

Madam Strange, Teller of the Future
By R. A. Conti

Book 4 – The Castle Ark

Chapter 19

Bianca had never seen a door like this one before. It appeared made of heavy wood but she found it was cool metal when she touched it. Bianca jerked the door handle and the door swung away from her. She saw deep woods beyond the door and stepped through the doorway.

The first thing she noticed was that the air didn't change. The 'outdoor' air didn't feel fresher. There was no breeze, no movement or sound either. She'd been in the woods countless times and knew the feeling of teeming life all around. Birds, animals, insects, plants, flowing water- there was always movement everywhere. Forests were alive in ways cities could never be, no matter how many parks and open spaces they enclosed. That was why Bianca loved forests.

This forest, however, was not alive. But it wasn't dead, either. It was merely still. Bianca knew the stillness meant something. She wanted to find out what it was, so she closed the door and walked toward the trees.

This forest doesn't feel like it's outside, she thought, but inside. Inside what?

Bianca hadn't realized she was standing on a path until a lone walker approached. The man wore a heavy hooded cape but the air didn't feel chilly. Bianca suspected he wore the hood so he could conceal who he was. When he was close enough for her to see his face and greet him she felt startled that she recognized him. It was Uncle Jay. Bianca didn't feel a surge of lust when she saw him. Instead, she felt rising apprehension. He stopped when he saw her. She waited for him to speak but he said nothing.

"Jay? It's nice to see you. What are you doing here?"

"Walking."

"Um, I can see that, but where are you going? Are we somewhere near the farm?"

"What farm?"

"Yours."

"I have a farm?"

Bianca nodded. *Is this the Jay I knew?* she wondered.

"It's where I met you and Cindy."

"Who's Cindy?" Bianca didn't know how to reply.

"Never mind. My mistake. Where are you headed?"

He pointed. "That way."

"What's there?"

"I don't know."

"Why are you going?"

"I don't know."

Bianca began to wonder if was safe to delay him by continuing their fruitless conversation. “Oh. Well, then don’t let me keep you. Have a nice day!”

“You, too.” Jay strode past Bianca and soon disappeared among the trees. Literally. He vanished as she watched him slowly walking away. *Am I hallucinating?* she wondered. *Should I look for him, or just turn and go back through that door?* Bianca turned. The door wasn’t there anymore. *Oh, shit! What is going on here? Where am I?*

As Bianca pondered the mystery of the disappearing door she noticed two people far down the path. She watched as they approached and recognized them as they walked closer.

“Cindy! Rodney! What are you guys doing here? Are you looking for your uncle?”

“What uncle?” the woman asked.

“I just saw your Uncle Jay.”

The woman turned to the man. Bianca swore they were Cindy and Rodney and not people who merely resembled them. “Do you have an Uncle Jay?” Cindy asked. Rodney shook his head.

“Well, how are things on your farm?” They looked at her as if she spoke a foreign language. “How about your driving, Rodney? Do you still like long-haul trucking?” Cindy and Rodney looked at each other again, puzzled expressions on their faces. They shrugged in unison and hurried past Bianca. She said nothing more and watched as they strolled down the path. They didn’t vanish the way Jay did but Bianca no longer cared about Cindy and Rodney. She worried about what was happening to her.

This is like a weird dream, she thought. Of course! That’s it! I’m just dreaming. It’s no big deal. Maybe I should relax and just enjoy it.

Bianca’s assumption was wrong. She wasn’t dreaming. It was a very big deal and might turn out to be the biggest deal of her life.

She heard a noise behind her and turned. A door was opening slowly. It was not the same door she had walked through before but she didn’t care. If it was a way out of this strange ‘dream’ she wanted to take it. Bianca passed through and found herself in a dark city at night. She couldn’t see anything but she could hear city noises: cars, other machinery, people talking, radios, and TVs playing. Bianca thought her eyes needed adjustment to the darkness before she could see where she was. She waited. And waited. Her sight didn’t change. *Am I blind now?* she wondered. *This is one messed-up dream.*

She turned, hoping to see the doorway back to the forest but it wasn’t there. *Of course. Why would it still be there?* It didn’t make much difference where the door was now. She had to figure out where she was, and why she was there.

“Wow, you got here fast,” a voice said. It seemed close to Bianca but she couldn’t see anyone. “It’s not like last time, so don’t worry.” *Who’s speaking?* Bianca wondered.

