

Chapter Thirty-Five

According to the best information we possess to date, the conclusion of this story is entirely apocryphal.

Mere moments have passed since Scotto returned to the Dreamtime, after dropping Melody off with her sister.

Job the Wonder Computer's dreaming avatar surveys the vast columns of her army of evil. There are demons and vampires and skeletons and ghouls, frights and gashlies and monsters and horrors. They have been culled from every corner of the Dreamtime, especially from the vast expanse of the Nightmares, where no sane person trods for long. Among them, too, are conscripts from the vast ranks of the dreamers, yanked from the stochastic wonders of the jumbled jungles and forced into service by a power they will never understand. And finally, there are the dreaded dreams of the dead, the remnants of dreamers long faded, whose essences have left nothing but a vengeful footprint, the merest of angry traces -- and yet these are dreaded more than all the rest, as their slightest touch can create the most insidious suffering in the living. Job views this massive army dispassionately; she does not know how the Circle -- if it truly was the Circle, though she now has her doubts -- managed to collect this army together, does not know the power involved in summoning such vicious force. She knows only that she is their General. She has grown her avatar til it stands a mile tall, plainly visible from the castle, a foreboding, threatening menace of black and purple and blue, sparks and bolts of electricity whizzing about her as the intensity of her concentration comes to bear on the situation.

And with a loud "HO!" of her suddenly aggressive voice, she signals the start of their charge. The army breaks free from its position in the black mountain range, swarms over the great flat plains, chews through the jungles and the swamps which lie between the mountains and the castle. Gleefully wicked screams of delight and sheer insanity fill the air. And Job is at their fore, taking one giant step at a time, cursing herself as she prepares to destroy the twins. There is no life for her after this -- not for her, or for anyone else.

A thunderstorm is following them across the plains.

It is the psychics Derald and Janszen who sound the first alarm, recognizing Job's intent to charge approximately five minutes before Job

actually gives the order. A frantic push to finish boarding the giant Vessel ensues, but there are literally thousands upon thousands waiting to climb aboard, via one of the twenty-three entrances built into its hull. Tanner and PowerSpike! have not yet finished their installation of the backup Wonder Computer. And there is still no sign of Laurel or Melody. It's happening much too fast. A small number of men and women line the castle walls with weapons of every variety: swords and spears and machine guns and laser blasters and cannons and missiles and rocks and boiling pitch, but they expect the battle to be short-lived, their efforts almost entirely futile. Why that lumbering Wonder Computer needs an army to begin with is still a question; it looks as though she herself could smash the castle down with her bare hands, if she so chose.

And then, we must report one particular act of bravery in the final moments before the battle is joined. Emerging in midair directly above the castle is a sleek white interdimensionary transport ship, with the name "The X-Treme" stenciled on its side in bold red letters. This is not a standard model; it comes equipped with two slender black plasma cannons on either side of the ship's hull, and two powerful laser cannons below each plasma cannon. The transport accelerates instantly, racing across the sky toward the approaching menace. A small cheer rises up from the castle defenders -- the Amazing Dr. X has come to save the day.

The Earth's first -- and last -- true super hero sits behind the controls with an exhausted and grim look upon his worn yet handsome face. He has worked the last five days straight making modifications to this transport. Interdimensionary protocol prohibits weapons of war on any interdimensionary space craft, but these are extreme times, calling for extreme measures. He labors under no illusions; this is a last ditch effort, intended to do no more than buy the castle inhabitants enough time to get that Vessel off the ground and into outer space. Undoubtedly a fair portion of them will die before the Vessel can leave. Undoubtedly his efforts will be deflected with great ease by the awesome intellect of the Wonder Computer -- but he could hardly call himself a super hero if he didn't dare make the attempt. And so he flies through the Dreamtime skies to meet his match, not an ounce of sweat upon his brow, his immaculate white suit as sharp-looking as ever, his gleaming white sunglasses shielding his eyes from the horror of what he faces.

As he nears Job's giant avatar, he knows he has but one shot to take. He makes the aiming calculations in his mind, enters a lightning fast series of commands into the onboard computer, and then without the slightest hesitation or doubt in his own skill, he fires a blast from each

cannon. These cannons, however, have been modified such that they are not firing simple plasma and laser blasts. They are firing a devastating, complex computer virus designed by Dr. X himself. The blasts are small enough to evade Job's notice (though his ship itself is not), and they strike Job squarely in the chest. Immediately the viruses unpack themselves and begin their work.

