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CHAPTER
INSIDE

THE HOST

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the twilight saga

The Host

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PROLOGUE

Inserted

The Healer's name was Fords Deep Waters.

Because he was a soul, by nature he was all things good: compassionate, patient, honest, virtuous, and full of love. Anxiety was an unusual emotion for Fords Deep Waters.

Irritation was even rarer. However, because Fords Deep Waters lived inside a human body, irritation was sometimes inescapable.

As the whispers of the Healing students buzzed in the far corner of the operating room, his lips pressed together into a tight line. The expression felt out of place on a mouth more often given to smiling.

Darren, his regular assistant, saw the grimace and patted his shoulder.

"They're just curious, Fords," he said quietly.

"An insertion is hardly an interesting or challenging procedure. Any soul on the street could perform it in an emergency. There's nothing for them to learn by observing today." Fords was surprised to hear the sharp edge marring his normally soothing voice.

"They've never seen a grown human before," Darren said.

Fords raised one eyebrow. "Are they blind to each other's faces? Do they not have mirrors?"

"You know what I mean—a wild human. Still soulless. One of the insurgents."

Fords looked at the girl's unconscious body, laid out facedown on the operating table. Pity swelled in his heart as he remembered the condition her poor, broken body had been in when the Seekers had brought her to the Healing facility. Such pain she'd endured....

Of course she was perfect now—completely healed. Fords had seen to that.

"She looks the same as any of us," Fords murmured to Darren. "We all have human faces. And when she wakes up, she will be one of us, too."

"It's just exciting for them, that's all."

"The soul we implant today deserves more respect than to have her host body gawked at this way. She'll already have far too much to deal with as she acclimates. It's not fair to put her through this." By this, he did not mean the gawking. Fords heard the sharp edge return to his voice.

Darren patted him again. "It will be fine. The Seeker needs information and —"

At the word Seeker, Fords gave Darren a look that could only be described as a glare. Darren blinked in shock.

"I'm sorry," Fords apologized at once. "I didn't mean to react so negatively. It's just that I fear for this soul."

His eyes moved to the cryotank on its stand beside the table. The light was a steady, dull red, indicating that it was occupied and in hibernation mode.

"This soul was specially picked for the assignment," Darren said soothingly. "She is exceptional among our kind—braver than most. Her lives speak for themselves. I think she would volunteer, if it were possible to ask her."

"Who among us would not volunteer if asked to do something for the greater good? But is that really the case here? Is the greater good served by this? The question is not her willingness, but what it is right to ask any soul to bear."

The Healing students were discussing the hibernating soul as well. Fords could hear the whispers clearly; their voices were rising now, getting louder with their excitement.

"She's lived on six planets."

"I heard seven."

"I heard she's never lived two terms as the same host species."

"Is that possible?"

“She’s been almost everything. A Flower, a Bear, a Spider -“

“A See Weed, a Bat -“

“Even a Dragon!”

“I don’t believe it-not seven planets.”

“At least seven. She started on the Origin.”

“Really? The Origin?”

“Quiet, please!” Fords interrupted. “If you cannot observe professionally and silently, then I will have to ask you to remove yourselves.”

Abashed, the six students fell silent and edged away from one another.

“Let’s get on with this, Darren.”

Everything was prepared. The appropriate medicines were laid out beside the human girl. Her long dark hair was secured beneath a surgical cap, exposing her slender neck. Deeply sedated, she breathed slowly in and out. Her sun-browned skin had barely a mark to show for her... accident.

“Begin thaw sequence now, please, Darren.”

The gray-haired assistant was already waiting beside the cryotank, his hand resting on the dial. He flipped the safety back and spun down on the dial. The red light atop the small gray cylinder began to pulse, flashing faster as the seconds passed, changing color.

Fords concentrated on the unconscious body; he edged the scalpel through the skin at the base of the subject’s skull with small, precise movements, and then sprayed on the medication that stilled the excess flow of blood before he widened the fissure. Fords delved delicately beneath the neck muscles, careful not to injure them, exposing the pale bones at the top of the spinal column.

“The soul is ready, Fords,” Darren informed him.

“So am I. Bring her.”

Fords felt Darren at his elbow and knew without looking that his assistant would be prepared, his hand stretched out and waiting; they had worked together for many years now. Fords held the gap open.

“Send her home,” he whispered.

Darren’s hand moved into view, the silver gleam of an awaking soul in his cupped palm.

Fords never saw an exposed soul without being struck by the beauty of it.

The soul shone in the brilliant lights of the operating room, brighter than the reflective silver instrument in his hand. Like a living ribbon, she twisted and rippled, stretching, happy to be free of the cryotank. Her thin, feathery attachments, nearly a thousand of them, billowed softly like pale silver hair. Though they were all lovely, this one seemed particularly graceful to Fords Deep Waters.

He was not alone in his reaction. He heard Darren’s soft sigh, heard the admiring murmurs of the students.

Gently, Darren placed the small glistening creature inside the opening Fords had made in the human’s neck. The soul slid smoothly into the offered space, weaving herself into the alien anatomy. Fords admired the skill with which she possessed her new home. Her attachments wound tightly into place around the nerve centers, some elongating and reaching deeper to where he couldn’t see, under and up into the brain, the optic nerves, the ear canals. She was very quick, very firm in her movements. Soon, only one small segment of her glistening body was visible.

“Well done,” he whispered to her, knowing that she could not hear him. The human girl was the one with ears, and she still slept soundly.

It was a routine matter to finish the job. He cleaned and healed the wound, applied the salve that sealed the incision closed behind the soul, and then brushed the scar-softening powder across the line left on her neck.

“Perfect, as usual,” said the assistant, who, for some reason unfathomable to Fords, had never made a change from his human host’s name, Darren.

Fords sighed. “I regret this day’s work.”

“You’re only doing your duty as a Healer.”

“This is the rare occasion when Healing creates an injury.”

Darren began to clean up the workstation. He didn’t seem to know how to answer. Fords was filling his Calling. That was enough for Darren.

But not enough for Fords Deep Waters, who was a true Healer to the core of his being. He gazed anxiously at the human female’s body, peaceful in slumber, knowing that this peace would be shattered as soon as she awoke. All the horror of this young woman’s end would be borne by the innocent soul he’d just placed inside her.

As he leaned over the human and whispered in her ear, Fords wished fervently that the soul inside could hear him now.

“Good luck, little wanderer, good luck. How I wish you didn’t need it.”

The Host

CHAPTER 1

Remembered

Iknew it would begin with the end, and the end would look like death to these eyes. I had been warned.

Not these eyes. My eyes. Mine. This was me now.

The language I found myself using was odd, but it made sense. Choppy, boxy, blind, and linear. Impossibly crippled in comparison to many I’d used, yet still it managed to find fluidity and expression. Sometimes beauty. My language now. My native tongue.

With the truest instinct of my kind, I’d bound myself securely into the body’s center of thought, twined myself inescapably into its every breath and reflex until it was no longer a separate entity. It was me.

Not the body, my body.

I felt the sedation wearing off and lucidity taking its place. I braced myself for the onslaught of the first memory, which would really be the last memory—the last moments this body had experienced, the memory of the end. I had been warned thoroughly of what would happen now. These human emotions would be stronger, more vital than the feelings of any other species I had been. I had tried to prepare myself.

The memory came. And, as I’d been warned, it was not something that could ever be prepared for.

It seared with sharp color and ringing sound. Cold on her skin, pain gripping her limbs, burning them. The taste was fiercely metallic in her mouth. And there was the new sense, the fifth sense I’d never had, that took the particles from the air and transformed them into strange messages and pleasures and warnings in her brain-scents. They were distracting, confusing to me, but not to her memory. The memory had no time for the novelties of smell. The memory was only fear.

Fear locked her in a vise, goading the blunt, clumsy limbs forward but hampering them at the same time. To flee, to run—it was all she could do.

I’ve failed.

The memory that was not mine was so frighteningly strong and clear that it sliced through my control—overwhelmed the detachment, the knowledge that this was just a memory and not me. Sucked into the hell that was the last minute of her life, I was she, and we were running.

It’s so dark. I can’t see. I can’t see the floor. I can’t see my hands stretched out in front of me. I run blind and try to hear the pursuit I can feel behind me, but the pulse is so loud behind my ears it drowns everything else out.

It’s cold. It shouldn’t matter now, but it hurts. I’m so cold.

The air in her nose was uncomfortable. Bad. A bad smell. For one second, that discomfort pulled me free of the memory. But it was only a second, and then I was dragged in again, and my eyes filled with horrified tears.

I’m lost, we’re lost. It’s over.

They’re right behind me now, loud and close. There are so many footsteps! I am alone. I’ve failed.

The Seekers are calling. The sound of their voices twists my stomach. I’m going to be sick.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” one lies, trying to calm me, to slow me. Her voice is disturbed by the effort of her breathing.

“Be careful!” another shouts in warning.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” one of them pleads. A deep voice, full of concern.

Concern!

Heat shot through my veins, and a violent hatred nearly choked me.

I had never felt such an emotion as this in all my lives. For another second, my revulsion pulled me away from the memory. A high, shrill keening pierced my ears and pulsed in my head. The sound scraped through my airways. There was a weak pain in my throat.

Screaming, my body explained. You’re screaming.

I froze in shock, and the sound broke off abruptly.

This was not a memory.

My body-she was thinking! Speaking to me!

But the memory was stronger, in that moment, than my astonishment.

“Please!” they cry. “There is danger ahead!”

The danger is behind! I scream back in my mind. But I see what they mean. A feeble stream of light, coming from who knows where, shines on the end of the hall. It is not the flat wall or the locked door, the dead end I feared and expected. It is a black hole.

An elevator shaft. Abandoned, empty, and condemned, like this building. Once a hiding place, now a tomb.

A surge of relief floods through me as I race forward. There is a way. No way to survive, but perhaps a way to win.

No, no, no! This thought was all mine, and I fought to pull myself away from her, but we were together. And we sprinted for the edge of death.

“Please!” The shouts are more desperate.

I feel like laughing when I know that I am fast enough. I imagine their hands clutching for me just inches behind my back. But I am as fast as I need to be. I don’t even pause at the end of the floor. The hole rises up to meet me midstride.

The emptiness swallows me. My legs flail, useless. My hands grip the air, claw through it, searching for anything solid. Cold blows past me like tornado winds.

I hear the thud before I feel it.... The wind is gone....

And then pain is everywhere.... Pain is everything.

Make it stop.

Not high enough, I whisper to myself through the pain.

When will the pain end? When... ?

The blackness swallowed up the agony, and I was weak with gratitude that the memory had come to this most final of conclusions. The blackness took all, and I was free. I took a breath to steady myself, as was this body’s habit. My body.

But then the color rushed back, the memory reared up and engulfed me again.

No! I panicked, fearing the cold and the pain and the very fear itself.

But this was not the same memory. This was a memory within a memory-a final memory, like a last gasp of air-yet, somehow, even stronger than the first.

The blackness took all but this: a face.

The face was as alien to me as the faceless serpentine tentacles of my last host body would be to this new body. I’d seen this kind of face in the images I had been given to prepare for this world. It was hard to tell them apart, to see the tiny variations in color and shape that were the only markers of the individual. So much the same, all of them. Noses centered in the middle of the sphere, eyes above and mouths below, ears around the sides. A collection of senses, all but touch, concentrated in one place. Skin over bones, hair growing on the crown and in strange furry lines above the eyes. Some had more fur lower down on the jaw; those were always males. The colors ranged through the brown scale from pale cream to a deep almost-black. Aside from that, how to know one from the other?

This face I would have known among millions.

This face was a hard rectangle, the shape of the bones strong under the skin. In color it was a light golden brown. The hair was just a few shades darker than the skin, except where flaxen streaks lightened it, and it covered only the head and the odd fur stripes above the eyes. The circular irises in the white eyeballs were darker than the hair but, like the hair, flecked with light. There were small lines around the eyes, and her memories told me the lines were from smiling and squinting into sunlight.

I knew nothing of what passed for beauty among these strangers, and yet I knew that this face was beautiful. I wanted to keep looking at it. As soon as I realized this, it disappeared.

Mine, spoke the alien thought that should not have existed.

Again, I was frozen, stunned. There should have been no one here but me. And yet this thought was so strong and so aware!

Impossible. How was she still here? This was me now.

Mine, I rebuked her, the power and authority that belonged to me alone flowing through the word.

Everything is mine.

So why am I talking back to her? I wondered as the voices interrupted my thoughts.

The Host

CHAPTER 2

Overheard

The voices were soft and close and, though I was only now aware of them, apparently in the middle of a murmured conversation.

“I’m afraid it’s too much for her,” one said. The voice was soft but deep, male. “Too much for anyone. Such violence!” The tone spoke of revulsion.

“She screamed only once,” said a higher, reedy, female voice, pointing this out with a hint of glee, as if she were winning an argument.

“I know,” the man admitted. “She is very strong. Others have had much more trauma, with much less cause.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, just as I told you.”

“Maybe you missed your Calling.” There was an edge to the man’s voice. Sarcasm, my memory named it. “Perhaps you were meant to be a Healer, like me.”

The woman made a sound of amusement. Laughter. “I doubt that. We Seekers prefer a different sort of diagnosis.”

My body knew this word, this title: Seeker. It sent a shudder of fear down my spine. A leftover reaction. Of course, I had no reason to fear Seekers.

“I sometimes wonder if the infection of humanity touches those in your profession,” the man mused, his voice still sour with annoyance. “Violence is part of your life choice. Does enough of your body’s native temperament linger to give you enjoyment of the horror?”

I was surprised at his accusation, at his tone. This discussion was almost like... an argument. Something my host was familiar with but that I’d never experienced.

The woman was defensive. “We do not choose violence. We face it when we must. And it’s a good thing for the rest of you that some of us are strong enough for the unpleasantness. Your peace would be shattered without our work.”

“Once upon a time. Your vocation will soon be obsolete, I think.”

“The error of that statement lies on the bed there.”

“One human girl, alone and unarmed! Yes, quite a threat to our peace.”

The woman breathed out heavily. A sigh. “But where did she come from? How did she appear in the middle of Chicago, a city long since civilized, hundreds of miles from any trace of rebel activity? Did she manage it alone?”

She listed the questions without seeming to seek an answer, as if she had already voiced them many times.

“That’s your problem, not mine,” the man said. “My job is to help this soul adapt herself to her new host without unnecessary pain or trauma. And you are here to interfere with my job.”

Still slowly surfacing, acclimating myself to this new world of senses, I understood only now that I was the subject of the conversation. I was the soul they spoke of. It was a new connotation to the word, a word that had meant many other things to my host. On every planet we took a different name. Soul. I suppose it was an apt description. The unseen force that guides the body.

“The answers to my questions matter as much as your responsibilities to the soul.”

“That’s debatable.”

There was the sound of movement, and her voice was suddenly a whisper. “When will she become responsive? The sedation must be about to wear off.”