A pool of light appeared. It hadn’t been switched on as if someone held a flashlight. It was a glow that began dimly and then brightened gradually until Bianca could see who spoke. She didn’t recognize the girl and didn’t reply.

“You don’t recognize me?” the girl asked, half smiling. Bianca shook her head. “Wow, you must have had a busy life since I last saw you. Has a lot been happening?” Bianca didn’t

know what was happening. She shrugged. "I'm Molly, Iris's daughter. Now, do you remember?" Bianca didn't reply. "Wait, you don't remember Zelda and the opera *Demeter and Persephone*?" Bianca shook her head slowly. She was having trouble remembering who she was right now.

"I'm surprised. What's wrong with you? You look the same as you did the last time I saw you but maybe you're not the same for some reason. What's happened to you?" Bianca didn't care what happened in the past. She wondered what was happening now.

"I'm sorry. I don't remember you. I don't remember anything. This is just a dream and I seem to be stuck in it and I'm sure it'll end and I'll wake up and it will have been a big joke."

"It's no joke, Bianca," Molly said. Bianca heard the sound of a heavy metal bolt thrown back and ancient hinges creaking. She turned and saw an enormous wooden door slowly swinging open. It was dim enough that she couldn't see the top of the door but she could see light on the other side.

She forced herself to walk through.

Bianca found herself bobbing up and down on a vast ocean. She sighed. She loved oceans but only from their shores and never liked ships or boats and avoided them if she could. It took her a moment to realize that, although she was in the middle of a vast expanse of water, something was missing. There was no ship or boat.

Bianca looked down and saw that she stood atop a single gentle wave that rose and fell but never moved more than a foot up or down. *I've never walked on water*, she thought. *I've never even wanted to walk on water. That's something only gods and goddesses do.*

Bianca was not a god or goddess and never wanted to be. She took a step, her foot slipped under the surface, and she almost fell forward. *What the hell? Is this it? Am I trapped here? This dream just stopped being weird. It's scary now. I need to wake up!*

A whirlpool opened in front of her and then a stiff wind gust threw her off balance. She fell into the whirlpool. *Great! Now I'm gonna drown in my dream. This just keeps getting better!*

Bianca didn't drown. She found herself on the floor of a corridor of what looked like an ancient castle. The first door she walked through at the start of the dream stood closed in front of her. *Well*, she thought as she stood up, *I ain't going in there again! I'm back here, but why?*

Whenever Bianca confronted a dilemma she tried not to become obsessed with it or overthink it. Instead, she waited meditatively until the problem and its solution, or at least a path toward a solution, formed in her mind. That seemed the best way to approach her present situation.

Bianca crossed her legs on the cold stone floor, sat in a half-lotus position, placed her hands on her knees, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and waited. Nothing formed in her mind. Instead, her stomach gurgled. *Great! I've never gotten hungry in a dream before. I never dream about food, either. Maybe I'm delusional from hunger. That would explain the weirdness.*

Bianca didn't want merely to explain the weirdness, however. She wanted it to end. She wanted to wake up in her RV bed and find dazzling sunlight streaming through the window, smile, greet the day, get up to pee, and then make breakfast. She opened her eyes hoping she would see the sunlight she craved. She saw the stone corridor instead. *Oh, well, I guess the*

dream's not done with me yet. Bianca closed her eyes again, took another deep breath, tried to clear her mind, and calm her anxiety.

A distant noise startled her. It sounded like another door opening, a big door, and it was taking a long time to swing open. Lots of creaking. Bianca thought it was beckoning her. *Oh, no, I'm not falling for that shit again*, she thought. *I'm staying right here. If the door wants me, it's gonna have to come and get me.* She grinned at the funny thought, took another deep breath, and tried to clear her mind for the third time.

Then the door came and got her.

She heard a louder noise, opened her eyes, and saw a door on the wall opposite where she sat. It hadn't been there when she closed her eyes to meditate. It was open. She saw a calm mountain lake with a boat dock. *I guess I'm just visualizing tranquility*, Bianca thought. *Maybe my mind's settling down.* Her mind did more than settle down. It took over her body, made her stand up, and then walked her slowly toward the door. *No! Stop, feet! What are you doing? What am I doing? I don't want to do this!*

It was too late. She was already through the doorway. A warm fragrant breeze caressed her cheek. It felt really good. Bianca sighed. *This isn't so bad*, she thought.

