

# WONDER CITY STORIES

## VOLUME 4: WHOSE DREAMS COME TRUE

BY JUDE MCCLAUGHLIN

EPISODE #13

A Man Does What He Can;  
A Woman Does What a Man Cannot

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# A Man Does What He Can; A Woman Does What a Man Cannot

"Guys," Nereid said into the general hubbub of the Young Cosmics meeting room. The loud conversations—particularly from Mercury holding court—continued unabated. "Guys?" she said again.

Sophie looked over at her and raised her eyebrows. Mercury was playing his boyfriends Gemini and Deflector off against each other in some sort of flex-off. Gemini had just done his power trick, making his two muscular brown arms into four, and Deflector was peeling his shirt off to reveal his pale but muscular chest. Vector was egging them on, to the annoyance of her girlfriend Meridian, who had not just turned away, but turned her entire wheelchair toward a conversation with Tin Lizzie, giving the gayboy display the cut direct. Wildstar, their featureless mask off for a change, revealing their androgynous tan face and short black hair, was chatting with Citizen Pain. Pay was giving Nereid side glances of attentiveness, but was also trying to be polite to Wildstar, their newest member. Wire was leaning back in her chair, arms crossed, one foot braced against the edge of the table, scowling at her boot, with her blue forelock drifting distractingly across her face.

Irritation bloomed and spread inside Nereid, making her feel like her skin was stretched taut with fury. *Why did they elect me commander if they had no goddamn intention of paying attention to me?* She fumed in silence for a few more moments, until Deflector was reaching for his belt, apparently to drop trou, and the anger exploded into her vision. She came to her feet, slammed both hands on the tabletop, and bellowed, "This meeting of the Young Cosmics will come to *order*."

There was instant, shocked silence, and they all stared at her, wide-eyed. Well, except for Sophie, who smiled to herself in her usual mysterious way.

"Thank you," Nereid said in more normal tones. Well, more normal for her new voice. After a moment during which the muscleheads sat down, chastened, and Meridian

turned her wheelchair to face the table, Nereid sat down. "Brainchild and I have some rather disturbing news." She gestured to Sophie.

"Evidence suggests," Sophie said, "that Wonder City may be experiencing sporadic timeline alteration."

There was a tightening of the group's focus on the conversation, and frowns on several faces. They were nearly all spandex spawn: they'd all grown up with stories of the Great Gulf and its associated timeline rewriting. Deflector put his shirt back on.

"I've found several reports on social media of people in Wonder City who suddenly woke up with birdlike attributes a couple days ago," Sophie said, flipping on her heavily-"customized" StarLeaf and projecting images on the screen. A number of alarmed posts in several different social media formats scrolled by, people saying that they had wings, feathers, and/or claws that they hadn't had before. "These reports were followed up by confusion that *other* people remembered them *always* having had these attributes."

Meridian raised her hand and asked, "Is it typical for people affected by timeline rewrites to remember their old timeline?"

"Excellent point," Sophie said. "I consulted the literature and found that if the timeline reworking is accidental or unfocused—untrained, perhaps—then the target may remember their original timeline. That remembering may splash over to others who are physically close to the target. This has even been recorded as occurring when the apparent target is collateral damage to an actual target—when an unfocused alteration splashes its effects around at random."

Meridian's face contracted in a scowl, and she ran her gloved hands through her short purple-iridescent curls. "So these people who have wings now," she said slowly, "may not even have been the target?"

"How do we find out who the original target *was* then?" Tin Lizzie said, half to Meridian and half to Sophie. "I mean, it's not like we're going to spot a neon sign anywhere."

"Another excellent point," Sophie said, switching the projection to another set of posts. "I've also found a number of instances of individuals changing biological sex in the city."

"What?" Mercury said, looking appalled. "What the fuck, man? Who's got the sex-change ray?"

"No one," Sophie said, giving him a bored look. "As I was explaining, these cases have the same pattern as the bird attributes: other people remember these subjects as being the sex they now present."

"That would fuck me up, man," Deflector said, scratching his crotch idly under the table.

"You probably wouldn't even remember if you used to be a girl," Gemini said archly. "Remembering requires brains."

"*Enough* already," Nereid snarled, and again, most of the group gave her a surprised look. "The key thing here is that this has affected our team already."

There was silence as everyone looked around the room at everyone else. Wire's gaze came up from her boot and settled on Nereid intensely.

"Who?" Pay said softly, though he looked like he knew the answer already.

"I went to bed the other night," Nereid said slowly and carefully, surreptitiously pressing her thumbnail into the center of her other hand to keep herself from crying under the surfeit of attention, as well as the weird shame and embarrassment the whole thing had been causing her, "as a woman named Pacifica Starr, going by the spandex name Nereid. And woke up Pacific Starr, aka Proteus."