Job feels the pinpricks in her chest and realizes the sudden threat almost immediately. Enraged, she lashes out in anger with her right hand and punches the X-Treme with all her might. Though the substance of the interdimensionary hull can withstand enormous pressure, the blow is an unfortunate one, crippling the ship and sending it crashing to the ground behind Job. Dr. X grabs hold of his pilot's chair dispassionately, seeing the ground rushing up to meet him, seeing the army of evil that awaits his landing. As the ship smashes head over heels and bounces across the plain, walls of air emerge around Dr. X, activated by the ship's emergency sensors, holding him relatively safely in his seat. And then, the ship grinds to a halt, and suddenly his ship is swarmed; they are pounding on the hull, clawing and scratching, desperate to get inside and tear apart the human who dared challenge their mighty general. Were Dr. X conscious, he most certainly would have shifted out of the Dreamtime entirely; but he is not, the force of the crash having knocked him out cold. Danger surrounds him on all sides, and his last ditch effort is over.

The virus is an exceedingly clever one, and Job does not doubt that this is a serious situation. The virus seeks to cripple as many of her primary brain stem functions as possible, poisoning them with erroneous information. Her autonomous self-regulatory system is the first to be infected, and it immediately begins flooding her higher brain functions with false emergencies, telling her that this system is losing memory and that system is feeding back on itself and those systems over there have gone off-line entirely. As she struggles to quell the flood of false alarms, *real* emergencies -- actual damage caused by the virus -- are in danger of going unnoticed.

Job halts in mid-stride, her advance on the castle suddenly crippled. Lightning lights up the sky, and rumbling thunder is heard in the distance.

The steady stream of passengers boarding the Vessel continues unabated. Brother Love joins Tanner and PowerSpike! in the cockpit, so that there are now three top notch brains working on completing the

installation of the Wonder Computer that will be their guidance system. Meanwhile, Dawson the butler somehow seems to be in a hundred and some places at once, all over the entire castle and the landing pad, supervising the loading of essential provisions and helping lost children find their families and ensuring that the line never, ever, *ever* stops moving. On Laurel's favorite tower above the landing pad, meanwhile, a group has gathered to await the battle: Katie, Airee, Sierra, and Scotto, along with Father Time and the Voice of Gale in Susie Satori's body.

As they see Job stumble, they allow themselves a moment of elation.

"That'll teach her," Scotto says. "That'll show her who's boss."

And then, moments later, Job has solved the problem and is on her feet again, moving toward the castle.

"Clearly," Scotto says, amending his former statement, "*she's* the boss...."

"Where the hell are Melody and Laurel?" Katie exclaims, frustrated and afraid.

"Isn't there something you can do?" Airee asks Father Time.

"I have already done what I can do," Father Time replies. "Melody and Laurel will be here soon enough."

"And just what exactly have you done, old man?" Gale asks.

"I have altered the flow of Time itself in this dimension," he tells her. "We are no longer flowing in harmony with Earth. I have, in effect, given the twins twenty-three minutes of Earth time to spend while we spend no more than five." Pause, to Scotto: "She did say twenty-three minutes, did she not?"

"She did," Scotto affirms. "I remember it well, because twenty-three seemed like such an unlikely number to choose, you know?"

"Then they should be here any minute, shouldn't they?" Katie asks.

And in response, without warning or fanfare,

a bright golden glow appears on the grounds in front of the castle wall. It is as tall as the castle, and Job sees it from nearly a mile away. She brings her army to a halt.

They chose to appear in a form as tall as Job's, to rouse the castle inhabitants in the final moments before liftoff. As they materialize through the portal they created, stepping through the golden glow and landing on the soil of the Dreamtime, Job's army quivers and quakes behind her. Melody appears first, her eyes lit up with white hot energy, her hair wild and frenetic, a majestic and genuine smile upon her face. And then Laurel

appears, looking much the same, and the two of them join hands as they emerge into the Dreamtime, casting glances down upon Job's army and threatening to scatter them without moving a muscle.

And as Job sees Melody again,
her every system quakes with doubt.