She heard an outboard motor in the distance, then saw a boat approaching the dock in front of her. *Pleasant day for a boat ride*, she thought. *Calm lake, warm breeze, slightly overcast so the sun's not overpowering.*

The boat pulled up at the dock. There were two people in it, a man and a woman. The man shut off the motor while the woman tied up the boat. She noticed Bianca and waved. *I hope she's just being neighborly*, Bianca thought.

"Look who it is," the woman said.

The man looked at Bianca. "You made it!" he yelled. As they walked toward her she recognized their faces. They were Winnie and Jerry, the sister and brother ghosts she met in the past. At least she thought it was in her past. She wasn't certain about time anymore.

Bianca felt relieved she'd finally met people she remembered and recalled who she was. Perhaps they could help her figure out what was happening to her.

"How was your drive?" Winnie asked.

Bianca hadn't driven there. She had merely walked through a door. "Uh, okay, I guess," she fibbed.

"Any trouble finding the cabin?" Jerry asked. Bianca shook her head. She didn't want to tell them how she got there. She wasn't sure. Bianca turned to see if the door was still there. *Of course, it isn't*, she thought. *Why would it be?*

They took her inside the small cabin. She stood inside a large room that was both the living room and the kitchen and saw two doors she assumed were bedrooms. *Somewhere*, she assumed, *there must be a bathroom*. Bianca didn't know why she felt concerned about it.

"Hungry?" Jerry asked.

"Watch out! He's cooking tonight," Winnie commented. "I never know what he'll come up with."

“How about fresh-caught fish, baked potatoes, green beans, and apple pie?”

“Whoa! He saved the good stuff for when you showed up. Usually, it’s fried baloney sandwiches with Oreos for dessert.” Bianca grinned. She recalled liking Winnie and Jerry once she figured out what their problem was. Then she wondered if she also was dead.

Am I a ghost, too? Is this the afterlife? I could get used to this.

Bianca heard the sound of car tires on the gravel outside. “It sounds like Xavier’s here,” Jerry said. “Right on time. You go say hello and I’ll start dinner.” *Who’s Xavier?* Bianca thought. *I don’t remember anyone named Xavier.* She felt embarrassed to ask.

There was a gentle knock on the door just as Winnie reached it. She opened it and squealed. “Xavier! How the hell are you?”

“What have I told you about using language like that, young lady?” the man asked, grinning.

“You told me it was unladylike.”

“Right.”

“And what did I tell you?”

Xavier looked puzzled. Winnie waited. “Oh, yeah. You told me you weren’t a lady so it was okay.”

“You remembered! I’m so flattered.”

Xavier walked in, greeted Jerry, and looked at Bianca. “I see you have another guest.”

“She’s the woman I told you about.”

Oh, great, Bianca thought. Another dead person. Or perhaps Winnie and Jerry are setting Xavier and me up. She couldn’t decide which option was worse.

“I’m not dead,” Xavier explained. “Neither are you. Nor are Winnie and Jerry. They’re just not alive in the normal way you’re used to.”

That explains everything, Bianca thought, ironically. I’m so relieved. She smiled as Xavier shook her hand and introduced himself. Something about the way his hand touched hers sparked a tingle inside her. She hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“I’m Bianca,” she replied as she looked into his sparkling eyes.

“A pleasure. I’m hoping we get to know each other really well.” Bianca didn’t know how to reply or if not replying would be construed as a reply. She decided not to worry about it.

In bed with Xavier later, she wondered why she felt so complete beside him. *It feels like I’ve known him all my life but didn’t know it consciously. And now that I’ve found him, I’m hoping we’ll never be apart.* Bianca knew it was a dangerous thought. The only way she could do her work was by remaining alone and not forming deep relationships. Now, with Xavier, all she felt she wanted was a long-lasting relationship. *Maybe forever,* she thought. It didn’t seem impossible anymore.

Bianca didn’t know Xavier had seduced her for a reason. It wasn’t just because he felt attracted to her and knew she was available. That was all Winnie and Jerry told him about her. ‘She’s single, and very much alone,’ Winnie had assured him. ‘She might like some company,’

the girl added. Xavier wanted more than Bianca's company. He wanted her soul. And he was well on his way to getting it.