“When she’s ready. Leave her be. She deserves to handle the situation however she finds most comfortable. Imagine the shock of her awakening—inside a rebel host injured to the point of death in the escape attempt! No one should have to endure such trauma in times of peace!” His voice rose with the increase of emotion.

“She is strong.” The woman’s tone was reassuring now. “See how well she did with the first memory, the worst memory. Whatever she expected, she handled this.”

Worst memory. Whatever she expected, she handed this.

"Why should she have to?" the man muttered, but he didn't seem to expect an answer.

The woman answered anyway. "If we're to get the information we need -"

"Need being your word. I would choose the term want."

"Then someone must take on the unpleasantness," she continued as if he had not interrupted. "And I think, from all I know of this one, she would accept the challenge if there had been any way to ask her. What do you call her?"

The man didn't speak for a long moment. The woman waited.

"Wanderer," he finally and unwillingly answered.

"Fitting," she said. "I don't have any official statistics, but she has to be one of the very few, if not the only one, who has wandered so far. Yes, Wanderer will suit her well until she chooses a new name for herself."

He said nothing.

"Of course, she may assume the host's name.... We found no matches on record for the fingerprints or retinal scan. I can't tell you what that name was."

"She won't take the human name," the man muttered.

Her response was conciliatory. "Everyone finds comfort their own way."

"This Wanderer will need more comfort than most, thanks to your style of Seeking."

There were sharp sounds-footsteps, staccato against a hard floor. When she spoke again, the woman's voice was across the room from the man.

"You would have reacted poorly to the early days of this occupation," she said.

"Perhaps you react poorly to peace."

The woman laughed, but the sound was false-there was no real amusement. My mind seemed well adapted to inferring the true meanings from tones and inflections.

"You do not have a clear perception of what my Calling entails. Long hours hunched over files and maps. Mostly desk work. Not very often the conflict or violence you seem to think it is."

"Ten days ago you were armed with killing weapons, running this body down."

"The exception, I assure you, not the rule. Do not forget, the weapons that disgust you are turned on our kind wherever we Seekers have not been vigilant enough. The humans kill us happily whenever they have the ability to do so. Those whose lives have been touched by the hostility see us as heroes."

"You speak as if a war were raging."

"To the remains of the human race, one is."

These words were strong in my ears. My body reacted to them; I felt my breathing speed, heard the sound of my heart pumping louder than was usual. Beside the bed I lay on, a machine registered the increases with a muted beeping. The Healer and the Seeker were too involved in their disagreement to notice.

"But one that even they must realize is long lost. They are outnumbered by what? A million to one? I imagine you would know."

"We estimate the odds are quite a bit higher in our favor," she admitted grudgingly.

The Healer appeared to be content to let his side of the disagreement rest with that information. It was quiet for a moment.

I used the empty time to evaluate my situation. Much was obvious.

I was in a Healing facility, recovering from an unusually traumatic insertion. I was sure the body that hosted me had been fully healed before it was given to me. A damaged host would have been disposed of.

I considered the conflicting opinions of the Healer and the Seeker. According to the information I had been given before making the choice to come here, the Healer had the right of it. Hostilities with the few remaining pockets of humans were all but over. The planet called Earth was as peaceful and serene as it looked from space, invitingly green and blue, wreathed in its harmless white vapors. As was the way of the soul, harmony was universal now.

The verbal dissension between the Healer and the Seeker was out of character. Strangely aggressive for our kind. It made me wonder. Could they be true, the whispered rumors that had undulated like waves through the thoughts of the... of the...

I was distracted, trying to find the name for my last host species. We'd had a name, I knew that. But, no longer connected to that host, I could not remember the word. We'd used much simpler language than this, a silent language of thought that connected us all into one great mind. A necessary convenience when one was rooted forever into the wet black soil.

I could describe that species in my new human language. We lived on the floor of the great ocean that

covered the entire surface of our world—a world that had a name, too, but that was also gone. We each had a hundred arms and on each arm a thousand eyes, so that, with our thoughts connected, not one sight in the vast waters went unseen. There was no need for sound, so there was no way to hear it. We tasted the waters, and, with our sight, that told us all we needed to know. We tasted the suns, so many leagues above the water, and turned their taste into the food we needed.

I could describe us, but I could not name us. I sighed for the lost knowledge, and then returned my ponderings to what I'd overheard.

Souls did not, as a rule, speak anything but the truth. Seekers, of course, had the requirements of their Calling, but between souls there was never reason for a lie. With my last species' language of thought, it would have been impossible to lie, even had we wanted to. However, anchored as we were, we told ourselves stories to alleviate the boredom. Storytelling was the most honored of all talents, for it benefited everyone.

Sometimes, fact mixed with fiction so thoroughly that, though no lies were told, it was hard to remember what was strictly true.

When we thought of the new planet—Earth, so dry, so varied, and filled with such violent, destructive denizens we could barely imagine them—our horror was sometimes overshadowed by our excitement. Stories spun themselves quickly around the thrilling new subject. The wars—wars! our kind having to fight!—were first reported accurately and then embellished and fictionalized. When the stories conflicted with the official information I sought out, I naturally believed the first reports.

But there were whispers of this: of human hosts so strong that the souls were forced to abandon them. Hosts whose minds could not be completely suppressed. Souls who took on the personality of the body, rather than the other way around. Stories. Wild rumors. Madness.

But that seemed almost to be the Healer's accusation....

I dismissed the thought. The more likely meaning of his censure was the distaste most of us felt for the Seeker's Calling. Who would choose a life of conflict and pursuit? Who would be attracted to the chore of tracking down unwilling hosts and capturing them? Who would have the stomach to face the violence of this particular species, the hostile humans who killed so easily, so thoughtlessly? Here, on this planet, the Seekers had become practically a... militia—my new brain supplied the term for the unfamiliar concept. Most believed that only the least civilized souls, the least evolved, the lesser among us, would be drawn to the path of Seeker.

Still, on Earth the Seekers had gained new status. Never before had an occupation gone so awry. Never before had it turned into a fierce and bloody battle. Never before had the lives of so many souls been sacrificed. The Seekers stood as a mighty shield, and the souls of this world were thrice-over indebted to them: for the safety they had carved out of the mayhem, for the risk of the final death that they faced willingly every day, and for the new bodies they continued to provide.

Now that the danger was virtually past, it appeared the gratitude was fading. And, for this Seeker at least, the change was not a pleasant one.

It was easy to imagine what her questions for me would be. Though the Healer was trying to buy me time to adjust to my new body, I knew I would do my best to help the Seeker. Good citizenship was quintessential to every soul.

So I took a deep breath to prepare myself. The monitor registered the movement. I knew I was stalling a bit. I hated to admit it, but I was afraid. To get the information the Seeker needed, I would have to explore the violent memories that had made me scream in horror. More than that, I was afraid of the voice I'd heard so loudly in my head. But she was silent now, as was right. She was just a memory, too.

I should not have been afraid. After all, I was called Wanderer now. And I'd earned the name.

With another deep breath, I delved into the memories that frightened me, faced them head-on with my teeth locked together.

I could skip past the end—it didn't overwhelm me now. In fast-forward, I ran through the dark again, wincing, trying not to feel. It was over quickly.

Once I was through that barrier, it wasn't hard to float through less-alarming things and places, skimming for the information I wanted. I saw how she'd come to this cold city, driving by night in a stolen car chosen for its nondescript appearance. She'd walked through the streets of Chicago in darkness, shivering beneath her coat.

She was doing her own seeking. There were others like her here, or so she hoped. One in particular. A friend... no, family. Not a sister... a cousin.

The words came slower and slower, and at first I did not understand why. Was this forgotten? Lost in the trauma of an almost death? Was I still sluggish from unconsciousness? I struggled to think clearly. This

sensation was unfamiliar. Was my body still sedated? I felt alert enough, but my mind labored unsuccessfully for the answers I wanted.

I tried another avenue of searching, hoping for clearer responses. What was her goal? She would find... Sharon-I fished out the name-and they would...

I hit a wall.

It was a blank, a nothing. I tried to circle around it, but I couldn't find the edges of the void. It was as if the information I sought had been erased.

As if this brain had been damaged.

Anger flashed through me, hot and wild. I gasped in surprise at the unexpected reaction. I'd heard of the emotional instability of these human bodies, but this was beyond my ability to anticipate. In eight full lives, I'd never had an emotion touch me with such force.

I felt the blood pulse through my neck, pounding behind my ears. My hands tightened into fists.

The machines beside me reported the acceleration of my heartbeats. There was a reaction in the room: the sharp tap of the Seeker's shoes approached me, mingled with a quieter shuffle that must have been the Healer.

"Welcome to Earth, Wanderer," the female voice said.

The Host

CHAPTER 3

Resisted

She won't recognize the new name," the Healer murmured.

A new sensation distracted me. Something pleasant, a change in the air as the Seeker stood at my side. A scent, I realized. Something different than the sterile, odorless room. Perfume, my new mind told me. Floral, lush...

"Can you hear me?" the Seeker asked, interrupting my analysis. "Are you aware?"

"Take your time," the Healer urged in a softer voice than the one he had used before.

I did not open my eyes. I didn't want to be distracted. My mind gave me the words I needed, and the tone that would convey what I couldn't say without using many words.

"Have I been placed in a damaged host in order to gain the information you need, Seeker?"

There was a gasp-surprise and outrage mingled-and something warm touched my skin, covered my hand.

"Of course not, Wanderer," the man said reassuringly. "Even a Seeker would stop at some things."

The Seeker gasped again. Hissed, my memory corrected.

"Then why doesn't this mind function correctly?"

There was a pause.

"The scans were perfect," the Seeker said. Her words not reassuring but argumentative. Did she mean to quarrel with me? "The body was entirely healed."

"From a suicide attempt that was perilously close to succeeding." My tone was stiff, still angry. I wasn't used to anger. It was hard to contain it.

"Everything was in perfect order -"

The Healer cut her off. "What is missing?" he asked. "Clearly, you've accessed speech."

"Memory. I was trying to find what the Seeker wants."

Though there was no sound, there was a change. The atmosphere, which had gone tense at my accusation, relaxed. I wondered how I knew this. I had a strange sensation that I was somehow receiving more than my five senses were giving me-almost a feeling that there was another sense, on the fringes, not quite harnessed. Intuition? That was almost the right word. As if any creature needed more than five senses.

The Seeker cleared her throat, but it was the Healer who answered.

"Ah," he said. "Don't make yourself anxious about some partial memory... difficulties. That's, well, not to be expected, exactly, but not surprising, considering."

"I don't understand your meaning."

"This host was part of the human resistance." There was a hint of excitement in the Seeker's voice now. "Those humans who were aware of us before insertion are more difficult to subdue. This one still resists."

There was a moment of silence while they waited for my response.

Resisting? The host was blocking my access? Again, the heat of my anger surprised me.

“Am I correctly bound?” I asked, my voice distorted because it came through my teeth.

“Yes,” the Healer said. “All eight hundred twenty-seven points are latched securely in the optimum positions.”

This mind used more of my faculties than any host before, leaving me only one hundred eighty-one spare attachments. Perhaps the numerous bindings were the reason the emotions were so vivid.

I decided to open my eyes. I felt the need to double-check the Healer’s promises and make sure the rest of me worked.

Light. Bright, painful. I closed my eyes again. The last light I had seen had been filtered through a hundred ocean fathoms. But these eyes had seen brighter and could handle it. I opened them narrowly, keeping my eyelashes feathered over the breach.

“Would you like me to turn down the lights?”

“No, Healer. My eyes will adjust.”

“Very good,” he said, and I understood that his approval was meant for my casual use of the possessive.

Both waited quietly while my eyes slowly widened.

My mind recognized this as an average room in a medical facility. A hospital. The ceiling tiles were white with darker speckles. The lights were rectangular and the same size as the tiles, replacing them at regular intervals. The walls were light green—a calming color, but also the color of sickness. A poor choice, in my quickly formed opinion.

The people facing me were more interesting than the room. The word doctor sounded in my mind as soon as my eyes fastened on the Healer. He wore loose-fitting blue green clothes that left his arms bare. Scrubs. He had hair on his face, a strange color that my memory called red.

Red! It had been three worlds since I had seen the color or any of its relatives. Even this gingery gold filled me with nostalgia.

His face was generically human to me, but the knowledge in my memory applied the word kind.

An impatient breath pulled my attention to the Seeker.

She was very small. If she had remained still, it would have taken me longer to notice her there beside the Healer. She didn’t draw the eye, a darkness in the bright room. She wore black from chin to wrists—a conservative suit with a silk turtleneck underneath. Her hair was black, too. It grew to her chin and was pushed back behind her ears. Her skin was darker than the Healer’s. Olive toned.

The tiny changes in humans’ expressions were so minimal they were very hard to read. My memory could name the look on this woman’s face, though. The black brows, slanted down over the slightly bulging eyes, created a familiar design. Not quite anger. Intensity. Irritation.

“How often does this happen?” I asked, looking at the Healer again.

“Not often,” the Healer admitted. “We have so few full-grown hosts available anymore. The immature hosts are entirely pliable. But you indicated that you preferred to begin as an adult....”

“Yes.”

“Most requests are the opposite. The human life span is much shorter than you’re used to.”

“I’m well versed in all the facts, Healer. Have you dealt with this... resistance before yourself?”

“Only once, myself.”

“Tell me the facts of the case.” I paused. “Please,” I added, feeling a lack of courtesy in my command.

The Healer sighed.

The Seeker began tapping her fingers against her arm. A sign of impatience. She did not care to wait for what she wanted.

“This occurred four years ago,” the Healer began. “The soul involved had requested an adult male host. The first one to be available was a human who had been living in a pocket of resistance since the early years of the occupation. The human... knew what would happen when he was caught.”

“Just as my host did.”

“Um, yes.” He cleared his throat. “This was only the soul’s second life. He came from Blind World.”

“Blind World?” I asked, cocking my head to the side reflexively.

“Oh, sorry, you wouldn’t know our nicknames. This was one of yours, though, was it not?” He pulled a device from his pocket, a computer, and scanned quickly. “Yes, your seventh planet. In the eighty-first sector.”

“Blind World?” I said again, my voice now disapproving.

“Yes, well, some who have lived there prefer to call it the Singing World.”

I nodded slowly. I liked that better.

“And some who’ve never been there call it Planet of the Bats,” the Seeker muttered.

I turned my eyes to her, feeling them narrow as my mind dredged up the appropriate image of the ugly flying rodent she referred to.

“I assume you are one who has never lived there, Seeker,” the Healer said lightly. “We called this soul Racing Song at first—it was a loose translation of his name on... the Singing World. But he soon opted to take the name of his host, Kevin. Though he was slated for a Calling in Musical Performance, given his background, he said he felt more comfortable continuing in the host’s previous line of work, which was mechanical.

“These signs were somewhat worrisome to his assigned Comforter, but they were well within normal bounds.

