He starts toward the steps, saying, "But in the meantime, friends, do beware of 'forces at play that are beyond all possibility of comprehension.' There are so many forces at play it boggles the mind, all of them working at seemingly cross purposes, all of them wanting something just a little bit different." To Airee, he says: "You're going to be in a very difficult position soon. Rather than trusting no one, I suggest you trust *everyone*." And before he vanishes completely down the stairs, he says, "Your sister's doing fine, Laurel. You needn't worry. But what on Earth are you getting yourself into?" And then he is gone. A pause, and his voice calls up the stairs, "Oh, and beware the Ides of March and *alla that!*" Booming laughter, and then he is really gone.

Laurel turns to Airee, and they stare at each other for a moment, the situation before them having been both clarified and completely complicated all at once.

"What do you think he meant by--" Airee begins. She is quickly interrupted, however, by a certain strange howling sound that suddenly rises up through the castle, and a moment after that, Dawson the butler arrives with breathless news.

"Laurel, I think you should come quickly," he says, an anxious smile on his face. "Your friend Cohen has arrived in the foyer."

Laurel is breathless as she enters the grand foyer, Dawson and Airee in step behind her. She isn't breathless from the run -- you don't wear yourself out physically in the Dreamtime -- but rather from excitement, a kind of head rush that exacerbates itself in the Dreamtime simply because it feels good. There are others present in the foyer as well,

as she might have expected, having arrived at nearly the same time, in order to witness the same thing: Sierra the drummer is across the foyer from them, standing up on the balcony are the boy genius Tanner Mildew and everyone's pal Susie Satori, and standing near the front doorway, ever vigilant in the face of possible disaster, are the psychics Derald and Janszen. And Cohen, it seems, is making a rather *dramatic* entrance.

As they step into the foyer, they can see the vague outline of Cohen in the center of the foyer, almost as though he is fading in and fading out of the Dreamtime, except not so smoothly as that, but rather, breaking in and breaking up and breaking in again in bits and pieces, shimmering, translucent pixels of Cohen struggling to coalesce and focus. His shape is certainly Cohen-esque, but the pseudo-holographic figure shrinks and swells according to some unseen rhythm; Laurel wonders what will happen if the figure which eventually attains solidity is actually some hulking, fifteen foot Cohen with no way to relate. His expression, too, is one of singular curiosity; certainly Cohen is one who has seen a great deal in his short life, enough to know that screaming in panic does you no more good in a situation like this than praying to God, and there's a tranquillity about him that suggests he is neither acting nor reacting, suggests that he simply *is*. And there's a strange and eerie sound in the background, the sound of spacetime being torn asunder if only briefly and in the tiniest of fashions, the sound of one reality literally tearing a hole in another and causing an awful leak; most visitors to the Dreamtime arrive organically, somewhat mystically, but Cohen is engaged in some kind of violent penetration, it seems, *forcing* his way into the Dreamtime, even though he himself seems to be unaware of the larger, largely subconscious processes which seem to be propelling him. And further still, Laurel notes, there is a strange, thoroughly eerie luminescence which occasionally rises to the surface of Cohen's skin, and in those moments when the glow subsumes him, Laurel receives quite a chill, as though she is seeing a sort of cosmic X-ray into the very core of her friend and finding out

that he isn't what she expected, on the inside, that  
he has *company* on the inside,  
and things are certainly about to get strange.

It is Airee who first has the presence of mind to actually say something out loud about the intensely beautiful and frightening sight before them, muttering the words, "There's something inside him," just loud enough for Laurel to hear. Yes, Laurel realizes, there *is* something inside him, and her first reaction is a horrifying kind of shock, followed by

a rapid numbness which swells throughout her emotional body. That eerie sound, the sound of too many realities intersecting in one space, sounds an awful lot like howling, and it isn't Cohen doing the howling, that's for sure; there are *other* voices howling in agony at the sudden phase shift, the sudden reorientation of metaphysical plane in which Cohen is engaged. There are *Voices* inside his head, she realizes with a screaming kind of terror, and indeed she does scream, quite loudly, loudly enough that every head in the room turns toward her and devotes its attention to the sudden perceived crisis: Laurel isn't taking this well, and something needs to be done.