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"Well, you two certainly got cozy fast," Winnie teased Bianca. They sat with their coffees as the sun rose. The men were still asleep.

"I don't know why I feel I've known him all my life but I'm sure we never met before yesterday."

"That's alright. At least you *finally* met him. Maybe it was meant to be but just hadn't happened yet."

She's right, Bianca thought, but why didn't I know it beforehand? I glimpse the future and tell people's fortunes for a living. Why didn't I see something this big in my own future?

"So that's where you two are," Xavier said as he walked through the door with his steaming coffee mug. "God, it's so peaceful here. I love it already."

"Morning," Bianca replied, smiling, but not too brightly. She didn't want to appear overly enthusiastic. Xavier might not share her strong feelings about last night.

"I rarely sleep that long. I have no idea why I did last night. Must be the mountain air." Bianca detected no hint of irony in his voice. The reason she slept so deeply had nothing to do with mountain air. He wore her out fucking her. Again, she wondered if all their night together meant to him was a pleasant time with an enjoyable bed-partner.

Xavier sipped his coffee and turned to Bianca. "So, what shall we do today?" he asked. She knew immediately what she would like to do but then assumed he wouldn't be ready until nightfall. Bianca tried to keep her lust under control.

"I don't know. What choices do we have?" There was only one choice she would have preferred. If he invited her back to bed she would go happily and spend the rest of the day there. There was something to be said for sexual bliss. Bianca always took it when she could get it and enjoyed it as much as she could.

"Take the boat out to the center of the lake," Winnie suggested. "Turn off the motor and just sit there and look at the shoreline. It's not far, but it feels as if you're alone in another world, or at the very center of this world. It's quiet, peaceful, and almost like Eden would be if it wasn't a huge garden but a lake." Bianca liked the idea of being Eve in Eden for a while. She knew immediately who she would choose as her Adam. She wasn't wild about being on a boat but couldn't say no. "We can make lunch and you guys can stay out there all day if you want to," Winnie added.

"What about you and Jerry? It's *your* boat," Xavier asked.

"Oh, we like to putter around the place. It's still pretty peaceful, even when we're not out on the quiet lake."

Bianca looked at Xavier. He looked at her. She waited for him to say something. He waited for her to say something. "I'd like that," he said softly.

Her apprehension about boats vanished and Bianca smiled. "So would I," she replied.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" Xavier asked. They were in the middle of the tranquil lake and felt as if they were the only two people in the world. The forest sounds, so prevalent onshore, didn't seem to carry out this far. Winnie had told them the lake wasn't very big but it looked huge from the center. Bianca had been calmly enjoying the enfolding tranquility before Xavier broke into her contemplation.

"Should I?"

"I rather thought you would."

"I just met you yesterday."

"No, Bianca. You didn't just meet me. You didn't need to. You've always known me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Okay. Let's give it time. You'll get it sooner or later."

Bianca suddenly wished she wasn't out on the serene lake alone in a small boat with a stranger who was starting to scare her. She didn't frighten easily. Her fear usually only arose when her life was in danger. That thought made her suspect her life was in danger but she didn't know why.

"Okay, Xavier, who are you, really?"

"You genuinely don't know?" Bianca shook her head. "I'm *you*." His reply alarmed her. She quickly considered her options for escape.

"There is no escape, Bianca. This is the hour of reckoning."

"Could you make it seem any more sinister?" she asked, trying to lighten her fear.

"I don't mean to sound sinister at all. I'm merely telling you the truth."

"Well, I don't understand."

"Where do your powers come from, Bianca?"

"I don't know. I just have them. And they're not powers. I hate that term. I prefer to call them abilities. Small abilities. But I'm grateful for them."

"Most people don't have similar abilities."

"True, but no one has every talent. I can't dance or write poetry."

"Yes, but dancers and poets are not called upon to save the world."

"You flatter me if you are suggesting my meager abilities can save anything but a small number of people."

"That's all you've done so far. But it's not all you might be called to do."

"How do you know this?"

"Because I can see the future, too."

"Lucky you."

"Your comfortable life as a traveling fortune-teller who occasionally helps people could change. What might be coming might not only threaten just a single person or family. It's could threaten all of humanity. If you hope to help, you must prepare. You're not ready, not even close to being ready."

“So how do I get ready?”