“Then Kevin started to complain that he was blacking out for periods of time. They brought him back to me, and we ran extensive tests to make sure there was no hidden flaw in the host’s brain. During the testing, several Healers noted marked differences in his behavior and personality. When we questioned him about this, he claimed to have no memory of certain statements and actions. We continued to observe him, along with his Comforter, and eventually discovered that the host was periodically taking control of Kevin’s body.”

“Taking control?” My eyes strained wide. “With the soul unaware? The host took the body back?”

“Sadly, yes. Kevin was not strong enough to suppress this host.”

Not strong enough.

Would they think me weak as well? Was I weak, that I could not force this mind to answer my questions? Weaker still, because her living thoughts had existed in my head where there should be nothing but memory? I’d always thought of myself as strong. This idea of weakness made me flinch. Made me feel shame.

The Healer continued. “Certain events occurred, and it was decided -“

“What events?”

The Healer looked down without answering.

“What events?” I demanded again. “I believe I have a right to know.”

The Healer sighed. “You do. Kevin... physically attacked a Healer while not... himself.” He winced. “He knocked the Healer unconscious with a blow from his fist and then found a scalpel on her person. We found him insensible. The host had tried to cut the soul out of his body.”

It took me a moment before I could speak. Even then, my voice was just a breath. “What happened to them?”

“Luckily, the host was unable to stay conscious long enough to inflict real damage. Kevin was relocated, into an immature host this time. The troublesome host was in poor repair, and it was decided there wasn’t much point in saving him.

“Kevin is seven human years old now and perfectly normal... aside from the fact that he kept the name Kevin, that is. His guardians are taking great care that he is heavily exposed to music, and that is coming along well...” The last was added as if it were good news—news that could somehow cancel out the rest.

“Why?” I cleared my throat so that my voice could gain some volume. “Why have these risks not been shared?”

“Actually,” the Seeker broke in, “it is very clearly stated in all recruitment propaganda that assimilating the remaining adult human hosts is much more challenging than assimilating a child. An immature host is highly recommended.”

“The word challenging does not quite cover Kevin’s story,” I whispered.

“Yes, well, you preferred to ignore the recommendation.” She held up her hands in a peacemaking gesture when my body tensed, causing the stiff fabric on the narrow bed to crackle softly. “Not that I blame you. Childhood is extraordinarily tedious. And you are clearly not the average soul. I have every confidence that this is well within your abilities to handle. This is just another host. I’m sure you will have full access and control shortly.”

By this point in my observations of the Seeker, I was surprised that she’d had the patience to wait for any delay, even my personal acclimatization. I sensed her disappointment in my lack of information, and it brought back some of the unfamiliar feelings of anger.

“Did it not occur to you that you could get the answers you seek by being inserted into this body yourself?” I asked.

She stiffened. “I’m no skipper.”

My eyebrows pulled up automatically.

“Another nickname,” the Healer explained. “For those who do not complete a life term in their host.”

“Another mechanic,” the Healer explained. “I’ve heard of those who do not complete a job until their host. I nodded in understanding. We’d had a name for it on my other worlds. On no world was it smiled upon. So I quit quizzing the Seeker and gave her what I could.

“Her name was Melanie Stryder. She was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She was in Los Angeles when the occupation became known to her, and she hid in the wilderness for a few years before finding... Hmmm. Sorry, I’ll try that one again later. The body has seen twenty years. She drove to Chicago from...” I shook my head. “There were several stages, not all of them alone. The vehicle was stolen. She was searching for a cousin named Sharon, whom she had reason to hope was still human. She neither found nor contacted anyone before she was spotted. But...” I struggled, fighting against another blank wall. “I think... I can’t be sure... I think she left a note... somewhere.”

“So she expected someone would look for her?” the Seeker asked eagerly.

“Yes. She will be... missed. If she does not rendezvous with...” I gritted my teeth, truly fighting now. The wall was black, and I could not tell how thick it was. I battered against it, sweat beading on my forehead. The Seeker and the Healer were very quiet, allowing me to concentrate.

I tried thinking of something else—the loud, unfamiliar noises the engine of the car had made, the jittery rush of adrenaline every time the lights of another vehicle drew near on the road. I already had this, and nothing fought me. I let the memory carry me along, let it skip over the cold hike through the city under the sheltering darkness of night, let it wind its way to the building where they’d found me.

Not me, her. My body shuddered.

“Don’t overextend -” the Healer began.

The Seeker shushed him.

I let my mind dwell on the horror of discovery, the burning hatred of the Seekers that overpowered almost everything else. The hatred was evil; it was pain. I could hardly bear to feel it. But I let it run its course, hoping it would distract the resistance, weaken the defenses.

I watched carefully as she tried to hide and then knew she could not. A note, scratched on a piece of debris with a broken pencil. Shoved hastily under a door. Not just any door.

“The pattern is the fifth door along the fifth hall on the fifth floor. Her communication is there.”

The Seeker had a small phone in her hand; she murmured rapidly into it.

“The building was supposed to be safe,” I continued. “They knew it was condemned. She doesn’t know how she was discovered. Did they find Sharon?”

A chill of horror raised goose bumps on my arms.

The question was not mine.

The question wasn’t mine, but it flowed naturally through my lips as if it were. The Seeker did not notice anything amiss.

“The cousin? No, they found no other human,” she answered, and my body relaxed in response. “This host was spotted entering the building. Since the building was known to be condemned, the citizen who observed her was concerned. He called us, and we watched the building to see if we could catch more than one, and then moved in when that seemed unlikely. Can you find the rendezvous point?”

I tried.

So many memories, all of them so colorful and sharp. I saw a hundred places I’d never been, heard their names for the first time. A house in Los Angeles, lined with tall fronded trees. A meadow in a forest, with a tent and a fire, outside Winslow, Arizona. A deserted rocky beach in Mexico. A cave, the entrance guarded by sheeting rain, somewhere in Oregon. Tents, huts, rude shelters. As time went on, the names grew less specific. She did not know where she was, nor did she care.

My name was now Wanderer, yet her memories fit it just as well as my own. Except that my wandering was by choice. These flashes of memory were always tinged with the fear of the hunted. Not wandering, but running.

I tried not to feel pity. Instead, I worked to focus the memories. I didn’t need to see where she’d been, only where she was going. I sorted through the pictures that tied to the word Chicago, but none seemed to be anything more than random images. I widened my net. What was outside Chicago? Cold, I thought. It was cold, and there was some worry about that.

Where? I pushed, and the wall came back.

I exhaled in a gust. “Outside the city—in the wilderness... a state park, away from any habitations. It’s not somewhere she’d been before, but she knew how to get there.”

“How soon?” the Seeker asked.

“Soon.” The answer came automatically. “How long have I been here?”

“We let the host heal for nine days, just to be absolutely sure she was recovered,” the Healer told me. “Insertion was today, the tenth day.”

Ten days. My body felt a staggering wave of relief.

“Too late,” I said. “For the rendezvous point... or even the note.” I could feel the host’s reaction to this—could feel it much too strongly. The host was almost... smug. I allowed the words she thought to be spoken, so that I could learn from them. “He won’t be there.”

“He?” The Seeker pounced on the pronoun. “Who?”

The black wall slammed down with more force than she’d used before. She was the tiniest fraction of a second too late.

Again, the face filled my mind. The beautiful face with the golden tan skin and the light-flecked eyes. The face that stirred a strange, deep pleasure within me while I viewed it so clearly in my mind.

Though the wall slapped into place with an accompanying sensation of vicious resentment, it was not fast enough.

“Jared,” I answered. As quickly as if it had come from me, the thought that was not mine followed the name through my lips. “Jared is safe.”

The Host

CHAPTER 4

Dreamed

It is too dark to be so hot, or maybe too hot to be so dark. One of the two is out of place.

I crouch in the darkness behind the weak protection of a scrubby creosote bush, sweating out all the water left in my body. It’s been fifteen minutes since the car left the garage. No lights have come on. The arcadia door is open two inches, letting the swamp cooler do its job. I can imagine the feel of the moist, cool air blowing through the screen. I wish it could reach me here.

My stomach gurgles, and I clench my abdominal muscles to stifle the sound. It is quiet enough that the murmur carries.

I am so hungry.

There is another need that is stronger—another hungry stomach hidden safely far away in the darkness, waiting alone in the rough cave that is our temporary home. A cramped place, jagged with volcanic rock. What will he do if I don’t come back? All the pressure of motherhood with none of the knowledge or experience. I feel so hideously helpless. Jamie is hungry.

There are no other houses close to this one. I’ve been watching since the sun was still white hot in the sky, and I don’t think there is a dog, either.

I ease up from my crouch, my calves screaming in protest, but keep hunched at the waist, trying to be smaller than the bush. The way up the wash is smooth sand, a pale pathway in the light of the stars. There are no sounds of cars on the road.

I know what they will realize when they return, the monsters who look like a nice couple in their early fifties. They will know exactly what I am, and the search will begin at once. I need to be far away. I really hope they are going out for a night on the town. I think it’s Friday. They keep our habits so perfectly, it’s hard to see any difference. Which is how they won in the first place.

The fence around the yard is only waist high. I get over easily, noiselessly. The yard is gravel, though, and I have to walk carefully to keep my weight from shifting it. I make it to the patio slab.

The blinds are open. The starlight is enough to see that the rooms are empty of movement. This couple goes for a spartan look, and I’m grateful. It makes it harder for someone to hide. Of course, that leaves no place for me to hide, either, but if it comes to hiding for me, it’s too late anyway.

I ease the screen door open first, and then the glass door. Both glide silently. I place my feet carefully on the tile, but this is just out of habit. No one is waiting for me here.

The cool air feels like heaven.

The kitchen is to my left. I can see the gleam of granite counters.

I pull the canvas bag from my shoulder and start with the refrigerator. There is a moment of anxiety as the

light comes on when the door opens, but I find the button and hold it down with my toe. My eyes are blind. I don't have time to let them adjust. I go by feel.

Milk, cheese slices, leftovers in a plastic bowl. I hope it's the chicken-and-rice thing I watched him cooking for dinner. We'll eat this tonight.

Juice, a bag of apples. Baby carrots. These will stay good till morning.

I hurry to the pantry. I need things that will keep longer.

I can see better as I gather as much as I can carry. Mmm, chocolate chip cookies. I'm dying to open the bag right now, but I grit my teeth and ignore the twist of my empty stomach.

The bag gets heavy too quickly. This will last us only a week, even if we're careful with it. And I don't feel like being careful; I feel like gorging. I shove granola bars into my pockets.

One more thing. I hurry to the sink and refill my canteen. Then I put my head under the flow and gulp straight from the stream. The water makes odd noises when it hits my hollow stomach.

I start to feel panicked now that my job is done. I want to be out of here. Civilization is dead.

I watch the floor on my way out, worried about tripping with my heavy bag, which is why I don't see the silhouetted black figure on the patio until my hand is on the door.

I hear his mumbled oath at the same time that a stupid squeak of fear escapes my mouth. I spin to sprint for the front door, hoping the locks are not latched, or at least not difficult.

I don't even get two steps before rough, hard hands grab my shoulders and wrench me back against his body. Too big, too strong to be a woman. The bass voice proves me right.

"One sound and you die," he threatens gruffly. I am shocked to feel a thin, sharp edge pushing into the skin under my jaw.

I don't understand. I shouldn't be given a choice. Who is this monster? I've never heard of one who would break rules. I answer the only way I can.

"Do it," I spit through my teeth. "Just do it. I don't want to be a filthy parasite!"

I wait for the knife, and my heart is aching. Each beat has a name. Jamie, Jamie, Jamie. What will happen to you now?

"Clever," the man mutters, and it doesn't sound like he's speaking to me. "Must be a Seeker. And that means a trap. How did they know?" The steel disappears from my throat, only to be replaced by a hand as hard as iron.

I can barely breathe under his grip.

"Where are the rest of them?" he demands, squeezing.

"It's just me!" I rasp. I can't lead him to Jamie. What will Jamie do when I don't come back? Jamie is hungry!

I throw my elbow into his gut-and this really hurts. His stomach muscles are as iron hard as the hand. Which is very strange. Muscles like that are the product of hard living or obsession, and the parasites have neither.

He doesn't even suck in a breath at my blow. Desperate, I jab my heel into his instep. This catches him off guard, and he wobbles. I wrench away, but he grabs hold of my bag, yanking me back into his body. His hand clamps down on my throat again.

"Feisty for a peace-loving body snatcher, aren't you?"

His words are nonsensical. I thought the aliens were all the same. I guess they have their nut jobs, too, after all.

I twist and claw, trying to break his hold. My nails catch his arm, but this just makes him tighten his hold on my throat.

"I will kill you, you worthless body thief. I'm not bluffing."

"Do it, then!"

Suddenly he gasps, and I wonder if any of my flailing limbs have made contact. I don't feel any new bruises.

He lets go of my arm and grabs my hair. This must be it. He's going to cut my throat. I brace for the slice of the knife.

But the hand on my throat eases up, and then his fingers are fumbling on the back of my neck, rough and warm on my skin.

"Impossible," he breathes.

Something hits the floor with a thud. He's dropped the knife? I try to think of a way to get it. Maybe if I

fall. The hand on my neck isn't tight enough to keep me from yanking free. I think I heard where the blade landed.

He spins me around suddenly. There is a click, and light blinds my left eye. I gasp and automatically try to twist away from it. His hand tightens in my hair. The light flickers to my right eye.

"I can't believe it," he whispers. "You're still human."

His hands grab my face from both sides, and before I can pull free, his lips come down hard on mine.

I'm frozen for half a second. No one has ever kissed me in my life. Not a real kiss. Just my parents' pecks on the cheek or forehead, so many years ago. This is something I thought I would never feel. I'm not sure exactly what it feels like, though. There's too much panic, too much terror, too much adrenaline.

I jerk my knee up in a sharp thrust.

He chokes out a wheezing sound, and I'm free. Instead of running for the front of the house again like he expects, I duck under his arm and leap through the open door. I think I can outrun him, even with my load. I've got a head start, and he's still making pained noises. I know where I'm going-I won't leave a path he can see in the dark. I never dropped the food, and that's good. I think the granola bars are a loss, though.

"Wait!" he yells.

Shut up, I think, but I don't yell back.

He's running after me. I can hear his voice getting closer. "I'm not one of them!"

Sure. I keep my eyes on the sand and sprint. My dad used to say I ran like a cheetah. I was the fastest on my track team, state champion, back before the end of the world.

"Listen to me!" He's still yelling at full volume. "Look! I'll prove it. Just stop and look at me!"

Not likely. I pivot off the wash and flit through the mesquites.

"I didn't think there was anyone left! Please, I need to talk to you!"

His voice surprises me-it is too close.

"I'm sorry I kissed you! That was stupid! I've just been alone so long!"

"Shut up!" I don't say it loudly, but I know he hears. He's getting even closer. I've never been outrun before. I push my legs harder.

There's a low grunt to his breathing as he speeds up, too.