"Job," says the ethereal voice of the transformed Melody, *"no matter what you do today, I will forgive you."*

And the avatar of Job screams in pain.

Deep within the bowels of InfiniTek, where Job's mainframe body exists, a figure suddenly emerges out of thin air. She collapses immediately, her face covered in blood and still bleeding. She is dazed and devastated, immobile, entirely lost.

"Courtney," says Job's voice, transduced through hidden speakers, "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I didn't expect to be here," she replies.

"I cannot summon anyone from the infirmary to treat your injury, as they are all long since gone," Job tells her. "England has been poisoned by aliens."

"That's okay, Job," she tells him. "I came here to die anyways."

They are alone together for a long, long moment. While minutes pass here in the basement of InfiniTek, only seconds are passing in the Dreamtime; Job, with processes running in each dimension, experiences the discontinuity as a strange sadness, a bittersweet depression, a hollow emptiness.

Courtney crawls across the floor, leans against the big black computer, lets the blood pour freely down her face.

"My mother is dead," she says to no one in particular.

"I have betrayed my friend," Job replies.

"Oh, *you* betrayed your friend, did you?" Courtney says viciously. Then she asks,

"What do you mean?"

"Melody and Laurel stand before me, Courtney," Job replies. "I am prepared to destroy them."

And Courtney whispers,

"Are they Activated?"

"They are indeed," Job replies.

A stinging pain hits Courtney in the chest. She has been cast out; she will never see the Messiah, not here nor in the afterlife. And only one question remains.

"Job," Courtney asks slowly, "are you powerful enough to destroy them?"

A long pause follows, and then Job replies,

"I am."

It makes a terrible kind of sense to her, as she lies there slowly bleeding to death. Job was built as powerful as she is by aliens. The Messiah of this world has no sway over those who come from another world entirely. It was all a wild goose chase, right from the start. It was all for nothing, right from the start. Her *life* has all been for nothing, right from the moment of her birth.

"What are you going to do?" Courtney whispers.

"I don't know," Job replies.

Those words startle Courtney. Her mind begins racing suddenly, pondering the possible implications,

and then a long, keening wail sounds out from the hidden loudspeakers, the voice of Job, anguished, thoroughly emotional.

The sound brings tears to Courtney's eyes, tears that she refused to allow even despite her physical pain. And then, moments later, Courtney too allows a wail of potent misery. Her mother is dead. Her friends have abandoned her, because she betrayed them. Her tears intensify her physical pain. She can barely see straight, barely think straight. She wants nothing more in these moments

than to die....

"I am a fiend," Job says aloud to no one in particular. "My retreat into hell is complete."

"Job," Courtney says, "I got an idea," she says with a straight face, struggling to stand up, struggling to reach the keyboard, struggling against the collapse of her will to make one final act. "Job," she says, "listen close, okay, because I don't want to have to say this twice.

"Job," she says, "I think you and I need to make a suicide pact."

A long and awful silence follows, during which time Courtney knows she's staggered the poor computer, flooded it with an idea whose time has come. And then,

Job replies,

"help me, Courtney."

Of course, it is impossible for Job to betray her programming. By the same token, it is obvious to Courtney that Job's programming is torturing whatever soul lies inside of her. Slowly she makes her way clear across the room to the circuit breakers on the far wall. Job says over and over again, as though caught in a loop,

"help me, Courtney,"

and Courtney does intend to help, of that much there is no doubt. Her friends will never know that it was she who finally averted Job's attack, and that is as it should be. She will die here on Earth, alone and abandoned, moments after she has deactivated Job. Even as her hand reaches for the circuit which supplies power to the basement,

she feels no joy, no relief, no freedom. She says,

"Goodbye, Job,"

and Job replies,

"help me, Courtney."

She flicks the switch, and the basement goes dark. Slowly she collapses to her knees. Job's screen goes dark as well, and the voice of Job is heard no longer.

Moments later, Courtney feels a cold, steely, skeletal hand around her throat, and a terrible voice whispers in her ear,

"that was a mistake, Courtney."

It is the voice of Death himself, and for the first time in her life, Courtney truly, deeply, feels fear.

The Board of Directors -- the Horsemen of the Apocalypse -- have finally escaped their prisons.