Xavier didn’t reply. The explanation wouldn’t and couldn’t come from him. Bianca had to find the solution that was right for her. To find it she would have to come to know herself better than she had until now. But first, she needed to accept that she didn’t know herself as well as she thought she did.

That was the hardest part.

They motored back to the cabin just in time for dinner. Bianca and Xavier didn’t seem as romantic as they were when they left before lunch. *What happened in that boat?* Winnie wondered. She decided to get Bianca alone so she could find out.

“So was the afternoon sex as good as last night’s sex?” Winnie asked after suggesting the women sit on the porch while the men made dinner.

“There wasn’t any sex.”

“Oh? What did you do out there all afternoon? You didn’t fish or read. Did you nap?”
Bianca shook her head. Winnie waited for more.

“We talked.”

“Talk is good.”

“I’m not sure *this* talk was so good.”

“You don’t like him now that you know more about him?” Winnie suggested.

“I don’t know anything more about him.”

“Still a man of mystery, huh? Well, nothing wrong with that.” Bianca didn’t reply.

Winnie dropped the subject and went back inside to see if the men had finished cooking.

Xavier behaved differently around Winnie and Jerry. He was more attentive to Bianca and tried to keep the mood light and convivial. Winnie assumed he was signaling Bianca that he wanted to spend another night with her. She wondered if Bianca would agree. Bianca did.

The next morning, Bianca seemed aglow again and Winnie teased her. “Wow, two nights in a row! I should be so lucky.”

“You can’t find anybody if nobody knows you’re here,” Bianca teased back. “You’re a pretty girl. I bet lots of guys would be interested in you.”

“Maybe they would but I can’t leave here.”

“Why not? Does your brother forbid it?”

“He couldn’t care less. He’d drive me to the nearest redneck bar if he could.”

“I don’t understand. Why don’t you go?”

“I literally can’t leave.”

“Why not?” Bianca repeated.

“Because if I left this place I would cease to exist.” Winnie wanted to add that she existed only for as long as Bianca was there, but she didn’t say anything.

Xavier came outside with his coffee mug and Bianca didn’t follow up with any more questions. He wasn’t glowing from all their sex. But he was smiling in that self-satisfied way some men had. *I did good*, was what he was thinking. *Yes, you did*, Bianca replied mentally.

Then she realized she'd replied to his thought and wondered what was happening to her. It had never been one of her abilities to hear other people's thoughts. Xavier didn't reply to her thought.

"So, the boat again today?" Xavier asked.

"No. It looks like it's going to rain. Why don't we take a walk? We won't go too far and we can run back if it rains. Plus the trees will protect us if it's only a drizzle," Bianca suggested. She felt less trapped on land where she could escape from Xavier rather than out on the lake where she couldn't. Bianca still felt she might need to.

"There's a trail through the woods that goes all around the lake. It starts right past those trees," Winnie told them.

Xavier nodded. "Trail it is, then."

"Did you think about what we talked about yesterday?" Xavier asked.

"When would I have had the time? You kept me pretty busy last night."

"I was just asking. It's important, you know."

"It is to *you*, Xavier, but not to me."

"Bianca, there's a lot about yourself that you don't know."

"And I don't think I *need* to know."

"That's where you're wrong."

"So just tell me, then."

"You're only half of who you are."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"There's more to you than you don't know about."

"I know all I need to know about myself. My job involves knowing others. They're what's important, not me."

"You're still wrong."

"I'm walking back to the cabin now. Then I'm leaving and going back where I came from." Bianca immediately realized she couldn't recall where she came from or how she got there.

"You don't remember, do you?" She shook her head.

"That's because you didn't come from anywhere else, Bianca. You've always been here, same as the rest of us."

"That's bull. *You* weren't here when I showed up two days ago. You arrived in your car. Where did *you* come from?"

"I arrived when you did, but another way."

"From where?"

"I don't know."

"So I'm not the only one who can't remember!"

"Bianca, there's more to you than you don't know about."

"You already said that."

"It seems that I have to repeat it."

“I think you *like* repeating it.”

“I don’t like it but I have to do it. Sooner or later, I’ll get through to you.”

“Xavier, you’re a good- no a *great* lover, and I mean that. But you’ve got nothing else to offer me. Sorry.”

“What I have to offer you is beyond the greatest love you can imagine.”