Something big flies into my back, and I go down. I taste dirt in my mouth, and I'm pinned by something so heavy I can hardly breathe.

"Wait. A. Minute," he huffs.

He shifts his weight and rolls me over. He straddles my chest, trapping my arms under his legs. He is squishing my food. I growl and try to squirm out from under him.

"Look, look, look!" he says. He pulls a small cylinder from his hip pocket and twists the top. A beam of light shoots out the end.

He turns the flashlight on his face.

The light makes his skin yellow. It shows prominent cheekbones beside a long thin nose and a sharply squared-off jaw. His lips are stretched into a grin, but I can see that they are full, for a man. His eyebrows and lashes are bleached out from sun.

But that's not what he is showing me.

His eyes, clear liquid sienna in the illumination, shine with no more than human reflection. He bounces the light between left and right.

"See? See? I'm just like you."

"Let me see your neck." Suspicion is thick in my voice. I don't let myself believe that this is more than a trick. I don't understand the point of the charade, but I'm sure there is one. There is no hope anymore.

His lips twist. "Well... That won't exactly help anything. Aren't the eyes enough? You know I'm not one of them."

"Why won't you show me your neck?"

"Because I have a scar there," he admits.

I try to squirm out from under him again, and his hand pins my shoulder.

"It's self-inflicted," he explains. "I think I did a pretty good job, though it hurt like hell. I don't have all that pretty hair to cover my neck. The scar helps me blend in."

"Get off me."

He hesitates, then gets to his feet in one easy move, not needing to use his hands. He holds one out, palm up, to me.

"Please don't run away. And yes. I'd rather you didn't kick me again, either."

please don't run away. And, um, I'd rather you didn't kick me again, either.

I don't move. I know he can catch me if I try to run.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

He smiles wide. "My name is Jared Howe. I haven't spoken to another human being in more than two years, so I'm sure I must seem... a little crazy to you. Please, forgive that and tell me your name, anyway."

"Melanie," I whisper.

"Melanie," he repeats. "I can't tell you how delighted I am to meet you."

I grip my bag tightly, keeping my eyes on him. He reaches his hand down toward me slowly.

And I take it.

It isn't until I see my hand curl voluntarily around his that I realize I believe him.

He helps me to my feet and doesn't release my hand when I'm up.

"What now?" I ask guardedly.

"Well, we can't stay here for long. Will you come back with me to the house? I left my bag. You beat me to the fridge."

I shake my head.

He seems to realize how brittle I am, how close to breaking.

"Will you wait for me here, then?" he asks in a gentle voice. "I'll be very quick. Let me get us some more food."

"Us?"

"Do you really think I'm going to let you disappear? I'll follow you even if you tell me not to."

I don't want to disappear from him.

"I..." How can I not trust another human completely? We're family-both part of the brotherhood of extinction. "I don't have time. I have so far to go and... Jamie is waiting."

"You're not alone," he realizes. His expression shows uncertainty for the first time.

"My brother. He's just nine, and he's so frightened when I'm away. It will take me half the night to get back to him. He won't know if I've been caught. He's so hungry." As if to make my point, my stomach growls loudly.

Jared's smile is back, brighter than before. "Will it help if I give you a ride?"

"A ride?" I echo.

"I'll make you a deal. You wait here while I gather more food, and I'll take you anywhere you want to go in my jeep. It's faster than running-even faster than you running."

"You have a car?"

"Of course. Do you think I walked out here?"

I think of the six hours it took me to walk here, and my forehead furrows.

"We'll be back to your brother in no time," he promises. "Don't move from this spot, okay?"

I nod.

"And eat something, please. I don't want your stomach to give us away." He grins, and his eyes crinkle up, fanning lines out of the corners. My heart gives one hard thump, and I know I will wait here if it takes him all night.

He is still holding my hand. He lets go slowly, his eyes not leaving mine. He takes a step backward, then pauses.

"Please don't kick me," he pleads, leaning forward and grabbing my chin. He kisses me again, and this time I feel it. His lips are softer than his hands, and hot, even in the warm desert night. A flock of butterflies riots in my stomach and steals my breath. My hands reach for him instinctively. I touch the warm skin of his cheek, the rough hair on his neck. My fingers skim over a line of puckered skin, a raised ridge right beneath the hairline.

I scream.

I woke up covered in sweat. Even before I was all the way awake, my fingers were on the back of my neck, tracing the short line left from the insertion. I could barely detect the faint pink blemish with my fingertips. The medicines the Healer had used had done their job.

Jared's poorly healed scar had never been much of a disguise.

I flicked on the light beside my bed, waiting for my breathing to slow, veins full of adrenaline from the realistic dream.

A new dream, but in essence so much the same as the many others that had plagued me in the past months.

No, not a dream. Surely a memory.

I could still feel the heat of Jared's lips on mine. My hands reached out without my permission, searching across the rumpled sheet, looking for something they did not find. My heart ached when they gave up, falling to the bed limp and empty.

I blinked away the unwelcome moisture in my eyes. I didn't know how much more of this I could stand. How did anyone survive this world, with these bodies whose memories wouldn't stay in the past where they should? With these emotions that were so strong I couldn't tell what I felt anymore?

I was going to be exhausted tomorrow, but I felt so far from sleep that I knew it would be hours before I could relax. I might as well do my duty and get it over with. Maybe it would help me take my mind off things I'd rather not think about.

I rolled off the bed and stumbled to the computer on the otherwise empty desk. It took a few seconds for the screen to glow to life, and another few seconds to open my mail program. It wasn't hard to find the Seeker's address; I only had four contacts: the Seeker, the Healer, my new employer, and his wife, my Comforter.

There was another human with my host, Melanie Stryder.

I typed, not bothering with a greeting.

His name is Jamie Stryder; he is her brother.

For a panicked moment, I wondered at her control. All this time, and I'd never even guessed at the boy's existence-not because he didn't matter to her, but because she protected him more fiercely than other secrets I'd unraveled. Did she have more secrets this big, this important? So sacred that she kept them even from my dreams? Was she that strong? My fingers trembled as I keyed the rest of the information.

I think he's a young adolescent now. Perhaps thirteen. They were living in a temporary camp, and I believe it was north of the town of Cave Creek, in Arizona. That was several years ago, though. Still, you could compare a map to the lines I remembered before. As always, I'll tell you if I get anything more.

I sent it off. As soon as it was gone, terror washed through me.

Not Jamie!

Her voice in my head was as clear as my own spoken aloud. I shuddered in horror.

Even as I struggled with the fear of what was happening, I was gripped with the insane desire to e-mail the Seeker again and apologize for sending her my crazy dreams. To tell her I was half asleep and to pay no attention to the silly message I'd sent.

The desire was not my own.

I shut off the computer.

I hate you, the voice snarled in my head.

"Then maybe you should leave," I snapped. The sound of my voice, answering her aloud, made me shudder again.

She hadn't spoken to me since the first moments I'd been here. There was no doubt that she was getting stronger. Just like the dreams.

And there was no question about it; I was going to have to visit my Comforter tomorrow. Tears of disappointment and humiliation welled in my eyes at the thought.

I went back to bed, put a pillow over my face, and tried to think of nothing at all.

The Host

CHAPTER 5

Uncomforted

Hello there, Wanderer! Won't you take a seat and make yourself at home?"

I hesitated on the threshold of the Comforter's office, one foot in and one foot out.

She smiled, just a tiny movement at the corners of her mouth. It was much easier to read facial expressions now; the little muscle twitches and shifts had become familiar through months of exposure. I could see that the Comforter found my reluctance a bit amusing. At the same time, I could sense her frustration that I was still uneasy coming to her.

With a quiet sigh of resignation, I walked into the small brightly colored room and took my usual seat-the puffy red one, the one farthest from where she sat.

Her lips pursed.

To avoid her gaze, I stared through the open windows at the clouds scuttling past the sun. The faint tang of ocean brine blew softly through the room.

“So, Wanderer. It’s been a while since you’ve come to see me.”

I met her eyes guiltily. “I did leave a message about that last appointment. I had a student who requested some of my time....”

“Yes, I know.” She smiled the tiny smile again. “I got your message.”

She was attractive for an older woman, as humans went. She’d let her hair stay a natural gray-it was soft, tending toward white rather than silver, and she wore it long, pulled back in a loose ponytail. Her eyes were an interesting green color I’d never seen on anyone else.

“I’m sorry,” I said, since she seemed to be waiting for a response.

“That’s all right. I understand. It’s difficult for you to come here. You wish so much that it wasn’t necessary. It’s never been necessary for you before. This frightens you.”

I stared down at the wooden floor. “Yes, Comforter.”

“I know I’ve asked you to call me Kathy.”

“Yes... Kathy.”

She laughed lightly. “You are not at ease with human names yet, are you, Wanderer?”

“No. To be honest, it seems... like a surrender.”

I looked up to see her nod slowly. “Well, I can understand why you, especially, would feel that way.”

I swallowed loudly when she said that, and stared again at the floor.

“Let’s talk about something easier for a moment,” Kathy suggested. “Do you continue to enjoy your Calling?”

“I do.” This was easier. “I’ve begun a new semester. I wondered if it would get tiresome, repeating the same material, but so far it doesn’t. Having new ears makes the stories new again.”

“I hear good things about you from Curt. He says your class is among the most requested at the university.”

My cheeks warmed a bit at this praise. “That’s nice to hear. How is your partner?”

“Curt is wonderful, thank you. Our hosts are in excellent shape for their ages. We have many years ahead of us, I think.”

I was curious if she would stay on this world, if she would move to another human host when the time came, or if she would leave. But I didn’t want to ask any questions that might move us into the more difficult areas of discussion.

“I enjoy teaching,” I said instead. “It’s somewhat related to my Calling with the See Weeds, so that makes it easier than something unfamiliar. I’m indebted to Curt for requesting me.”

“They’re lucky to have you.” Kathy smiled warmly. “Do you know how rare it is for a Professor of History to have experienced even two planets in the curriculum? Yet you’ve lived a term on almost all of them. And the Origin, to boot! There isn’t a school on this planet that wouldn’t love to steal you away from us. Curt plots ways to keep you busy so you have no time to consider moving.”

“Honorary Professor,” I corrected her.

Kathy smiled and then took a deep breath, her smile fading. “You haven’t been to see me in so long, I was wondering if your problems were resolving themselves. But then it occurred to me that perhaps the reason for your absence was that they were getting worse.”

I stared down at my hands and said nothing.

My hands were light brown-a tan that never faded whether I spent time in the sun or not. One dark freckle marked the skin just above my left wrist. My nails were cut short. I disliked the feeling of long nails. They were unpleasant when they brushed the skin wrong. And my fingers were so long and thin-the added length of fingernails made them look strange. Even for a human.

She cleared her throat after a minute. “I’m guessing my intuition was right.”

“Kathy.” I said her name slowly. Stalling. “Why did you keep your human name? Did it make you feel... more at one? With your host, I mean?” I would have liked to know about Curt’s choice as well, but it was such a personal question. It would have been wrong to ask anyone besides Curt for the answer, even his partner. I worried that I’d already been too impolite, but she laughed.

“Heavens, no, Wanderer. Haven’t I told you this? Hmm. Maybe not, since it’s not my job to talk, but to listen. Most of the souls I speak with don’t need as much encouragement as you do. Did you know I came to Earth in one of the very first placements, before the humans had any idea we were here? I had human neighbors on both sides. Curt and I had to pretend to be our hosts for several years. Even after we’d settled the immediate

area, you never knew when a human might be near. So Kathy just became who I was. Besides, the translation of my former name was fourteen words long and did not shorten prettily.” She grinned. The sunlight slanting through the window caught her eyes and sent their silver green reflection dancing on the wall. For a moment, the emerald irises glowed iridescent.

I’d had no idea that this soft, cozy woman had been a part of the front line. It took me a minute to process that. I stared at her, surprised and suddenly more respectful. I’d never taken Comforters very seriously-never had a need before now. They were for those who struggled, for the weak, and it shamed me to be here. Knowing Kathy’s history made me feel slightly less awkward with her. She understood strength.

“Did it bother you?” I asked. “Pretending to be one of them?”

“No, not really. You see, this host was a lot to get used to-there was so much that was new. Sensory overload. Following the set pattern was quite as much as I could handle at first.”

“And Curt... You chose to stay with your host’s spouse? After it was over?”

This question was more pointed, and Kathy grasped that at once. She shifted in her seat, pulling her legs up and folding them under her. She gazed thoughtfully at a spot just over my head as she answered.

“Yes, I chose Curt-and he chose me. At first, of course, it was random chance, an assignment. We bonded, naturally, from spending so much time together, sharing the danger of our mission. As the university’s president, Curt had many contacts, you see. Our house was an insertion facility. We would entertain often. Humans would come through our door and our kind would leave. It all had to be very quick and quiet-you know the violence these hosts are prone to. We lived every day with the knowledge that we could meet a final end at any moment. There was constant excitement and frequent fear.

“All very good reasons why Curt and I might have formed an attachment and decided to stay together when secrecy was no longer necessary. And I could lie to you, assuage your fears, by telling you that these were the reasons. But...” She shook her head and then seemed to settle deeper into her chair, her eyes boring into me. “In so many millennia, the humans never did figure love out. How much is physical, how much in the mind? How much accident and how much fate? Why did perfect matches crumble and impossible couples thrive? I don’t know the answers any better than they did. Love simply is where it is. My host loved Curt’s host, and that love did not die when the ownership of the minds changed.”

She watched me carefully, reacting with a slight frown when I slumped in my seat.

“Melanie still grieves for Jared,” she stated.

I felt my head nod without willing the action.

“You grieve for him.”

I closed my eyes.

“The dreams continue?”

“Every night,” I mumbled.

“Tell me about them.” Her voice was soft, persuasive.

“I don’t like to think about them.”

“I know. Try. It might help.”

“How? How will it help to tell you that I see his face every time I close my eyes? That I wake up and cry when he’s not there? That the memories are so strong I can’t separate hers from mine anymore?”

I stopped abruptly, clenching my teeth.

Kathy pulled a white handkerchief from her pocket and offered it to me. When I didn’t move, she got up, walked over to me, and dropped it in my lap. She sat on the arm of my chair and waited.

I held on stubbornly for half a minute. Then I snatched the little square of fabric angrily and wiped my eyes.

“I hate this.”

“Everybody cries their first year. These emotions are so impossible. We’re all children for a bit, whether we intended that or not. I used to tear up every time I saw a pretty sunset. The taste of peanut butter would sometimes do that, too.” She patted the top of my head, then trailed her fingers gently through the lock of hair I always kept tucked behind my ear.

“Such pretty, shiny hair,” she noted. “Every time I see you it’s shorter. Why do you keep it that way?”

Already in tears, I didn’t feel like I had much dignity to defend. Why claim that it was easier to care for, as I usually did? After all, I’d come here to confess and get help-I might as well get on with it.

“It bothers her. She likes it long.”