She takes a step forward, wants desperately to attract Cohen's attention, wants desperately to make eye contact or flesh contact or soul contact or *whatever*. She wants to communicate, and even though the struggle for resolution and solidity seems to have reached a boiling point, flashes of light and rapid phase transitions between here and the waking world where Cohen's sleeping body must be sweating something fierce, he still can recognize her flavor at a distance, still can feel her presence affecting his, can feel the way her aura is tuned to his on the great cosmic short-wave, and he turns to her and smiles broadly and deeply, holding out his hand to her, expecting her to somehow yank him fully into the now. Meanwhile, the luminescent, eerie radiance within him, the presence of that which *isn't* Cohen, is struggling horribly as well, resisting this maneuver, challenging Cohen at a fundamental level, threatening Cohen with dissolution at the molecular level, and total, violent reorganization at the metaphysical level.

"Cohen," she says. "Can you hear me?"

He nods rapidly, moves his mouth to speak but his words aren't crossing the distance and the resolution of his mouth is much too fuzzy for her to read his lips. Airee moves next to her, and Sierra moves in closer from across the room, and it seems as the two of them move to him, his expression grows stronger, and the resolution of his dream self gains confidence (very similar, Airee thinks, to those occasions where the television is getting terrible reception until someone stands next to the antenna). There's an intense kind of heat rolling off Cohen in waves, and Laurel and Airee and Sierra seem to be absorbing it, and accessing it, seeking a line of energy, perhaps, that will lead them to whatever limbo Cohen is hanging in by a thread,

and then, Airee says, "oh my God," and those who were averting their eyes are no longer able to. Cohen's skin is beginning to bubble, and as

they peer into the morass, they begin to make out faces pressed against the inside of his skin, stretching his skin, twisting it, and at first glance, Laurel thinks these faces are caught in horrified and angry existential screams and grimaces, such sheer visceral agony and hatred captured in their expressions, until Laurel suddenly says, "Those aren't human faces," and then they all realize, in one blistering moment, that those aren't faces at all, that whatever those patterns are that are threatening to burst through Cohen's skin bear no resemblance whatsoever to anything they've ever seen before, not human faces nor animal nor insect nor anything else, impossible combinations of shifting, rippling skin attacked by impossibly colored sounds and grooves from the inside, and the only thing they *can* discern is that these forces, whatever they are, want *out*....

"Make a circle," Airee says slowly. "We need a circle. Derald, Janszen, get over here!" she calls out. The two psychics, called to duty, rapidly approach the group.

"No need to explain," says Derald.

"It's a good plan and we approve," says Janszen.

"Take my hands," says Airee, offering her right hand to Laurel and her left to Sierra. "Don't let go, no matter what."

Cohen's smile is beginning to fade; he has finally turned his attention away from the sight of Laurel, and has begun to address the torture which is his insides. His entire body begins shifting and warping and whirling and churning, and it is apparent he can't contain these things much longer; or rather, Laurel realizes slowly, a slippery wave of Hope rising up the back of her throat, he doesn't *intend* to contain these things much longer, he intends to *release* these things, deliberately, he intends to *escape* this quicksand in a way Gary never possibly could have. Cohen's two hands rise to his scalp, and he digs his fingernails in, tearing at the skin at the very crown of his skull, ripping it slowly apart until the bare skull is visible, and then, his fingernails dig deeper, chipping away at the bone in slow, deliberate strokes; at the last stroke, a wide hole is opened in his skull, and his face is practically split down the middle by the aperture, the two sides of his mangled face now grinning like a maniac, and in the very next second, a sudden

FLASH of light bursts from his skull, and screaming, whirling apparitions rise up into the air above the makeshift circle, spinning in the air above them and screaming a horrible cacophony. Cohen's body completely resolves and he collapses, exhausted, onto the floor of the foyer; Laurel's impulse is to run to him immediately, but Airee holds her hand

tight, snapping, "Don't let go, no matter what!" Whatever these Voices actually are, they mustn't be allowed to wander freely throughout the dream castle, or freely throughout the Dreamtime for that matter. Whatever they are, they must be contained, and addressed, and controlled.

A warm and incredibly strong presence suddenly enters the room, and Laurel knows without looking that Dawson has found Father Time and alerted him to the crisis at hand. Even now, Father Time, Dawson, and Tanner the boy genius are moving in for a closer look; meanwhile, Susie Satori remains at her perch, on the balcony high above the scene, nearly high enough to look directly into the core of these Voices. As Father Time arrives, the howling din grows quiet, and the mood in the room changes quite rapidly from one of scowling, magnetic defiance, to one of sudden reconsideration.