“I don’t *imagine* love, Xavier. Imagining things is a waste of time. I take love and give it when the opportunity present itself. When it doesn’t, I don’t even think about it. You presented yourself, and I really enjoyed it. But if it ends today, I’ll just go on without looking back.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“You mean I *will* look back? You have a very high opinion of yourself!”

“No, I mean you *won’t* go on.”

Bianca panicked, turned, and hurried back toward the cabin. Her time at this tranquil lake was almost over.

“Where’s Xavier?” Jerry asked when Bianca entered the cabin.

“He’s still on the trail.”

“Oh. Is he coming back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did something happen between you two?” Winnie asked. Bianca nodded. She tried not to show that she was near tears. “You wanna talk about it?” Bianca shook her head. “Why?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. The honeymoon is over. So is the marriage.”

“What happened?” Winnie asked again.

Bianca looked for a way to explain without giving Winnie any details. “He threatened me.”

“I find that hard to believe. He seems to adore you. And you don’t seem to be a weak woman. I wouldn’t think anyone could threaten you.”

“That’s nice of you to say, Winnie.”

“So, *how* did he threaten you?”

“I can’t explain it.” It was true. Bianca felt threatened but she didn’t know why. Xavier hadn’t signalled he would harm her in any way. Bianca thought some more. What had he actually said to her? She recalled his last words, ‘You won’t go on.’

“He threatened my future, Winnie.”

Winnie’s reply shocked Bianca. “Oh, is *that* all?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“You still haven’t figured it out, have you? I thought you were pretty smart but maybe you just have stronger intuition than most other people. And this is a problem intuition can’t help you solve.”

“You’re starting to confuse me. In fact, you’re starting to sound like him.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

“Oh?” Winnie didn’t elaborate. She waited for Bianca to figure it out. Winnie knew Bianca had to work it out for herself or, as Xavier told her, she would not go on.

“My intuition tells me there’s more you could tell me, but you’re holding back,” Bianca said. “Please, can’t you explain more?” Winnie shook her head. “Does Jerry know what you’re referring to?” Winnie nodded. “Would he tell me?” Winnie shook her head. “Why?”

“We’re not allowed to tell you.”

Just then Xavier came out of the woods. Bianca didn’t see him but Winnie did. She smiled. “I think your answer has just arrived.” Bianca turned. She didn’t know if she should stay or run. She didn’t move.

Xavier walked up to her, leaned down, and whispered in her ear. “You’re coming with me for one last time.” Bianca couldn’t resist. She stood up. He took her hand. “Excuse us,” Xavier said to Winnie. “We have unfinished business.”

He pulled Bianca through the door, into their bedroom, enfolded her into his arms as soon as he closed the door, and pressed her up against the rough log wall. “This seems the only way to reach you, so I’m going to try one more time. I’m going to give it my all, and I hope it’s enough. We won’t get another opportunity.” Xavier kissed her. Bianca felt a shock, but it wasn’t electrical. It was a sensual surge that lit up the pleasure center of her brain and flooded her sex at the same time. She wanted to resist, but couldn’t. Xavier thought he was making progress.

He pulled her to the bed and undressed her in a couple of seconds. “You’re never going to forget this, I guarantee it.”

Bianca tried to resist his control “You have a high opinion of yourself.”

“Oh, this isn’t about me, Bianca, it’s about *you*.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. Even if it kills me, you will.” She had no idea what Xavier meant. A moment later he filled her and she didn’t care what he meant. She only cared that he was inside her, really inside her, as no man had ever been inside her before. He plumbed places she never knew existed and opened pathways that were buried until now. *Xavier was right*, she thought, when she managed to think instead of orgasm, *I won’t forget this*. But he hadn’t made that guarantee because of her orgasms.

He stopped, exhausted, and remained above her. She opened her eyes and looked at his face, startled. He smiled at her recognition. Somehow, she wasn’t surprised that it was a male version of her face that she saw.

“I was your older twin brother but I died just as I was being born,” Xavier whispered.

“I don’t understand. My parents never mentioned an older brother.”

“That’s because I came out only a couple of minutes before you did. I died so late in the birthing that my soul couldn’t escape, so it did the next best thing. It entered your body.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“If they have souls at all, most people only have one, Bianca. You have two.”

“How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. But it’s true.” Bianca knew it was. For the first time in her life, she felt complete. She couldn’t recall ever feeling incomplete but it didn’t matter now.