She didn’t gasp, as I half expected she would. Kathy was good at her job. Her response was only a second

late and only slightly incoherent.

“You... She... she’s still that... present?”

The appalling truth tumbled from my lips. “When she wants to be. Our history bores her. She’s more dormant while I’m working. But she’s there, all right. Sometimes I feel like she’s as present as I am.” My voice was only a whisper by the time I was done.

“Wanderer!” Kathy exclaimed, horrified. “Why didn’t you tell me it was that bad? How long has it been this way?”

“It’s getting worse. Instead of fading, she seems to be growing stronger. It’s not as bad as the Healer’s case yet—we spoke of Kevin, do you remember? She hasn’t taken control. She won’t. I won’t let that happen!” The pitch of my voice climbed.

“Of course it won’t happen,” she assured me. “Of course not. But if you’re this... unhappy, you should have told me earlier. We need to get you to a Healer.”

It took me a moment, emotionally distracted as I was, to understand.

“A Healer? You want me to skip?”

“No one would think badly of that choice, Wanderer. It’s understood, if a host is defective -“

“Defective? She’s not defective. I am. I’m too weak for this world!” My head fell into my hands as the humiliation washed through me. Fresh tears welled in my eyes.

Kathy’s arm settled around my shoulders. I was struggling so hard to control my wild emotions that I didn’t pull away, though it felt too intimate.

It bothered Melanie, too. She didn’t like being hugged by an alien.

Of course Melanie was very much present in this moment, and unbearably smug as I finally admitted to her power. She was gleeful. It was always harder to control her when I was distracted by emotion like this.

I tried to calm myself so that I would be able to put her in her place.

You are in my place. Her thought was faint but intelligible. How much worse it was getting; she was strong enough to speak to me now whenever she wished. It was as bad as that first minute of consciousness.

Go away. It’s my place now.

Never.

“Wanderer, dear, no. You are not weak, and we both know that.”

“Hmph.”

“Listen to me. You are strong. Surprisingly strong. Our kind are always so much the same, but you exceed the norm. You’re so brave it astonishes me. Your past lives are a testament to that.”

My past lives maybe, but this life? Where was my strength now?

“But humans are more individualized than we are,” Kathy went on. “There’s quite a range, and some of them are much stronger than others. I truly believe that if anyone else had been put into this host, Melanie would have crushed them in days. Maybe it’s an accident, maybe it’s fate, but it appears to me that the strongest of our kind is being hosted by the strongest of theirs.”

“Doesn’t say much for our kind, does it?”

She heard the implication behind my words. “She’s not winning, Wanderer. You are this lovely person beside me. She’s just a shadow in the corner of your mind.”

“She speaks to me, Kathy. She still thinks her own thoughts. She still keeps her secrets.”

“But she doesn’t speak for you, does she? I doubt I would be able to say as much in your place.”

I didn’t respond. I was feeling too miserable.

“I think you should consider reimplantation.”

“Kathy, you just said that she would crush a different soul. I don’t know if I believe that—you’re probably just trying to do your job and comfort me. But if she is so strong, it wouldn’t be fair to hand her off to someone else because I can’t subdue her. Who would you choose to take her on?”

“I didn’t say that to comfort you, dear.”

“Then what -“

“I don’t think this host would be considered for reuse.”

“Oh!”

A shiver of horror jolted down my spine. And I wasn’t the only one who was staggered by the idea.

I was immediately repulsed. I was no quitter. Through the long revolutions around the suns of my last planet—the world of the See Weeds, as they were known here—I had waited. Though the permanence of being rooted began to wear long before I’d thought it would, though the lives of the See Weeds would measure in centuries on this planet, I had not skipped out on the life term of my host. To do so was wasteful, wrong,

centuries on this planet, I had not skipped out on the term of my host. To do so was wasteful, wrong, ungrateful. It mocked the very essence of who we were as souls. We made our worlds better places; that was absolutely essential or we did not deserve them.

But we were not wasteful. We did make whatever we took better, more peaceful and beautiful. And the humans were brutish and ungovernable. They had killed one another so frequently that murder had been an accepted part of life. The various tortures they'd devised over the few millennia they'd lasted had been too much for me; I hadn't been able to bear even the dry official overviews. Wars had raged over the face of nearly every continent. Sanctioned murder, ordered and viciously effective. Those who lived in peaceful nations had looked the other way as members of their own species starved on their doorstep. There was no equality to the distribution of the planet's bounteous resources. Most vile yet, their offspring-the next generation, which my kind nearly worshipped for their promise-had all too often been victims of heinous crimes. And not just at the hands of strangers, but at the hands of the caretakers they were entrusted to. Even the huge sphere of the planet had been put into jeopardy through their careless and greedy mistakes. No one could compare what had been and what was now and not admit that Earth was a better place thanks to us.

You murder an entire species and then pat yourselves on the back.

My hands balled up into fists.

I could have you disposed of, I reminded her.

Go ahead. Make my murder official.

I was bluffing, but so was Melanie.

Oh, she thought she wanted to die. She'd thrown herself into the elevator shaft, after all. But that was in a moment of panic and defeat. To consider it calmly from a comfortable chair was something else altogether. I could feel the adrenaline-adrenaline called into being by her fear-shoot through my limbs as I contemplated switching to a more pliant body.

It would be nice to be alone again. To have my mind to myself. This world was very pleasant in so many novel ways, and it would be wonderful to be able to appreciate it without the distractions of an angry, displaced nonentity who should have had better sense than to linger unwanted this way.

Melanie squirmed, figuratively, in the recesses of my head as I tried to consider it rationally. Maybe I should give up....

The words themselves made me flinch. I, Wanderer, give up? Quit? Admit failure and try again with a weak, spineless host who wouldn't give me any trouble?

I shook my head. I could barely stand to think of it.

And... this was my body. I was used to the feel of it. I liked the way the muscles moved over the bones, the bend of the joints and the pull of the tendons. I knew the reflection in the mirror. The sun-browned skin, the high, sharp bones of my face, the short silk cap of mahogany hair, the muddy green brown hazel of my eyes-this was me.

I wanted myself. I wouldn't let what was mine be destroyed.

The Host

CHAPTER 6

Followed

The light was finally fading outside the windows. The day, hot for March, had lingered on and on, as if reluctant to end and set me free.

I sniffled and twisted the wet handkerchief into another knot. "Kathy, you must have other obligations. Curt will be wondering where you are."

"He'll understand."

"I can't stay here forever. And we're no closer to an answer than before."

"Quick fixes aren't my specialty. You are decided against a new host -"

"Yes."

"So dealing with this will probably take some time."

I clenched my teeth in frustration.

"And it will go faster and more smoothly if you have some help."

"I'll be better with making my appointments. I promise."

I'll be back with making my appointments, I promise.

"That's not exactly what I mean, though I hope you will."

"You mean help... other than you?" I cringed at the thought of having to relive today's misery with a stranger. "I'm sure you're just as qualified as any Comforter-more so."

"I didn't mean another Comforter." She shifted her weight in the chair and stretched stiffly. "How many friends do you have, Wanderer?"

"You mean people at work? I see a few other teachers almost every day. There are several students I speak to in the halls..."

"Outside of the school?"

I stared at her blankly.

"Human hosts need interaction. You're not used to solitude, dear. You shared an entire planet's thoughts -"

"We didn't go out much." My attempt at humor fell flat.

She smiled slightly and went on. "You're struggling so hard with your problem that it's all you can concentrate on. Maybe one answer is to not concentrate quite so hard. You said Melanie grows bored during your working hours... that she is more dormant. Perhaps if you developed some peer relationships, those would bore her also."

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. Melanie, sluggish from the long day of attempted comfort, did seem rather unenthused by the idea.

Kathy nodded. "Get involved with life rather than with her."

"That makes sense."

"And then there are the physical drives these bodies have. I've never seen or heard of their equal. One of the most difficult things we of the first wave had to conquer was the mating instinct. Believe me, the humans noticed when you didn't." She grinned and rolled her eyes at some memory. When I didn't react as she'd expected, she sighed and crossed her arms impatiently. "Oh, come now, Wanderer. You must have noticed."

"Well, of course," I mumbled. Melanie stirred restlessly. "Obviously. I've told you about the dreams..."

"No, I didn't mean just memories. Haven't you come across anyone that your body has responded to in the present-on strictly a chemical level?"

I thought her question through carefully. "I don't think so. Not so I've noticed."

"Trust me," Kathy said dryly. "You'd notice." She shook her head. "Perhaps you should open your eyes and look around for that specifically. It might do you a lot of good."

My body recoiled from the thought. I registered Melanie's disgust, mirrored by my own.

Kathy read my expression. "Don't let her control how you interact with your kind, Wanderer. Don't let her control you."

My nostrils flared. I waited a moment to answer, reining in the anger that I'd never quite gotten used to.

"She does not control me."

Kathy raised an eyebrow.

The anger tightened my throat. "You did not look too far afield for your current partner. Was that choice controlled?"

She ignored my anger and considered the question thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," she finally said. "It's hard to know. But you've made your point." She picked at a string in the hem of her shirt, and then, as if realizing that she was avoiding my gaze, folded her hands resolutely and squared her shoulders. "Who knows how much comes from any given host on any given planet? As I said before, I think time is probably your answer. Whether she grows apathetic and silent gradually, allowing you to make another choice besides this Jared, or... well, the Seekers are very good. They're already looking for him, and maybe you'll remember something that helps."

I didn't move as her meaning sank in. She didn't seem to notice that I was frozen in place.

"Perhaps they'll find Melanie's love, and then you can be together. If his feelings are as fervent as hers, the new soul will probably be amenable."

"No!" I wasn't sure who had shouted. It could have been me. I was full of horror, too.

I was on my feet, shaking. The tears that came so easily were, for once, absent, and my hands trembled in tight fists.

"Wanderer?"

But I turned and ran for the door, fighting the words that could not come out of my mouth. Words that could not be my words. Words that made no sense unless they were hers, but they felt like mine. They couldn't be mine. They couldn't be spoken.

That's killing him! That's making him cease to be! I don't want someone else. I want Jared, not a stranger in his body! The body means nothing without him.

I heard Kathy calling my name behind me as I ran into the road.

I didn't live far from the Comforter's office, but the darkness in the street disoriented me. I'd gone two blocks before I realized I was running in the wrong direction.

People were looking at me. I wasn't dressed for exercise, and I wasn't jogging, I was fleeing. But no one bothered me; they politely averted their eyes. They would guess that I was new to this host. Acting out the way a child would.

I slowed to a walk, turning north so that I could loop around without passing Kathy's office again.

My walk was only slightly slower than a run. I heard my feet hitting the sidewalk too quickly, as though they were trying to match the tempo of a dance song. Slap, slap, slap against the concrete. No, it wasn't like a drumbeat, it was too angry. Like violence. Slap, slap, slap. Someone hitting someone else. I shuddered away from the horrible image.

I could see the lamp on over my apartment door. It hadn't taken me long to cover the distance. I didn't cross the road, though.

I felt sick. I remembered what it felt like to vomit, though I never had. The cold wetness dewed on my forehead, the hollow sound rang in my ears. I was pretty sure I was about to have that experience for my own.

There was a bank of grass beside the walk. Around a streetlamp there was a well-trimmed hedge. I had no time to look for a better place. I stumbled to the light and caught the post to hold myself up. The nausea was making me dizzy.

Yes, I was definitely going to experience throwing up.

"Wanderer, is that you? Wanderer, are you ill?"

The vaguely familiar voice was impossible to concentrate on. But it made things worse, knowing I had an audience as I leaned my face close to the bush and violently choked up my most recent meal.

"Who's your Healer here?" the voice asked. It sounded far away through the buzzing in my ears. A hand touched my arched back. "Do you need an ambulance?"

I coughed twice and shook my head. I was sure it was over; my stomach was empty.

"I'm not ill," I said as I pulled myself upright using the lamppost for support. I looked over to see who was watching my moment of disgrace.

The Seeker from Chicago had her cell phone in her hand, trying to decide which authority to call. I took one good look at her and bent over the leaves again. Empty stomach or no, she was the last person I needed to see right now.

But, as my stomach heaved uselessly, I realized that there would be a reason for her presence.

Oh, no! Oh, no no no no no no!

"Why?" I gasped, panic and sickness stealing the volume from my voice. "Why are you here? What's happened?" The Comforter's very uncomfortable words pounded in my head.

I stared at the hands gripping the collar of the Seeker's black suit for two seconds before I realized they were mine.

"Stop!" she said, and there was outrage on her face. Her voice rattled.

I was shaking her.

My hands jerked open and landed against my face. "Excuse me!" I huffed. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was doing."

The Seeker scowled at me and smoothed the front of her outfit. "You're not well, and I suppose I startled you."

"I wasn't expecting to see you," I whispered. "Why are you here?"

"Let's get you to a Healing facility before we speak. If you have a flu, you should get it healed. There's no point in letting it wear your body down."

"I don't have a flu. I'm not ill."

"Did you eat bad food? You must report where you got it."

Her prying was very annoying. "I did not eat bad food, either. I'm healthy."

"Why don't you have a Healer check? A quick scan-you shouldn't neglect your host. That's irresponsible. Especially when health care is so easy and effective."

I took a deep breath and resisted the urge to shake her again. She was a full head shorter than I was. It was a fight I would win.

A fight? I turned away from her and walked swiftly toward my home. I was dangerously emotional. I needed to calm down before I did something inexcusable.

“Wanderer? Wait! The Healer -“

“I need no Healer,” I said without turning. “That was just... an emotional imbalance. I’m fine now.”

The Seeker didn’t answer. I wondered what she made of my response. I could hear her shoes-high heels-tapping after me, so I left the door open, knowing she would follow me in. I went to the sink and filled a glass with water. She waited silently while I rinsed my mouth and spat. When I was through, I leaned against the counter, staring into the basin.

She was soon bored.

“So, Wanderer... or do you still go by that name? I don’t mean to be rude in calling you that.”

I didn’t look at her. “I still go by Wanderer.”

“Interesting. I pegged you for one that would choose her own.”

“I did choose. I chose Wanderer.”

It had long been clear to me that the mild spat I’d overheard the first day I woke in the Healing facility was the Seeker’s fault. The Seeker was the most confrontational soul I’d come across in nine lives. My first Healer, Fords Deep Waters, had been calm, kind, and wise, even for a soul. Yet he had not been able to help reacting to her. That made me feel better about my own response.

I turned around to face her. She was on my small couch, nestled in comfortably as if for a long visit. Her expression was self-satisfied, the bulging eyes amused. I controlled the desire to scowl.

“Why are you here?” I asked again. My voice was a monotone. Restrained. I would not lose control again in front of this woman.

“It’s been a while since I heard anything from you, so I thought I would check in personally. We’ve still made no headway in your case.”

My hands clamped down on the edge of the counter behind me, but I kept the wild relief from my voice.

“That seems... overzealous. Besides, I sent you a message last night.”