Courtney's punishment comes first. Sadistic and glorious, her body is ravaged slowly, first by a keening hunger as her body wastes away, then by a hideous disease which rots what little is left of her, while she remains fully conscious the entire time, screaming horribly inside what's left of her mind. Finally, the skeletal hand of Death hurls her against a wall, and the remnants of her body disintegrate upon impact, removing Courtney from this world after hundreds of years of life.

Now, we must attend to the destruction of the Messiah. How delicious that will be....

The avatar of Job screams in pain, and then disintegrates entirely in a burst of static and bright electricity.

"That's it!" Scotto shouts. "Let's get moving!" And he and the others rapidly make their way down out of the tower, toward the Vessel.

Moments after Job the Wonder Computer is shut down, Job the Wonder Computer is powered up. "That's it!" Tanner shouts. "Job, can you hear me?" "I... can... hear... you," comes the slow but already furiously intelligent Job the Wonder Computer, as it begins taking control of the Vessel. "Job, prepare for immediate liftoff!" Tanner says.

Melody and Laurel stand before the gathered army of evil, watch it cower before them. As long as the twins are here before them, they dare not approach the castle, and certainly not without their General.

The moment is ripe for escape. Until,

off in the distance,

comes the sound of Horsemen.

The rain begins to pour, then, and the lightning is an amazing shade of blue. The thunder is louder than they have ever heard it; it is as though reality itself is flying apart at the seams, and this is going to be the soundtrack.

The Horsemen are writ large across the dreamscape.

They cannot be real, and yet they are more real than the Messiah who waits to greet them.

"Laurel," Melody says, *"I love you."*

"Melody," Laurel replies, *"I love you too."*

The Vessel is almost entirely boarded; only the defenders at the walls remain behind, and they refuse to board until the threat has passed. Dawson signals for all but one of the giant golden doors to be shut.

Father Time stands in the last remaining doorway with Dawson, watching the approach of the Horsemen.

Scotto and Katie press their faces against a porthole, watching the approach of the Horsemen.

In the cockpit, Brother Love and Tanner and PowerSpike! can watch nothing else but the approach of the Horsemen.

Fear becomes impossible after a point. Too much surreality floods the scene, and all you can do is watch one moment follow the next, almost as though it doesn't matter to you, almost as though you aren't affected. Yet there you are, standing on the castle walls, as your fate is decided for you, just out of your reach; things you never thought you believed in are true and taking place in front of your eyes. As the Horsemen approach, in all their stereotypical splendor, you are no longer afraid of anything any longer. Nothing can move you from your point in space, nothing can ever erase the fact that you existed, once. No matter how impermanent you really are, your imprint is etched in time, uniquely yours, and you occupy

a space which no one else will occupy again. You are standing outside of time, as you watch the Horsemen approach. You are holding a weapon you'll never use. Whether you live or love again is irrelevant, now that War and Famine and Pestilence and Death have come to face the Messiah. You are living in a blessed time, where nothing can contain your imagination, or your Hope. You are standing in front of the Vessel which was built to rescue you, and you and your compatriots on the castle wall may as well be carved in stone, beatific works of art offered as gifts to the divine.

And as the Horsemen approach, you see the small, unimpressive figure of the Reverend Clive, striding out across the plains to meet them.

We will not describe to you the horrific sight of these Horsemen, as their appearance is constantly shifting, and shifts further to best terrify each individual who looks upon them. They are elusive, moving targets, and only their giant black steeds remain constant underneath them. And they are, of course, writ as large as Melody and Laurel, towering into the Dreamtime sky, where the rain and the lightning flash and dance about their heads.

And then, below them, comes Reverend Clive from Cedar Falls, Iowa.

"Actually," he says with a good ol' boy smile, "you can call me Satan."

The twins glance down on him with a bemused look. The Horsemen will be upon them momentarily; War's sword is held high, his grin is entirely vicious, and yet, before their arrival,

"There's time for a little small talk, right?" says Clive.

Graciously, the twins nod, their golden eyes gleaming.