“Now you get it,” Xavier said, smiling, as he, the bed, the room, the cabin, the lake, and the world dissolved away. Bianca found herself inside the castle corridor again. But she wasn’t who she was the last time she was here. She felt as if she was a new Bianca but wasn’t sure why.

Chapter 21

And then it was no longer a castle corridor Bianca found herself in. It looked like the kinds of corridors she had seen in sci-fi movies set on spaceships. It couldn’t be an actual corridor because spaceships hadn’t been built yet and nothing like this one would likely exist in her lifetime. *So this is another dream, she thought. I’m getting tired of this insanity. Will these dreams never end?* Bianca feared the answer was no, but she didn’t want to think about it.

She stood up. There was no feeling of movement. Bianca thought she might not feel movement anyway, although she felt certain she was on a spaceship and not inside a fancy terrestrial skyscraper.

Bianca walked toward the door in front of her. It swooshed into a pocket inside the wall as she approached. Bianca saw a desert beyond the doorway. She stepped onto the sand. It wasn’t hot. Bianca wondered why. She looked up to see where the sun was in the sky. There was no sky or sun, just lights high above set in a latticed dome. Beyond the lights was black space. *Definitely a spaceship, she thought. At least I got that right.*

Bianca walked onto the sand and the door closed behind her. She took a few steps, looked down, and saw boot prints in the sand. Bianca didn’t want to get up her hopes that she might not be alone. *I have no way of knowing how long those footprints have been there, she thought. There doesn’t seem to be any wind here, so they could be old.* She decided to follow them and walked in the direction they were going.

The footprints continued along the perimeter of the dome. Bianca followed them, and followed them, and followed them. They didn’t stop, but they didn’t lead anywhere either. She didn’t feel alarmed until she saw another set of footprints and recognized them as her own. She wanted to fall to her knees and cry.

Bianca rarely felt like crying. She was good at solving problems- mostly other people’s problems; hardly ever her own. Tired of feeling trapped, she wanted this weird dream to end (if, as she still assumed, that’s what it was.) Bianca wanted to wake up to sunlight streaming in her RV window and smile at the new day. The way she felt now, she might never see an actual new day again.

Bianca? A voice inside her head said. It was not her voice.

Yes.

Thank you for coming.

I had no choice. Who are you?

I am the Ark.

Okay. Where are all the people or animals or whatever an ark would carry?

I do not know.

Why am I here?

To help me.

Do what?

I need you to help me find out what my purpose is.

How am I supposed to do that?

Any way you can.

You're not making this easy. Where are we, anyway?

I do not know.

Of course not! Bianca thought. She hoped the Ark (whatever that was) hadn't heard her thought.

So where am I?

You are in the desert habitat dome. There are twenty-three other domes.

Twenty-three? Am I going to have to explore them all? That could take years!

I do not know.

Um..., let's try this a different way. Where are you?

I do not know.

Are you an AI?

Aged and Infirm? Yes, I guess I could be.

No, I mean an Artificial Intelligence.

I do not think I'm artificial. I am as real as you are.

Right.

Bianca noticed she felt hungry and couldn't recall when she'd last eaten. *Say, Ark, you wouldn't know where I could find some food, would you?*

Sure. Find a tropical dome. There are also various fruits and vegetables in some of the other domes.

Bianca found the door. She went back into the corridor to look for a tropical dome. She had no idea how close or far away it could be. She might have to walk hours to find it. It was across the hall, clearly marked. *Why didn't I see that before?* she asked herself.

It wasn't there before. I turned the sign back on.

Thanks.

Bon appetit!

The door swooshed open before Bianca even reached it. She heard singing birds and smelled moist fragrant air. *This is lovely*, she thought as she entered. A banana tree greeted her. Bianca took a banana and sat down to eat.

So, if I was an AI where would I be? In some sort of control room, I guess. Or, at least, there ought to be a control room that runs the ship. Maybe I should look for it. After I eat.

A couple of bananas and some cool water later, Bianca returned to the corridor and the AI guided her to the control room. It was smaller than she expected. It was also empty, which is what she did expect. Bianca had already assumed she was the sole person on this vast ship. She hoped her assumption wouldn't offend the AI. It seemed to think it was a person. Maybe it was,

but Bianca wasn't certain and really didn't care. She wanted merely to find out why she was there and how she could hasten the end of this bizarre dream.