Her eyebrows came together in that way she had, a way that made her look angry and annoyed at the same time, as if you, not she, were responsible for her anger. She pulled out her palm computer and touched the screen a few times.

“Oh,” she said stiffly. “I haven’t checked my mail today.”

She was quiet as she scanned through what I had written.

“I sent it very early in the morning,” I said. “I was half asleep at the time. I’m not sure how much of what I wrote was memory or dream, or sleep-typing, maybe.”

I went along with the words-Melanie’s words-as they flowed easily from my mouth; I even added my own lighthearted laugh at the end. It was dishonest of me. Shameful behavior. But I would not let the Seeker know that I was weaker than my host.

For once, Melanie was not smug at having bested me. She was too relieved, too grateful that I had not, for my own petty reasons, given her away.

“Interesting,” the Seeker murmured. “Another one on the loose.” She shook her head. “Peace continues to elude us.” She did not seem dismayed by the idea of a fragile peace-rather, it seemed to please her.

I bit my lip hard. Melanie wanted so badly to make another denial, to claim the boy was just part of a dream. Don’t be stupid, I told her. That would be so obvious. It said much for the repellent nature of the Seeker that she could put Melanie and me on the same side of an argument.

I hate her. Melanie’s whisper was sharp, painful like a cut.

I know, I know. I wished I could deny that I felt... similarly. Hate was an unforgivable emotion. But the Seeker was... very difficult to like. Impossible.

The Seeker interrupted my internal conversation. “So, other than the new location to review, you have no more help for me on the road maps?”

I felt my body react to her critical tone. “I never said they were lines on a road map. That’s your assumption. And no, I have nothing else.”

She clicked her tongue quickly three times. “But you said they were directions.”

“That’s what I think they are. I’m not getting anything more.”

“Why not? Haven’t you subdued the human yet?” She laughed loudly. Laughing at me.

I turned my back to her and concentrated on calming myself. I tried to pretend that she wasn’t there. That I was all alone in my austere kitchen, staring out the window into the little patch of night sky, at the three bright

stars I could see through it.

Well, as alone as I ever was.

While I stared at the tiny points of light in the blackness, the lines that I'd seen over and over again—in my dreams and in my broken memories, cropping up at strange, unrelated moments—flashed through my head.

The first: a slow, rough curve, then a sharp turn north, another sharp turn back the other way, twisting back to the north for a longer stretch, and then the abrupt southern decline that flattened out into another shallow curve.

The second: a ragged zigzag, four tight switchbacks, the fifth point strangely blunt, like it was broken...

The third: a smooth wave, interrupted by a sudden spur that swung a thin, long finger out to the north and back.

Incomprehensible, seemingly meaningless. But I knew this was important to Melanie. From the very beginning I'd known that. She protected this secret more fiercely than any other, next to the boy, her brother. I'd had no idea of his existence before the dream last night. I wondered what it was that had broken her. Maybe as she grew louder in my head, she would lose more of her secrets to me.

Maybe she would slip up, and I would see what these strange lines meant. I knew they meant something. That they led somewhere.

And at that moment, with the echo of the Seeker's laugh still hanging in the air, I suddenly realized why they were so important.

They led back to Jared, of course. Back to both of them, Jared and Jamie. Where else? What other location could possibly hold any meaning for her? Only now I saw that it was not back, because none of them had ever followed these lines before. Lines that had been as much of a mystery to her as they were to me, until...

The wall was slow to block me. She was distracted, paying more attention to the Seeker than I was. She fluttered in my head at a sound behind me, and that was the first I was aware of the Seeker's approach.

The Seeker sighed. "I expected more of you. Your track record seemed so promising."

"It's a pity you weren't free for the assignment yourself. I'm sure if you'd had to deal with a resistant host, it would have been child's play." I didn't turn to look at her. My voice stayed level.

She sniffed. "The early waves were challenging enough even without a resistant host."

"Yes. I've experienced a few settlings myself."

The Seeker snorted. "Were the See Weeds very difficult to tame? Did they flee?"

I kept my voice calm. "We had no trouble in the South Pole. Of course, the North was another matter. It was badly mishandled. We lost the entire forest." The sadness of that time echoed behind my words. A thousand sentient beings, closing their eyes forever rather than accept us. They'd curled their leaves from the suns and starved.

Good for them, Melanie whispered. There was no venom attached to the thought, only approval as she saluted the tragedy in my memory.

It was such a waste. I let the agony of the knowledge, the feel of the dying thoughts that had racked us with our sister forest's pain, wash through my head.

It was death either way.

The Seeker spoke, and I tried to concentrate on just one conversation.

"Yes." Her voice was uncomfortable. "That was poorly executed."

"You can never be too careful when it comes to doling out power. Some aren't as careful as they should be."

She didn't answer, and I heard her move a few steps back. Everyone knew that the misstep behind the mass suicide belonged to the Seekers, who, because the See Weeds couldn't flee, had underestimated their ability to escape. They'd proceeded recklessly, beginning the first settlement before we had adequate numbers in place for a full-scale assimilation. By the time they realized what the See Weeds were capable of, were willing to do, it was too late. The next shipment of hibernating souls was too far away, and before they'd arrived, the northern forest was lost.

I faced the Seeker now, curious to judge the impact of my words. She was impassive, staring at the white nothingness of the bare wall across the room.

"I'm sorry I can't help you further." I said the words firmly, trying to make the dismissal clear. I was ready to have my house to myself again. To ourselves, Melanie inserted spitefully. I sighed. She was so full of herself now. "You really shouldn't have troubled yourself to come so far."

"It's the job," the Seeker said, shrugging. "You're my only assignment. Until I find the rest of them, I may as well stick close to you and hope I get lucky."

The Host

CHAPTER 7

Confronted

Yes, Faces Sunward?" I asked, grateful to the raised hand for interrupting my lecture. I did not feel as comfortable behind the lectern as I usually did. My biggest strength, my only real credential-for my host body had had little in the way of a formal education, on the run since her early adolescence-was the personal experience I usually taught from. This was the first world's history I'd presented this semester for which I had no memories to draw upon. I was sure my students were suffering the difference.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but..." The white-haired man paused, struggling to word his question. "I'm not sure I understand. The Fire-Tasters actually... ingest the smoke from burning the Walking Flowers? Like food?" He tried to suppress the horror in his tone. It was not a soul's place to judge another soul. But I was not surprised, given his background on the Planet of the Flowers, at his strong reaction to the fate of a similar life-form on another world.

It was always amazing to me how some souls buried themselves in the affairs of whichever world they inhabited and ignored the rest of the universe. But, to be fair, perhaps Faces Sunward had been in hibernation when Fire World became notorious.

"Yes, they receive essential nutrients from this smoke. And therein lies the fundamental dilemma and the controversy of Fire World-and the reason the planet has not been closed, though there has certainly been adequate time to populate it fully. There is also a high relocation percentage.

"When Fire World was discovered, it was at first thought that the dominant species, the Fire-Tasters, were the only intelligent life-forms present. The Fire-Tasters did not consider the Walking Flowers to be their equals-a cultural prejudice-so it was a while, even after the first wave of settling, before the souls realized they were murdering intelligent creatures. Since then, Fire World scientists have focused their efforts on finding a replacement for the dietary needs of the Fire-Tasters. Spiders are being transported there to help, but the planets are hundreds of light-years apart. When this obstacle is overcome, as it will be soon, I'm sure, there is hope that the Walking Flowers might also be assimilated. In the meantime, much of the brutality has been removed from the equation. The, ah, burning-alive portion, of course, and other aspects as well."

"How can they..." Faces Sunward trailed off, unable to finish.

Another voice completed Faces Sunward's thought. "It seems like a very cruel ecosystem. Why was the planet not abandoned?"

"That has been debated, naturally, Robert. But we do not abandon planets lightly. There are many souls for whom Fire World is home. They will not be uprooted against their will." I looked away, back at my notes, in an attempt to end the side discussion.

"But it's barbaric!"

Robert was physically younger than most of the other students-closer to my age, in fact, than any other. And truly a child in a more important way. Earth was his first world-the Mother in this case had actually been an Earth-dweller, too, before she'd given herself-and he didn't seem to have as much perspective as older, better-traveled souls. I wondered what it would be like to be born into the overwhelming sensation and emotion of these hosts with no prior experience for balance. It would be difficult to find objectivity. I tried to remember that and be especially patient as I answered him.

"Every world is a unique experience. Unless one has lived on that world, it's impossible to truly understand the -"

"But you never lived on Fire World," he interrupted me. "You must have felt the same way.... Unless you had some other reason for skipping that planet? You've been almost everywhere else."

"Choosing a planet is a very personal and private decision, Robert, as you may someday experience." My tone closed the subject absolutely.

Why not tell them? You do think it's barbaric-and cruel and wrong. Which is pretty ironic if you ask me-not that you ever do. What's the problem? Are you ashamed that you agree with Robert? Because he's more human than the others?

Melanie having found her voice was becoming downright unbearable. How was I supposed to

concentrate on my work with her opinions sounding off in my head all the time?

In the seat behind Robert, a dark shadow moved.

The Seeker, clad in her usual black, leaned forward, intent for the first time on the subject of discussion.

I resisted the urge to scowl at her. I didn't want Robert, already looking embarrassed, to mistake the expression as meant for him. Melanie grumbled. She wished I wouldn't resist. Having the Seeker stalk our every footstep had been educational for Melanie; she used to think she couldn't hate anything or anyone more than she hated me.

"Our time is almost up," I announced with relief. "I'm pleased to inform you that we will have a guest speaker next Tuesday who will be able to make up for my ignorance on this topic. Flame Tender, a recent addition to our planet, will be here to give us a more personal account of the settling of Fire World. I know that you will give him all the courtesy you accord me, and be respectful of the very young age of his host. Thank you for your time."

The class filed out slowly, many of the students taking a minute to chat with one another as they gathered their things. What Kathy had said about friendships ran through my head, but I felt no desire to join any of them. They were strangers.

Was that the way I felt? Or the way Melanie felt? It was hard to tell. Maybe I was naturally antisocial. My personal history supported that theory, I supposed. I'd never formed an attachment strong enough to keep me on any planet for more than one life.

I noticed Robert and Faces Sunward lingering at the classroom door, locked in a discussion that seemed intense. I could guess the subject.

"Fire World stories ruffle feathers."

I started slightly.

The Seeker was standing at my elbow. The woman usually announced her approach with the quick tap of her hard shoes. I looked down now to see that she was wearing sneakers for once-black, of course. She was even tinier without the extra inches.

"It's not my favorite subject," I said in a bland voice. "I prefer to have firsthand experience to share."

"Strong reactions from the class."

"Yes."

She looked at me expectantly, as if waiting for more. I gathered my notes and turned to put them in my bag.

"You seemed to react as well."

I placed my papers in the bag carefully, not turning.

"I wondered why you didn't answer the question."

There was a pause while she waited for me to respond. I didn't.

"So... why didn't you answer the question?"

I turned around, not concealing the impatience on my face. "Because it wasn't pertinent to the lesson, because Robert needs to learn some manners, and because it's no one else's business."

I swung my bag to my shoulder and headed for the door. She stayed right beside me, rushing to keep up with my longer legs. We walked down the hallway in silence. It wasn't until we were outside, where the afternoon sun lit the dust motes in the salty air, that she spoke again.

"Do you think you'll ever settle, Wanderer? On this planet, maybe? You seem to have an affinity for their... feelings."

I bridled at the implied insult in her tone. I wasn't even sure how she meant to insult me, but it was clear that she did. Melanie stirred resentfully.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Tell me something, Wanderer. Do you pity them?"

"Who?" I asked blankly. "The Walking Flowers?"

"No, the humans."

I stopped walking, and she skidded to a halt beside me. We were only a few blocks from my apartment, and I'd been hurrying in hopes of getting away from her, though likely as not, she'd invite herself in. But her question caught me off guard.

"The humans?"

"Yes. Do you pity them?"

"Don't you?"

“No. They were quite the brutal race. They were lucky to survive each other as long as they did.”

“Not every one of them was bad.”

“It was a predilection of their genetics. Brutality was part of their species. But you pity them, it seems.”

“It’s a lot to lose, don’t you think?” I gestured around us. We stood in a parklike space between two ivy-covered dormitories. The deep green of the ivy was pleasing to the eye, especially in contrast to the faded red of the old bricks. The air was golden and soft, and the smell of the ocean gave a briny edge to the honey sweet fragrance of the flowers in the bushes. The breeze caressed the bare skin of my arms. “In your other lives, you can’t have felt anything so vivid. Wouldn’t you pity anyone who had this taken from them?” Her expression stayed flat, unmoved. I made an attempt to draw her in, to make her consider another viewpoint. “Which other worlds have you lived on?”

She hesitated, then squared her shoulders. “None. I’ve only lived on Earth.”

That surprised me. She was as much a child as Robert. “Only one planet? And you chose to be a Seeker in your first life?”

She nodded once, her chin set.

“Well. Well, that’s your business.” I started walking again. Maybe if I respected her privacy, she would return the favor.

“I spoke to your Comforter.”

And maybe not, Melanie thought sourly.

“What?” I gasped.

“I gather you’ve been having more trouble than just accessing the information I need. Have you considered trying another, more pliable host? She suggested that, did she not?”

“Kathy wouldn’t tell you anything!”

The Seeker’s face was smug. “She didn’t have to answer. I’m very good at reading human expressions. I could tell when my questions struck a nerve.”

“How dare you? The relationship between a soul and her Comforter -“

“Is sacrosanct, yes; I know the theory. But the acceptable means of investigation don’t seem to be working with your case. I have to get creative.”

“You think I’m keeping something from you?” I demanded, too angry to control the disgust in my voice. “You think I confided that to my Comforter?”

My anger didn’t faze her. Perhaps, given her strange personality, she was used to such reactions.

“No. I think you’re telling me what you know.... But I don’t think you’re looking as hard as you could. I’ve seen it before. You’re growing sympathetic to your host. You’re letting her memories unconsciously direct your own desires. It’s probably too late at this point. I think you’d be more comfortable moving on, and maybe someone else will have better luck with her.”

“Hah!” I shouted. “Melanie would eat them alive!”

Her expression froze in place.

She’d had no idea, no matter what she thought she’d discerned from Kathy. She’d thought Melanie’s influence was from memories, that it was unconscious.

“I find it very interesting that you speak of her in the present tense.”

I ignored that, trying to pretend I hadn’t made a slip. “If you think someone else would have better luck breaking into her secrets, you’re wrong.”

“Only one way to find out.”

“Did you have someone in mind?” I asked, my voice frigid with aversion.

She grinned. “I’ve gotten permission to give it a try. Shouldn’t take long. They’re going to hold my host for me.”

I had to breathe deeply. I was shaking, and Melanie was so full of hate that she was past words. The idea of having the Seeker inside me, even though I knew that I would not be here, was so repugnant that I felt a return of last week’s nausea.

“It’s too bad for your investigation that I’m not a skipper.”