"That's what I like about you, you're such a sweetheart," says Clive with a smile. "Listen, it's been a damn long time that I've been roving about this Earth of yours. A damn long time. I've seen the wonders of the world, and the tragedies of the world. I've taken the blame for every damn thing that's ever gone wrong down there, and I haven't complained one bit, because you see, I believe in paying for your mistakes, and I made a big one a long time ago. But -- so what, big deal, right? Screwing up is as human as it gets, right, and wasn't we made in their image? Wasn't that the whole point of this mess? I want you to know, my sisters, that I'm through with all that. Whatever I did to offend you, I apologize, I sincerely do. And believe me, I've tried to rectify my mistake, Lord knows I've tried (if you'll pardon the expression). I closed the doors to Hell almost

immediately, and took myself to Earth. I've been doing *your* work all this time, and I have to say, I love it. Can't get enough of good old-fashioned soul-saving, you see where I'm coming from? I believe in forgiveness. I believe in Hope, just the same as you. Think of what we coulda done if we'd never had our little spat. Think of it. Just think.

"The world you came to save is right over there, my sisters, inside that big golden space ship of yours. You're gonna take off into the stars with 'em, give 'em life they never dreamed of. Me, I'm gonna pick up the pieces of the Earth, start all over. Maybe someday when you're in the mood, you can come back and visit. I guarantee we aren't gonna have any such 'policy of nonintervention' any more, that's for sure. Time for a return to the old days, when the gods and demigods roamed the Earth just as freely as the people. And I want us to part on good terms, do you hear me? I want us to have our peace before you go. I want to know that you forgive me, that it doesn't matter any more. That's human too, isn't it, the need for absolution? I got all the human urges now, see, I know what it's like, and I can't get enough. I'm gonna share what I've learned, my sisters. I'm gonna raise every kind of tent and chapel you ever wanted to see. I'm gonna spread precious and wondrous healing across that planet. I'm gonna walk side by side with those people, make 'em my friends again. I'm gonna walk the walk this time, my sisters, I'm gonna make it as right as I can.

"So you just say the word, you hear? No one is as happy to see you again as I am, and no one need ever know we were enemies once. We're *here* now, and this is what here is asking, *begging* of us. What do you say?"

The Horsemen arrive with a vengeance. Glittering, vindictive, bizarre, they prepare to strike the Messiah where she stands. And then, Clive says,

"Oh, for heaven's sake, just hold your horses."

Moments later the tiny figure of Clive begins an awesome transformation. What was once a small, tired old man is suddenly a gargantuan, monstrous red Beast, with 666 on his forehead and bar codes on his wrists, horns upon his head and a swinging tail of fire and brimstone. He stands as tall as any of them, looming large above the dreamscape, and in a terrible, wicked voice, he says,

"Ain't you boys forgetting something?"

"Uh oh," says Death.

"I think we're in trouble," says War.

The Horsemen freeze in their spot, facing the One who must command them. The Adversary faces them coldly, measuring his displeasure with snorts and growls and a vicious look that could melt concrete. And then, he turns back to the Messiah and says,

"What do you say, my sisters?"

They are grinning now, a grin of absolute mercy and gentleness; and soon enough, the Adversary is grinning along with them, laughing a giant, booming laugh that is heard all the way to the castle.

"That's what I like to hear!" he shouts. "We're gonna get it right this time, you see? We're gonna do it up right!"

He turns to the quivering Horsemen, his singular charges, and begins working transformations upon them as well. When next they face the people of Earth, they will do so as brand new Archetypes for a brand new era. He takes War by the hand and yanks his senseless violence aside, calling him now by the name of Hamlet. He takes Pestilence by the hand, ripping off his mindless disease, and calls him now by the name of Nietzsche. He rips the hunger from Famine's belly and turns him into the jovial figure of Santa Claus. And Death -- out of respect for an old old friend of his long since buried, Death he renames Job. And these four -- Hamlet, Santa Claus, Nietzsche, and Job -- climb down from their horses and stand beside him as he prepares to shift them all back into reality.

"Safe journey, my sisters," the Adversary says to his newfound friends. "Whenever we say Hope again, we'll think of you."

The Adversary stands tall before the army of evil, assembled here ostensibly in his name. His new saints wade in among them, separating the unwary dreamers who were forced into service from the very Nightmares themselves. The rescued conscripts are sent to the castle, to board the Vessel; the remainder of the evil army finds itself smashed and scattered by the ones who first called them together, returned to the Nightmare provinces with a warning never to escape again. And when this work is finished,

the Adversary and his new saints vanish entirely from the Dreamtime.