The silence erupted into immediate and vehement denials and exclamations of disbelief. Nereid swallowed and continued to look around the room with as much assumed calm as she could muster. Declarations of her needing the team psychiatrist followed close on the trail of the initial denials. *Fake it till you make it*, she reminded herself. *Though why are some of them so invested in my biological sex?*

Mercury got particularly strident. "Pace, you're the manliest dude here! Someone's been fucking with your *head*."

Nereid looked at him and a lightbulb went off. *Oh, poor boy, you're really into Pace, aren't you? Well, hell, to be fair, I'd be into Pace if I weren't Pace right now. God, I really hope Pace wasn't stupid enough to sleep with you.*

"I mean, come *on*," Mercury said, and as if in answer to her thoughts, went on to excess TMI: "I don't fuck women. Or dudes who think they're women."

*Nope, Pace was as stupid as I am, and as attracted to someone else's attraction.* Nereid shot what she hoped was an opaque look at Sophie. Sophie's right eyebrow twitched slightly higher. Nereid let Gemini go off on a tangent of how gay Mercury was, distracted by wondering what happened when Pace went to rescue Sophie in the Far Green Land. *Did Tam Lane rape Pace too? But Tam needed the pregnancy story to get out of Faerie, right? How the hell did that work?*

Just as she was deciding to say something into the tumult, Wire said, cutting across what remained of the arguments, "I remember you as a woman."

Nereid shot her a grateful look.

Sophie added, "Me too." She gestured. "Physical proximity. Wire's apartment is next to ours."

"Mine's on the other side of yours, though," Vector said. "And I remember you as Pace."

"Were you in your apartment three nights ago?" Nereid said, leaning her chin on her hand, and watched Vector's face. *That panicked look is telling me that this is going to turn into a very messy breakup that's been in the offing for a while.* She repressed a sigh.

Meridian looked over at Vector with raised eyebrows. Vector looked away. Meridian's jaw set and she raised her chin in the universal *There's going to be hell to pay* expression. Unlike the gayboys, though, she chose not to interrupt the meeting, and turned her attention back to the team commander. Nereid gave her a nod and a look of sympathy before saying, to the group, "Anyway, I needed to tell you about this change, not least to let you know why I might be slow to answer to 'Pace' or 'Proteus.' Is there any other business we need to deal with today?"

There was a general negative murmur, and Nereid said, "Right, then, meeting dismissed."

People rose and milled and wandered out. Mercury stage-whispered, "He's gotta see a shrink, man," to Deflector and Gemini as they slid out the door.

Sophie, Pay, and Wire lingered behind as the door shut behind Meridian, who had watched her girlfriend flee with the gayboys and then furiously wheeled out behind Tin Lizzie.

"Are you all right?" Wire said with unusual concern.

Nereid sat down and leaned her head back. The six white stars in the dark blue Young Cosmics logo on the ceiling had smudgy fingerprints in them from the boys jumping to see who could touch the ceiling. There was also a pencil stuck up there for some reason. "I guess," Nereid said after a moment. "Though that was more exhausting than I expected." She lifted her head and looked at Pay. "Please tell me Mercury was pulling my leg about having slept with Pace."

"I am sorry to tell you he was not," Pay said, his crystal blue eyes full of sincerity. "Indeed, I questioned your... Pace's... wisdom at the time."

"Well, I have managed to make some questionable decisions as a woman," Nereid said, with a small smile at Wire, "so I suppose I'm not actually surprised."

"Would you prefer that I address you as Pacifica now?" Pay said.

Nereid blinked at him, then smiled. "I suppose I would, actually. It would be... easier."

"Of course, Pacifica," he said, and she guessed he'd just edited his internal database and would probably not make any mistakes.

Wire said, "How are you coping with the body?" with a critical glance up and down Nereid.

Nereid shrugged. "I hate it? Nothing works right, nothing feels right. I'm trying hard to get used to it. I won't let the team down in a fight, if that's what you're worried about. Water form feels like water form, at least."

"I'm only worried about *you*," Wire said impatiently.

Nereid met her gaze and thought, *I wonder if there've been other timeline rewrites? Because this is the first time Wire has ever been worried about me.* Aloud, she said, "Thank you." She rubbed her forehead. "I'm heading back to the apartment for some ibuprofen, because I can't think through this headache. But thank you guys for having my back."

"Of course," Pay said, and, "Sure," Wire said, and, "Natch," Sophie said, all standing as she stood. She glanced at Sophie, read in her expression that she was going to stay and talk to Pay and Wire, gave everyone what she hoped was a jaunty salute, and left.

Back in the apartment, she drew a bath and lowered her too-big, bulky body into the hot water and tried very hard not to look at the parts of herself that were shockingly wrong. She leaned her head back against the tile and stared at the ceiling. She expected to weep, but that didn't happen. Was it just that she'd cried herself out in the previous few days, or that she was getting into this stupid gender role? She let herself dissolve into water and tried to stop thinking too much, especially about what it might have been like to sleep with Mercury.