The Seeker’s eyes narrowed. “Well, it does certainly make this assignment drag on. History was never of much interest to me, but it looks like I’m in for a full course now.”

“You just said that it was probably too late to get any more from her memories,” I reminded her, struggling to make my voice calm. “Why don’t you go back to wherever you belong?”

She shrugged and smiled a tight smile. “I’m sure it is too late... for voluntary information. But if you don’t

cooperate, she might just lead me to them yet.”

“Lead you?”

“When she takes full control, and you’re no better than that weakling, once Racing Song, now Kevin. Remember him? The one who attacked the Healer?”

I stared at her, eyes wide, nostrils flared.

“Yes, it’s probably just a matter of time. Your Comforter didn’t tell you the statistics, did she? Well, even if she did, she wouldn’t have the latest information that we have access to. The long-term success rate for situations such as yours-once a human host begins to resist-is under twenty percent. Did you have any idea it was so bad? They’re changing the information they give potential settlers. There will be no more adult hosts offered. The risks are too great. We’re losing souls. It won’t be long before she’s talking to you, talking through you, controlling your decisions.”

I hadn’t moved an inch or relaxed a muscle. The Seeker leaned in, stretched up on her toes to put her face closer to mine. Her voice turned low and smooth in an attempt to sound persuasive.

“Is that what you want, Wanderer? To lose? To fade away, erased by another awareness? To be no better than a host body?”

I couldn’t breathe.

“It only gets worse. You won’t be you anymore. She’ll beat you, and you’ll disappear. Maybe someone will intervene... Maybe they’ll move you like they did Kevin. And you’ll become some child named Melanie who likes to tinker with cars rather than compose music. Or whatever it is she does.”

“The success rate is under twenty percent?” I whispered.

She nodded, trying to suppress a smile. “You’re losing yourself, Wanderer. All the worlds you’ve seen, all the experiences you’ve collected-they’ll be for nothing. I saw in your file that you have the potential for Motherhood. If you gave yourself to be a Mother, at least all that would not be entirely wasted. Why throw yourself away? Have you considered Motherhood?”

I jerked away from her, my face flushing.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, her face darkening, too. “That was impolite. Forget I said that.”

“I’m going home. Don’t follow.”

“I have to, Wanderer. It’s my job.”

“Why do you care so much about a few spare humans? Why? How do you justify your job anymore? We’ve won! It’s time for you to join society and do something productive!”

My questions, my implied accusations, did not ruffle her.

“Wherever the fringes of their world touch ours there is death.” She spoke the words peacefully, and for a moment I glimpsed a different person in her face. It surprised me to realize that she deeply believed in what she did. Part of me had supposed that she only chose to seek because she illicitly craved the violence. “If even one soul is lost to your Jared or your Jamie, that is one soul too many. Until there is total peace on this planet, my job will be justified. As long as there are Jareds surviving, I am needed to protect our kind. As long as there are Melanies leading souls around by the nose...”

I turned my back on her and headed for my apartment with long strides that would force her to run if she wanted to keep up.

“Don’t lose yourself, Wanderer!” she called after me. “Time is running out for you!” She paused, then shouted more loudly. “Inform me when I’m to start calling you Melanie!”

Her voice faded as the space between us grew. I knew she would follow at her own pace. This last uncomfortable week-seeing her face in the back of every class, hearing her footsteps behind me on the sidewalk every day-was nothing compared to what was coming. She was going to make my life a misery.

It felt as if Melanie were bouncing violently against the inner walls of my skull.

Let’s get her canned. Tell her higher-ups that she did something unacceptable. Assaulted us. It’s our word against hers -

In a human world, I reminded her, almost sad that I didn’t have access to that sort of recourse. There are no higher-ups, in that sense. Everyone works together as equals. There are those whom many report to, in order to keep the information organized, and councils who make decisions about that information, but they won’t remove her from an assignment she wants. You see, it works like -

Who cares how it works if it doesn’t help us? I know-let’s kill her! A gratuitous image of my hands tightening around the Seeker’s neck filled my head.

That sort of thing is exactly why my kind is better left in charge of this place.

Get off your high horse. You don't enjoy it as much as I would. The image returned, the Seeker's face turning blue in our imagination, but this time it was accompanied by a fierce wave of pleasure.

That's you, not me. My statement was true; the image sickened me. But it was also perilously close to false-in that I would very much enjoy never seeing the Seeker again.

What do we do now? I'm not giving up. You're not giving up. And that wretched Seeker is sure as hell not giving up!

I didn't answer her. I didn't have a ready answer.

It was quiet in my head for a brief moment. That was nice. I wished the silence could last. But there was only one way to buy my peace. Was I willing to pay the price? Did I have a choice anymore?

Melanie slowly calmed. By the time I was through the front door, locking behind me the bolts that I had never before turned-human artifacts that had no place in a peaceful world-her thoughts were contemplative.

I'd never thought about how you all carry on your species. I didn't know it was like that.

We take it very seriously, as you can imagine. Thanks for your concern. She wasn't bothered by the thick edge of irony in the thought.

She was still musing over this discovery while I turned on my computer and began to look for shuttle flights. It was a moment before she was aware of what I was doing.

Where are we going? The thought held a flicker of panic. I felt her awareness begin to rifle through my head, her touch like the soft brush of feathers, searching for anything I might be keeping from her.

I decided to save her the search. I'm going to Chicago.

The panic was more than a flicker now. Why?

I'm going to see the Healer. I don't trust her. I want to talk to him before I make my decision.

There was a brief silence before she spoke again.

The decision to kill me?

Yes, that one.

The Host

CHAPTER 8

Loved

"You're afraid to fly?" The Seeker's voice was full of disbelief edging toward mockery. "You've traveled through deep space eight times and you're afraid to take a shuttle to Tucson, Arizona?"

"First of all, I'm not afraid. Second, when I traveled through deep space I wasn't exactly aware of where I was, what with being stored in a hibernation chamber. And third, this host gets motion sickness on shuttles."

The Seeker rolled her eyes in disgust. "So take medication! What would you have done if Healer Fords hadn't relocated to Saint Mary's? Would you be driving to Chicago?"

"No. But since the option of driving is now reasonable, I will take it. It will be nice to see a bit more of this world. The desert can be stunning -"

"The desert is dead boring."

"-and I'm not in any hurry. I have many things to think through, and I will appreciate some time alone." I looked pointedly at her as I emphasized the last word.

"I don't understand the point of visiting your old Healer anyway. There are many competent Healers here."

"I'm comfortable with Healer Fords. He has experience with this, and I don't trust that I have all the information I need." I gave her another significant look.

"You don't have time to not hurry, Wanderer. I recognize the signs."

"Forgive me if I don't consider your information impartial. I know enough of human behavior to recognize the signs of manipulation."

She glowered at me.

I was packing my rental car with the few things I planned to take with me. I had enough clothes to go a week between washing, and the basic hygiene necessities. Though I wasn't bringing much, I was leaving even less behind. I'd accumulated very little in the way of personal belongings. After all these months in my small apartment, the walls were still bare, the shelves empty. Perhaps I'd never meant to settle here.

The Seeker was planted on the sidewalk next to my open trunk, assailing me with snide questions and comments whenever I was in hearing distance. At least I was secure in the belief that she was far too impatient

Comments wherever I was in hearing distance. At least I was secure in the belief that she was far too impatient to follow me on the road. She would take a shuttle to Tucson, just as she was hoping to shame me into doing. It was a huge relief. I imagined her joining me every time I stopped to eat, hovering outside gas station bathrooms, her inexhaustible inquisitions waiting for me whenever my vehicle paused at a light. I shuddered at the thought. If a new body meant freeing myself of the Seeker... well, that was quite an inducement.

I had another choice, too. I could abandon this entire world as a failure and move on to a tenth planet. I could work to forget this whole experience. Earth could be just a short blip in my otherwise spotless record.

But where would I go? A planet I'd already experienced? The Singing World had been one of my favorites, but to give up sight for blindness? The Planet of the Flowers was lovely.... Yet chlorophyll-based life-forms had so little range of emotion. It would feel unbearably slow after the tempo of this human place.

A new planet? There was a recent acquisition-here on Earth, they were calling the new hosts Dolphins for lack of a better comparison, though they resembled dragonflies more than marine mammals. A highly developed species, and certainly mobile, but after my long stay with the See Weeds, the thought of another water planet was repugnant to me.

No, there was still so much to this planet that I hadn't experienced. Nowhere else in the known universe called to me as strongly as this shady little green yard on this quiet street. Or held the lure of the empty desert sky, which I'd seen only in Melanie's memories.

Melanie did not share her opinion on my options. She had been very quiet since my decision to find Fords Deep Waters, my first Healer. I wasn't sure what the detachment meant. Was she trying to seem less dangerous, less of a burden? Was she preparing herself for the invasion of the Seeker? For death? Or was she preparing to fight me? To try to take over?

Whatever her plan, she kept herself distant. She was just a faint, watchful presence in the back of my head.

I made my last trip inside, searching for anything forgotten. The apartment looked empty. There were only the basic furnishings that had been left by the last tenant. The same plates were still in the cupboards, the pillows on the bed, the lamps on the tables; if I didn't come back, there would be little for the next tenant to clear out.

The phone rang as I was stepping out the door, and I turned back to get it, but I was too late. I'd already set the message system to answer on the first ring. I knew what the caller would hear: my vague explanation that I would be out the rest of the semester, and that my classes would be canceled until a replacement could be found. No reason given. I looked at the clock on top of the television. It was barely past eight in the morning. I was sure it must be Curt on the phone, having just received the only slightly more detailed e-mail I'd sent him late last night. I felt guilty about not finishing out my commitment to him, almost like I was already skipping. Perhaps this step, this quitting, was the prelude to my next decision, my greater shame. The thought was uncomfortable. It made me unwilling to listen to whatever the message said, though I wasn't in any real hurry to leave.

I looked around the empty apartment one more time. There was no sense of leaving anything behind me, no fondness for these rooms. I had the strange feeling that this world-not just Melanie, but the entire orb of the planet-did not want me, no matter how much I wanted it. I just couldn't seem to get my roots in. I smiled wryly at the thought of roots. This feeling was just superstitious nonsense.

I'd never had a host that was capable of superstition. It was an interesting sensation. Like knowing you were being watched without being able to find the watcher. It raised goose bumps on the nape of my neck.

I shut the door firmly behind me but did not touch the obsolete locks. No one would disturb this place until I returned or it was given to someone new.

Without looking at the Seeker, I climbed into the car. I hadn't done much driving, and neither had Melanie, so this made me a bit nervous. But I was sure I would get used to it soon enough.

"I'll be waiting for you in Tucson," the Seeker said, leaning in the open passenger-side window as I started the engine.

"I have no doubt of that," I muttered.

I found the controls on the door panel. Trying to hide a smile, I hit the button to raise the glass and watched her jump back.

"Maybe...," she said, raising her voice to almost a shout so that I could hear her over the engine noise and through the closed window, "maybe I'll try it your way. Maybe I'll see you on the road."

She smiled and shrugged.

She was just saying it to upset me. I tried not to let her see that she had. I focused my eyes on the road ahead and pulled carefully away from the curb.

It was easy enough to find the freeway and then follow the signs out of San Diego. Soon there were no

signs to follow, no wrong turns to take. In eight hours I would be in Tucson. It wasn't long enough. Perhaps I would stay a night in some small town along the way. If I could be sure that the Seeker would be ahead, waiting impatiently, rather than following behind, a stop would be a nice delay.

I found myself looking in the rearview mirror often, searching for a sign of pursuit. I was driving slower than anyone else, unwilling to reach my destination, and the other cars passed me without pause. There were no faces I recognized as they moved ahead. I shouldn't have let the Seeker's taunt bother me; she clearly didn't have the temperament to go anywhere slowly. Still... I continued to watch for her.

I'd been west to the ocean, north and south up and down the pretty California coastline, but I'd never been east for any distance at all. Civilization fell behind me quickly, and I was soon surrounded by the blank hills and rocks that were the precursors to the empty desert wastelands.

It was very relaxing to be away from civilization, and this bothered me. I should not have found the loneliness so welcoming. Souls were sociable. We lived and worked and grew together in harmony. We were all the same: peaceful, friendly, honest. Why should I feel better away from my kind? Was it Melanie who made me this way?

I searched for her but found her remote, dreaming in the back of my head.

This was the best it had been since she'd started talking again.

The miles passed quickly. The dark, rough rocks and the dusty plains covered in scrub flew by with monotonous uniformity. I realized I was driving faster than I'd meant to. There wasn't anything to keep my mind occupied here, so I found it hard to linger. Absently, I wondered why the desert was so much more colorful in Melanie's memories, so much more compelling. I let my mind coast with hers, trying to see what it was that was special about this vacant place.

But she wasn't seeing the sparse, dead land surrounding us. She was dreaming of another desert, canyoned and red, a magical place. She didn't try to keep me out. In fact, she seemed almost unaware of my presence. I questioned again what her detachment meant. I sensed no thought of attack. It felt more like a preparation for the end.

She was living in a happier place in her memory, as if she were saying goodbye. It was a place she had never allowed me to see before.

There was a cabin, an ingenious dwelling tucked into a nook in the red sandstone, perilously close to the flash flood line. An unlikely place, far from any trail or path, built in what seemed a senseless location. A rough place, without any of the conveniences of modern technology. She remembered laughing at the sink one had to pump to pull water up from the ground.

"It beats pipes," Jared says, the crease between his eyes deepening as his brows pull together. He seems worried by my laugh. Is he afraid I don't like it? "Nothing to trace, no evidence that we're here."

"I love it," I say quickly. "It's like an old movie. It's perfect."

The smile that never truly leaves his face—he smiles even in his sleep—grows wide. "They don't tell you the worst parts in the movies. C'mon, I'll show you where the latrine is."

I hear Jamie's laughter echo through the narrow canyon as he runs ahead of us. His black hair bounces with his body. He bounces all the time now, this thin boy with the sun-darkened skin. I hadn't realized how much weight those narrow shoulders were carrying. With Jared, he is positively buoyant. The anxious expression has faded, replaced by grins. We are both more resilient than I gave us credit for.

"Who built this place?"

"My father and older brothers. I helped, or rather hindered, a little. My dad loved to get away from everything. And he didn't care much about convention. He never bothered to find out who the land actually belonged to or file permits or any of that pesky stuff." Jared laughs, throwing his head back. The sun dances off the blond bits in his hair. "Officially, this place doesn't exist. Convenient, isn't it?" Without seeming to think about it, he reaches out and takes my hand.

My skin burns where it meets his. It feels better than good, but it sets off a strange aching in my chest.

He is forever touching me this way, always seeming to need to reassure himself that I am here. Does he realize what it does to me, the simple pressure of his warm palm next to mine? Does his pulse jump in his veins, too? Or is he just happy to not be alone anymore?

He swings our arms as we walk beneath a little stand of cottonwood trees, their green so vivid against the red that it plays tricks on my eyes, confusing my focus. He is happy here, happier than in other places. I feel happy, too. The feeling is still unfamiliar.