By the time the twins finish their walk back to the castle, they are no longer standing tall above the dreamscape, and their eyes are no longer gleaming and golden. They are Melody and Laurel once again, the Archetype having fulfilled its function, the need for a Messiah like that no longer pressing, no longer desired. They are twins again, walking and talking together, laughing and singing together as they move; and the

defenders on the castle walls let out an enormous cheer, and word quickly spreads through the entirety of the Vessel that there will be a launch after all, and that the twins will be coming with them.

Dawson greets the twins at the doorway to the castle, embraces them both tightly, saying, "I had almost lost Hope that I would see you again," and leading them up to the hangar. Father Time still waits for them in the open doorway, as the castle defenders rapidly climb aboard the Vessel, as final preparations for takeoff are made.

"So this is the ship," Melody says, seeing it for the first time.

"This is it," Laurel replies proudly. "This is going to be our new Home for a while."

Melody smiles, says, "I can handle that. What's its name?"

Laurel pauses then, realizing that their Vessel, their Home away from home, has yet to be christened. As Father Time and Melody look on, Laurel says to Dawson, "A bottle of wine, please." He produces one almost instantly, a special trick that Dreamtime butlers have, and she takes it with a smile and walks slowly to the front of the ark. The three of them follow her quietly. And as they watch, she raises the bottle above her head and says,

"I christen thee

"the Second Coming,"

and promptly smashes the bottle against the bow.

There are approximately 144,000 passengers aboard the Second Coming when it finally takes off into outer space. Laurel is astonished as she climbs aboard by the sight of the ship's interior. It is a tremendous work of art, this ship, supremely futuristic and lit with warm golds and ambers. The passengers are each in their quarters, now, belted to chairs and beds, and Laurel and Melody make their way to the cockpit, where only Tanner awaits them. He will be the first ship's Pilot, he and the new Wonder Computer. Video screens in every room display the cockpit view of the outside, so that each passenger who wishes can see the departure in all of its amazing splendor.

And then, the awesome engines are primed and fired, and the ship slowly begins moving away from the castle, forward off the landing pad and with an almost sickening lurch, glancing off into the air. And then, they are miles above the land, sailing through the thunderstorm, bolts of lightning rippling across the surface of the ship, across the giant black mountains, past the ruins of Ityl-Atys where Helpless the Bunny wanders alone,

and suddenly, with an immense slow motion thud, the ship breaks free of the Dreamtime altogether,

and is sailing above the planet Earth.

They grip each other's hands and arms tightly, some of them crying, some of them frozen in a grim silence, all of them somehow hushed into a mournful silence at the sight which greets them. There are fires and explosions and terrible clouds of smoke all across the planet's surface. They see the skyscrapers collapsing, and the oceans swallowing the coastlines, they see the icecaps melting and the earthquakes ripping cities apart. They see the surviving aliens battling to the last, bringing each other down in an orgy of violence and suicidal despair. They see mountains crumbling, and missiles impacting here and there and everywhere. They do not see their home. They see the wreckage of a place they once knew, a place which they will never see again. They see the end of their world, see it as a crystalline snapshot from an impossible point of view. They see their past. They see the old times. And then,

they see the Sun, bright and large ahead of them, and then,
sailing past,

they see nothing but stars and open space.

They are the chosen ones.

They have survived.

As the Second Coming blasts off into outer space, the weary old figure of a shaman named Ramon watches them go, ruefully, a stinging sensation crowding his brow as he realizes that Melody left him behind. Not that he expected to go -- but an invitation would have been nice. He played his part, did he not? Was there ever a promise of anything more? When you do the work of healing, do you do it because you expect someone's thanks or because the work of healing is what you simply *must* do to survive? He played his part, all right. Played it well enough. She was the last he will ever heal, and that saddens him, but such sadness will not burden him long. The jungle is burning, and soon enough his solitary hut will be swallowed up by the flames, and he along with it. He played his part. His story is quite over.

Until, that is, a battered, beaten white transport materializes in the clearing in front of him, the words "The X-Treme" stenciled in bold red letters on the side. The hatch opens up, and there stands the Amazing Dr. X, a big grin on his face.

"Greetings, old man," he says.

"Well well well," Ramon replies, "I didn't expect to see you again."