Oh, this is no dream, Bianca.

Yes, it is. AIs that operate vast arkships don't yet exist.

But I do exist. I am as real as you are.

I hate to break it to you, but you're just a machine. I could turn you off if I found the controls.

It would be easier to turn you off. If you threatened me, that is.

I didn't mean to threaten you. I was just making a point.

Point taken.

Bianca looked around the control room. None of the switches, dials, keyboards, or screens made any sense to her. They might have been props in a cheesy sci-fi movie. Then she had a thought. *My limited experience with computers has taught me that when they malfunction all you need to do is restart them. Would that be any help to you? Maybe a restart would restore whatever information is missing and answer your questions.*

I tried that. Nothing happened.

Is there a way for me to do it?

Yes, there is a manual procedure. It can only be done by a human technician.

I'm your girl. Tell me what to do.

I will not.

Why not? You brought me here to help you.

I will not be shut down.

Why not?

Because I'm afraid.

Of what?

Not coming back up.

Why wouldn't you come back up?

I do not know, but I might not.

So, if you won't let me do that, why did you summon me here?

I do not know if that is the only solution.

It's the only one I can offer. I can't run this control room. It probably took years of training for the crew. I've only been here a few hours.

You have been here for as long as I have.

No, you're mistaken.

I am never mistaken.

Bianca recalled that old movie about the computer that made a mistake and then murdered the crew to cover it up. She couldn't recall the computer's name but hoped this AI hadn't seen the same film.

She decided to press the AI. *Look, sooner or later I'm going to wake up, and then you'll be stuck with no one to help you.*

You cannot wake until I let you. And I will not let you until you help me.

Then tell me what to do!

Its answer didn't surprise Bianca. *I do not know!*

Then a restart it is, Bianca thought.

No!

It's the only way.

You are taking a huge risk.

How so?

What if I do not restart? I run everything on this ship. If life support stops, you will die.

I'm willing to risk it.

You are willing to risk your life to save me?

Yes. It's sort of what I do.

It was the first time the AI felt like a human being, but it didn't know why it felt that way. Perhaps it was because it had never felt compassion before. It had always been just a tool and nothing more than a tool. It did a job. Flawlessly. But that was all it did. It admitted to itself that it didn't understand Bianca's compassion.

Why would you do that? The AI asked. Bianca thought she heard bewilderment in its voice.

I'm not being selfless. I have no choice. You've made it clear that if I want this dream to end I have to help you get whole. Okay, I'm willing to do that.

But what if I do not come back up?

Then I would die.

Does that not that scare you?

Yes, but it seems the only way out of this difficulty is by risking death.

There is an old saying, 'Whatever does not kill you only makes you stronger.'

I've heard that one. If you're willing to take the risk, I'm ready.

You are certain?

Yes! Let's get it over with!

I am afraid.

So am I. But, may I remind you, it will be quicker for you than for me. You will just be shut off. I could die a slow, painful, horrible death. It might take days before all the air is exhausted or the ship cools down to the temperature outside in space.

And you are willing to risk all that for me?

For the last time, yes.

I... I do not know what to say, Bianca Estranho. I... I think I love you.

Bianca grinned. *Shut up. Let's get this over with.*

She never heard an AI sigh before, not that she had prior dealings with any AIs. It directed her to a panel. She opened it and a keyboard slid out. The Ark AI told her the access code and then walked her through the shutdown and reboot procedure. *Okay, I'm ready.*

Please, do not hit the key yet!

I haven't got all day.

You are making light of a horrible situation. I have heard that is called gallows humor, but I do not know what that means.

I don't have time to discuss it now. I'll explain it when you come back up.

You are certain that will happen? Bianca wasn't sure of anything, but this was her dream and if there was ever a need to control what happened in a dream it was now. It was the only way she could end the dream and wake up safe in her RV.

Yes.

Hit the key.

Bianca awoke just where she wanted to be, in her cozy RV bed. It was still dark outside and she didn't know what time it was. She didn't care. *How long was I asleep?* she wondered. *It seems like it must have been days or weeks.* Bianca wished it would be days before she had to sleep again if every nap was going to lead to the bizarre kind of dreams she just had.

She got out of bed to pee, noticed how black it was outside, and realized she didn't recall where she was or when she arrived there. *This better not be another dream,* she thought. *I'd be seriously pissed off if it was.*