"We're interested," says Father Time to the Voices, "in communication."

He touches Laurel's shoulder, and she turns to see him smiling quietly at her. His confidence and ease with this situation puts a new spin on things altogether; perhaps they are not, in this moment, threatened at all, since this is home ground. Perhaps, in fact, they have quite the upper hand, and should be prepared to exploit it, should be prepared to banish these Voices once and for all, lest they destroy *another* of Laurel's friends like they did the last time (they *won't*, I swear by everything that's holy in this world, they *won't*).

"We need to face them evenly," he says to her softly. "I certainly understand the initial impulse. But you can't keep them in a box forever. Or in a circle, as the case may be."

Laurel nods, and slowly releases Airee's hand. She, however, unaware of Father Time's plan, holds Laurel's hand tightly in hers nonetheless.

"It's okay, Airee," Laurel says. "We got a plan."

"I've never seen anything like this," Airee replies, "and I must confess I am highly suspicious of any sudden plans."

"Airee," she replies, "this is the Dreamtime. There's always a plan, and it always works, even if it doesn't make sense."

The circle broken, the swirling figures of the Voices in the air above them suddenly slow to a mellow sort of whirlpool, all the anger seeping out of their movements, slipping away into the night, and they begin sweeping around the expanse of the foyer, as though searching for a place to settle, a position from which to negotiate. Laurel bends down to

Cohen, whose split head has already fused itself together again, embraces him so tightly she thinks they both might suffocate, and she whispers, "You're crazy for coming here, Cohen, but I'm terribly glad to see you," to which he replies, "After all of that, I should hope so." As the two of them eventually rise to their feet, it seems as though the Voices have found an adequate solution: without warning, the shimmering wisps of light and energy suddenly bury themselves deeply within Susie Satori's chest. Airee gasps out loud and Tanner says, "What the hell!" as Susie's expression for the very first time wavers from blissful peace to sudden shock and a surreal kind of wonder; then Susie's body clumsily lurches down the steps toward them. Father Time takes a few steps forward to greet her, and Laurel instinctively moves to join him.

"Do not be alarmed," says a bizarre impersonation of Susie's original voice. Her face is awkward and jerky, as though whoever is controlling it needs a bit of practice. "We have done no damage to this entity, as there was no core present to be disturbed."

"No core present?" says Laurel.

"She is only a figment of the dream," Father Time murmurs softly.

Laurel turns him on with a vicious glare and says, "And what the hell does 'just a figment' mean?"

Ignoring her, he addresses the Voices cordially: "My name is Father Time."

"We have long been aware of you... Father Time," says Susie's head. "You may call me... Gale. I am a representative. I am indeed interested in... communication."

"What were you doing inside Gary's head?" Laurel demands in a highly antagonistic tone, striding forward, almost past Father Time. "And what were you doing inside Cohen's head? And who else's head are you crawling around inside?"

"Laurel," says Father Time to her, "I think some patience is in order." She turns to him with another furious look on her face, which he again ignores, turning back to Susie Satori.

"We are in the process of communication," Gale replies. "It is unfortunate that, until tonight, our only effective method of communication involved penetration of the human intellect. Had we ever been aware of *this* space, this space you call the Dreamtime, perhaps we could have accomplished much more with much less harm to your people."

"Penetration of the intellect?" says Tanner Mildew. "That means you guys force your way inside people's heads, and like, lodge there?"

"We are extradimensional beings," Gale says. "One small portion of our total energies is incorporated into the host's neural networks. We integrate ourselves with the host's personality. It is rarely direct communication, since the host rarely trusts the sudden shift in its perspective. But it is all we have been able to accomplish so far."

"They're aliens," says Cohen, slowly stepping forward, a super-charged kind of calm enveloping him as he experiences himself *without* the Voices for the first time in months and months and months. "They claim that they can't leave my head now, at least in the waking world, or I will psychically bleed to death."

"This is true," Gale says. "If we leave you, we have no way to reestablish your previous state of mind. The gap in your mind where we used to be cannot be closed organically, and none of your doctors possess the capability. So long as you live, Cohen, we will necessarily be with you."

And Laurel watches Cohen's face fall, then settle into a kind of determination. *He's making up his mind to fight them*, she realizes, and deep down, she approves wholeheartedly. There's no reason to trust these Voices, just because they're unique in this neck of this woods. No reason at all.

"And why have you done what you've done?" Father Time asks.