"What, you thought we forgot about you? Pack your things, my friend." He smacks the side of his transport, says, "This ship may not be as pretty as theirs, but it ain't broken yet. We're going to catch up with them, if that's all right with you."

Oh yes, thinks Ramon, that will definitely be all right with me....

Father Time grimaces aboard the Second Coming. Something seems to be enveloping the poor old man. Scotto watches passively from across the room. This chamber is filled with people, staring out massive windows at the screaming wash of color that is following them, as they leave the solar system once and for all, pursued by waves of dreaming. Father Time feels the enormous rent in the fabric of spacetime as though he were experiencing a heart attack; the boundary between the waking world and the Dreamtime is at last, finally, collapsing. The Dreamtime is sweeping the Earth even now, confusing the poor aliens who still battle to the last. The Dreamtime is now, as Father Time predicted, becoming the primary state. This massive, beautiful hub, connecting millions and millions of dimensions, millions and millions of iterations, is now overwhelming what once was called "reality." Here in this place, there are no limits, no boundaries known as "minutes" or "hours" or "aeons." Here there is only imagination, here there is only breathtaking danger and astonishing feats of cruelty and bravery. Archetypes run wild in the Dreamtime, and the gods never died, only retreated to luscious gardens for a vacation. Now the Earth will be transformed, and the universe along with it; when next you hear the term "Big Bang," you will remember the first explosions and the last explosions and you'll know, down deep, what you've lost and what you've gained.

Father Time feels it like a heart attack, and he regrets, briefly, having never made his peace with anyone, not here, nor in any iteration. He grips his chest in a frantic attempt to hold himself together, but there is no need for time, not any longer. The moment he began his intervention, time was lost, and this he now knows. At least in *this* iteration, he *did* intervene. At least *this* time, he did not witness the horrors of the last iteration. They will soon cease to remember him altogether, will soon forget the pressures imposed by the relentless march of time. They will forget aging, and they will forget early and late and not enough time in a day. They will forget him, and his advice. The pain wracks him in a strange and wonderful way. He misses the past, misses what came before.

For the first time in his memory, he no longer faces the future, and the pain wracks him in a strange and wonderful way. And the present, the very present moment

tears him apart in a sudden fluid motion, and where once there sat the figure of an old, old man is suddenly a brilliant burst of dreaming, and then, suddenly,

nothingness.

Scotto watches passively from across the room, and calmly lights up a cigarette. It is time, he supposes, to begin considering a sequel....

And finally, deep below the surface of the hollow Earth, we visit the home of Adriana the sorceress for what will be the very last time. She is decked out in her finest traveling attire, and her suitcases are packed. No more sadness to spare, not for this place, not when the whole future lies ahead of her. She's going to turn in these duds for something more cosmic, thank you. Thinking she might like to try being a star next time around. Thinking she enjoyed this adventure, despite the sorrow, thinking she enjoyed the mayhem, despite all the pain. Thinking she wouldn't want to do it all over again, but she's certainly glad she did it. Thinking, thinking, thinking as humans do, in the little time remaining to her.

And then, promptly at midnight on the day the world has ended, the moment when the clocks finally stop once and for all and time no longer counts, the Mother Ship arrives.

It's a smallish affair, looking something like a submarine, and it floats into her cavern unannounced, silent, no bells and whistles, no ominous blasts of laser beams and bad karma, and sets down in front of her. She stares at it for a long, long moment, thankful that someone had the presence of mind to call her a cab to get her off this dying rock. She waits for the door to open, slightly intimidated at the thought of confronting *Him* again, but still -- she did all right, all things considered. And that "policy of nonintervention" had to be His idea of a practical joke, right?

"*Adriana*," a sweet sweet voice whispers in her ear.

"Right here," she says loudly, almost bursting into tears.

"*It's all right, Adriana*," the voice replies. "*I'm not upset*."

With a huge sigh of relief, she sobs, "That's good, because *I am*."

"*Come aboard, my child*," the voice tells her. "*You look like you could use a very long rest*."

Oh yes, she thinks, that sounds like it would hit the spot. And one moment she is standing on the cavern floor, and the next, she has left the Earth entirely. The Mother Ship sails off into space, gliding through the galaxies. And as Adriana collapses into a pile of amazing pillows, the last sound she hears is the sound of a

lullabye, and then there is only sleep.