Gale turns to him and says, "At first, we only wanted contact. We only wanted communication. Your regular, peaceful brainstates prevented us from ever making contact with you; we needed to interrupt them, retune them so to speak, so that we could share a channel of communication. At first we only wanted contact. This is a noble enough gesture, although admittedly, we were unaware for quite some time that we were leaving humans dead in our wake. And by the time we had learned the full scope of our possible interactions with you... the situation had changed entirely."

"What situation?" Airee asks.

Gale takes a deep breath, then says, "We came to make you aware of the situation, as much as we are able. Surely it is apparent to you that your reality is experiencing greater and greater traumas in these the final hours before the coming of earthly concrescence--"

"Earthly concrescence?" Laurel interrupts. "What's that mean?"

"You should know, then, that we are not the only beings called here to interface with humanity in these final hours of your present state,"

Gale continues. "You should know, then, that there are others among you, and others on the way. And you should know that not all of them harbor such simple intentions as ours, as simple communication with neighbors in the universe. You should know that there is tremendous conflict in this existence, and you should know that your humanity places you in a most unusual position.

"You humans," she says, "are the nexus. You are the meeting place, the battleground. Because of your unique position, we are all coming here, and because of your unique position, you will find it nearly impossible to survive."

A silence falls over them for a while, and even Laurel considers the direct honesty that *seems* to have rolled out of Susie Satori's mouth. Could this be true, that aliens of every possible variety are descending here, to the planet Earth, in order to wage tremendous war? Could this be true, that humanity is the unwitting interface between each and every race that comes, and could this be true as well, that the end is nearly upon us? I don't think I like this end of the world shit, she realizes. And then, she says,

"What about the space ship?" Laurel asks. "Why did you keep asking Gary to build a space ship? Why did you keep asking Cohen to build a space ship?"

"Because," Gale replies, "there are other places in this universe where humans might go...."

Laurel and Cohen awake the next morning with a singular aura of awe and wonder about them. As Cohen slowly stirs, he remembers now what happened to him during the night, remembers dearly those moments without the Voices; and as he searches the recesses of his brain, sure enough, they're right back inside his head, if perhaps much quieter than they ever were. Perhaps this won't be so bad from now on, he realizes. Perhaps I can handle this. Perhaps I can *prove them wrong* and find a way to force them safely out of my head. Perhaps, he thinks. Perhaps.... And as for Laurel, waking slowly, exhausted despite the sleep, she is aware of the alarming incongruity between their message -- "humans can escape all this without perishing" -- and their actions -- "*some* humans can *never* escape us without perishing."

But these disconcerting ripples from the Dreamtime quickly give way to solemn elation, as they realize the magnitude of what they've accomplished, the wonder and the majesty of their connection, the deep

and powerful strength of their devotion. And Cohen gets up off the floor and says,

"that was some fucking fairy tale, Laurel,"

to which she replies,

"and you're the weirdest Prince Charming I ever met."

They collapse into a quick embrace, which embrace is interrupted moments later by a knock on the door, and then Courtney enters with a bottle of champagne in one hand and three glasses in the other. It is a strange sight, to see Courtney and champagne this early in the morning. Nonetheless, they can tell immediately that there is a sincere elation on Courtney's face which is quite similar to their own, and Courtney says,

"I wanted to tell you guys that most of the entire Circle *felt* what you did last night,"

and as the implications slowly sink into Laurel and Cohen, a quiet pride growing into a wonderful high, Courtney says,

"The initiation's in a week, my friends. We're going to fly to London. Many of the Circle's most esteemed and powerful members will be there. And we're going to initiate you both." She pauses, a nearly adolescent excitement charging her face, and then she says, "You *made* it!"

And within minutes, they have begun their celebration, despite the early hour; Courtney leaps onto the bed with them and pops the cork off the bottle, and there are many giggles and exclamations, and Cohen's Voices are deep deep into the background, letting him enjoy the precious satisfaction of this moment, and Laurel's suspicions die away, as Courtney's infectious laugh sweeps among the three of them. All things are going according to plan, Courtney realizes, not batting an eye as Laurel suggests a toast; they raise their glasses, but nothing comes to mind, nothing seems to convey the precise flavor of the moment, and so they let the toast pass without a word, slamming their first glasses of champagne and immediately progressing to the next.

Next week will come quite rapidly, Laurel knows; time is plastic when you're this high off the ground.