He hasn't kissed me since that first night, when I screamed, finding the scar on his neck. Does he not want

to kiss me again? Should I kiss him? What if he doesn't like that?

He looks down at me and smiles, the lines around his eyes crinkling into little webs. I wonder if he is as handsome as I think he is, or if it's just that he's the only person left in the whole world besides Jamie and me.

No, I don't think that's it. He really is beautiful.

"What are you thinking, Mel?" he asks. "You seem to be concentrating on something very important." He laughs.

I shrug, and my stomach flutters. "It's beautiful here."

He looks around us. "Yes. But then, isn't home always beautiful?"

"Home." I repeat the word quietly. "Home."

"Your home, too, if you want it."

"I want it." It seems like every mile I've walked in the past three years has been toward this place. I never want to leave, though I know we'll have to. Food doesn't grow on trees. Not in the desert, at least.

He squeezes my hand, and my heart punches against my ribs. It's just like pain, this pleasure.

There was a blurring sensation as Melanie skipped ahead, her thoughts dancing through the hot day until hours after the sun had fallen behind the red canyon walls. I went along, almost hypnotized by the endless road stretching ahead of me, the skeletal bushes flying by with mind-numbing sameness.

I peek into the one narrow little bedroom. The full-size mattress is only inches away from the rough stone walls on either side.

It gives me a deep, rich sense of joy to see Jamie asleep on a real bed, his head on a soft pillow. His lanky arms and legs sprawl out, leaving little room for me where I am meant to sleep. He is so much bigger in reality than the way I see him in my head. Almost ten-soon he won't be a child at all. Except that he will always be a child to me.

Jamie breathes evenly, sleeping sound. There is no fear in his dream, for this moment at least.

I shut the door quietly and go back to the small couch where Jared waits.

"Thank you," I whisper, though I know shouting the words wouldn't wake Jamie now. "I feel bad. This couch is much too short for you. Maybe you should take the bed with Jamie."

Jared chuckles. "Mel, you're only a few inches shorter than I am. Sleep comfortably, for once. Next time I'm out, I'll steal myself a cot or something."

I don't like this, for lots of reasons. Will he be leaving soon? Will he take us with him when he goes? Does he see this room assignment as a permanent thing?

He drops his arm around my shoulders and tucks me against his side. I scoot closer, though the heat of touching him has my heart aching again.

"Why the frown?" he asks.

"When will you... when will we have to leave again?"

He shrugs. "We scavenged enough on our way up that we're set for a few months. I can do a few short raids if you want to stay in one place for a while. I'm sure you're tired of running."

"Yes, I am," I agree. I take a deep breath to make me brave. "But if you go, I go."

He hugs me tighter. "I'll admit, I prefer it that way. The thought of being separated from you..." He laughs quietly. "Does it sound crazy to say that I'd rather die? Too melodramatic?"

"No, I know what you mean."

He must feel the same way I do. Would he say these things if he thought of me as just another human, and not as a woman?

I realize that this is the first time we've ever been really alone since the night we met-the first time there's been a door to close between a sleeping Jamie and the two of us. So many nights we've stayed awake, talking in whispers, telling all of our stories, the happy stories and the horror stories, always with Jamie's head cradled on my lap. It makes my breath come faster, that simple closed door.

"I don't think you need to find a cot, not yet."

I feel his eyes on me, questioning, but I can't meet them. I'm embarrassed now, too late. The words are out.

"We'll stay here until the food is gone, don't worry. I've slept on worse things than this couch."

"That's not what I mean," I say, still looking down.

"You get the bed, Mel. I'm not budging on that."

"That's not what I mean, either." It's barely a whisper. "I meant the couch is plenty big for Jamie. He won't outgrow it for a long time. I could share the bed with... you."

There is a pause. I want to look up, to read the expression on his face, but I'm too mortified. What if he is

disgusted? How will I stand it? Will he make me go away?

His warm, callused fingers tug my chin up. My heart throbs when our eyes meet.

“Mel, I...” His face, for once, has no smile.

I try to look away, but he holds my chin so that my gaze can't escape his. Does he not feel the fire between his body and mine? Is that all me? How can it all be me? It feels like a flat sun trapped between us-pressed like a flower between the pages of a thick book, burning the paper. Does it feel like something else to him? Something bad?

After a moment, his head turns; he's the one looking away now, still keeping his grip on my chin. His voice is quiet. “You don't owe me that, Melanie. You don't owe me anything at all.”

It's hard for me to swallow. “I'm not saying... I didn't mean that I felt obligated. And... you shouldn't, either. Forget I said anything.”

“Not likely, Mel.”

He sighs, and I want to disappear. Give up-lose my mind to the invaders if that's what it takes to erase this huge blunder. Trade the future to blot out the last two minutes of the past. Anything.

Jared takes a deep breath. He squints at the floor, his eyes and jaw tight. “Mel, it doesn't have to be like that. Just because we're together, just because we're the last man and woman on Earth...” He struggles for words, something I don't think I've ever seen him do before. “That doesn't mean you have to do anything you don't want to. I'm not the kind of man who would expect... You don't have to...”

He looks so upset, still frowning away, that I find myself speaking, though I know it's a mistake before I start. “That's not what I mean,” I mutter. “‘Have to’ is not what I'm talking about, and I don't think you're ‘that kind of man.’ No. Of course not. It's just that -“

Just that I love him. I grit my teeth together before I can humiliate myself more. I should bite my tongue off right now before it ruins anything else.

“Just that... ?” he asks.

I try to shake my head, but he's still holding my chin tight between his fingers.

“Mel?”

I yank free and shake my head fiercely.

He leans closer to me, and his face is different suddenly. There's a new conflict I don't recognize in his expression, and even though I don't understand it completely, it erases the feeling of rejection that's making my eyes sting.

“Will you talk to me? Please?” he murmurs. I can feel his breath on my cheek, and it's a few seconds before I can think at all.

His eyes make me forget that I am mortified, that I wanted to never speak again.

“If I got to pick anyone, anyone at all, to be stranded on a deserted planet with, it would be you,” I whisper. The sun between us burns hotter. “I always want to be with you. And not just... not just to talk to. When you touch me...” I dare to let my fingers brush lightly along the warm skin of his arm, and it feels like the flames are flowing from their tips now. His arm tightens around me. Does he feel the fire? “I don't want you to stop.” I want to be more exact, but I can't find the words. That's fine. It's bad enough having admitted this much. “If you don't feel the same way, I understand. Maybe it isn't the same for you. That's okay.” Lies.

“Oh, Mel,” he sighs in my ear, and pulls my face around to meet his.

More flames in his lips, fiercer than the others, blistering. I don't know what I'm doing, but it doesn't seem to matter. His hands are in my hair, and my heart is about to combust. I can't breathe. I don't want to breathe.

But his lips move to my ear, and he holds my face when I try to find them again.

“It was a miracle-more than a miracle-when I found you, Melanie. Right now, if I was given the choice between having the world back and having you, I wouldn't be able to give you up. Not to save five billion lives.”

“That's wrong.”

“Very wrong but very true.”

“Jared,” I breathe. I try to reach for his lips again. He pulls away, looking like he has something to say. What more can there be?

“But...”

“But?” How can there be a but? What could possibly follow all this fire that starts with a but?

“But you're seventeen, Melanie. And I'm twenty-six.”

“What's that got to do with anything?”

He doesn't answer. His hands stroke my arms slowly, pointing them with fire.

he doesn't answer. His hands stroke my arms slowly, painting them with me.

"You've got to be kidding me." I lean back to search his face. "You're going to worry about conventions when we're past the end of the world?"

He swallows loudly before he speaks. "Most conventions exist for a reason, Mel. I would feel like a bad person, like I was taking advantage. You're very young."

"No one's young anymore. Anyone who's survived this long is ancient."

There's a smile pulling up one corner of his mouth. "Maybe you're right. But this isn't something we need to rush."

"What is there to wait for?" I demand.

He hesitates for a long moment, thinking.

"Well, for one thing, there are some... practical matters to consider."

I wonder if he is just searching for a distraction, trying to stall. That's what it feels like. I raise one eyebrow. I can't believe the turn this conversation has taken. If he really does want me, this is senseless.

"See," he explains, hesitating. Under the deep golden tan of his skin, it looks like he might be blushing. "When I was stocking this place, I wasn't much planning for... guests. What I mean is..." The rest comes out in a rush. "Birth control was pretty much the last thing on my mind."

I feel my forehead crease. "Oh."

The smile is gone from his face, and for one short second there is a flash of anger I've never seen there before. It makes him look dangerous in a way I hadn't imagined he could. "This isn't the kind of world I'd want to bring a child into."

The words sink in, and I cringe at the thought of a tiny, innocent baby opening his eyes to this place. It's bad enough to watch Jamie's eyes, to know what this life will bring him, even in the best possible circumstances.

Jared is suddenly Jared again. The skin around his eyes crinkles. "Besides, we've got plenty of time to... think about this." Stalling again, I suspect. "Do you realize how very, very little time we've been together so far? It's been just four weeks since we found each other."

This floors me. "That can't be."

"Twenty-nine days. I'm counting."

I think back. It's not possible that it has been only twenty-nine days since Jared changed our lives. It seems like Jamie and I have been with Jared every bit as long as we were alone. Two or three years, maybe.

"We've got time," Jared says again.

An abrupt panic, like a warning premonition, makes it impossible for me to speak for a long moment. He watches the change on my face with worried eyes.

"You don't know that." The despair that softened when he found me strikes like the lash of a whip. "You can't know how much time we'll have. You don't know if we should be counting in months or days or hours."

He laughs a warm laugh, touching his lips to the tense place where my eyebrows pull together. "Don't worry, Mel. Miracles don't work that way. I'll never lose you. I'll never let you get away from me."

She brought me back to the present-to the thin ribbon of the highway winding through the Arizona wasteland, baking under the fierce noon sun-without my choosing to return. I stared at the empty place ahead and felt the empty place inside.

Her thought sighed faintly in my head: You never know how much time you'll have.

The tears I was crying belonged to both of us.

The Host

CHAPTER 9

Discovered

I drove quickly through the I-10 junction as the sun fell behind me. I didn't see much besides the white and yellow lines on the pavement, and the occasional big green sign pointing me farther east. I was in a hurry now.

I wasn't sure exactly what I was in a hurry for, though. To be out of this, I supposed. Out of pain, out of sadness, out of aching for lost and hopeless loves. Did that mean out of this body? I couldn't think of any other answer. I would still ask my questions of the Healer, but it felt as though the decision was made. Skipper. Quitter. I tested the words in my head, trying to come to terms with them.

Quiet. I tested the words in my head, trying to come to terms with them.

If I could find a way, I would keep Melanie out of the Seeker's hands. It would be very hard. No, it would be impossible.

I would try.

I promised her this, but she wasn't listening. She was still dreaming. Giving up, I thought, now that it was too late for giving up to help.

I tried to stay clear of the red canyon in her head, but I was there, too. No matter how hard I tried to see the cars zooming beside me, the shuttles gliding in toward the port, the few, fine clouds drifting overhead, I couldn't pull completely free of her dreams. I memorized Jared's face from a thousand different angles. I watched Jamie shoot up in a sudden growth spurt, always skin and bones. My arms ached for them both-no, the feeling was sharper than an ache, blade-edged and violent. It was intolerable. I had to get out.

I drove almost blindly along the narrow two-lane freeway. The desert was, if anything, more monotonous and dead than before. Flatter, more colorless. I would make it to Tucson long before dinnertime. Dinner. I hadn't eaten yet today, and my stomach rumbled as I realized that.

The Seeker would be waiting for me there. My stomach rolled then, hunger momentarily replaced with nausea. Automatically, my foot eased off the gas.

I checked the map on the passenger seat. Soon I would reach a little pit stop at a place called Picacho Peak. Maybe I would stop to eat something there. Put off seeing the Seeker a few precious moments.

As I thought of this unfamiliar name-Picacho Peak-there was a strange, stifled reaction from Melanie. I couldn't make it out. Had she been here before? I searched for a memory, a sight or a smell that corresponded, but found nothing. Picacho Peak. Again, there was that spike of interest that Melanie repressed. What did the words mean to her? She retreated into faraway memories, avoiding me.

This made me curious. I drove a little faster, wondering if the sight of the place would trigger something.

A solitary mountain peak-not massive by normal standards, but towering above the low, rough hills closer to me-was beginning to take shape on the horizon. It had an unusual, distinctive shape. Melanie watched it grow as we traveled, pretending indifference to it.

Why did she pretend not to care when she so obviously did? I was disturbed by her strength when I tried to find out. I couldn't see any way around the old blank wall. It felt thicker than usual, though I'd thought it was almost gone.

I tried to ignore her, not wanting to think about that-that she was growing stronger. I watched the peak instead, tracing its shape against the pale, hot sky. There was something familiar about it. Something I was sure I recognized, even as I was positive that neither of us had been here before.

Almost as if she was trying to distract me, Melanie plunged into a vivid memory of Jared, catching me by surprise.

I shiver in my jacket, straining my eyes to see the muted glare of the sun dying behind the thick, bristly trees. I tell myself that it is not as cold as I think it is. My body just isn't used to this.

The hands that are suddenly there on my shoulders do not startle me, though I am afraid of this unfamiliar place and I did not hear his silent approach. Their weight is too familiar.

"You're easy to sneak up on."

Even now, there is a smile in his voice.

"I saw you coming before you took the first step," I say without turning. "I have eyes in the back of my head."

Warm fingers stroke my face from my temple to my chin, dragging fire along my skin.

"You look like a dryad hidden here in the trees," he whispers in my ear. "One of them. So beautiful that you must be fictional."

"We should plant more trees around the cabin."

He chuckles, and the sound makes my eyes close and my lips stretch into a grin.

"Not necessary," he says. "You always look that way."

"Says the last man on Earth to the last woman on Earth, on the eve of their separation."

My smile fades as I speak. Smiles cannot last today.

He sighs. His breath on my cheek is warm compared to the chill forest air.

"Jamie might resent that implication."

"Jamie's still a boy. Please, please keep him safe."

"I'll make you a deal," Jared offers. "You keep yourself safe, and I'll do my best. Otherwise, no deal."

Just a joke, but I can't take it lightly. Once we are apart, there are no guarantees. "No matter what

happens,” I insist.

“Nothing’s going to happen. Don’t worry.” The words are nearly meaningless. A waste of effort. But his voice is worth hearing, no matter the message.

“Okay.”

He pulls me around to face him, and I lean my head against his chest. I don’t know what to compare his scent to. It is his own, as unique as the smell of juniper or the desert rain.

“You and I won’t lose each other,” he promises. “I will always find you again.” Being Jared, he cannot be completely serious for more than a heartbeat or two. “No matter how well you hide. I’m unstoppable at hide-and-seek.”

“Will you give me to the count of ten?”

“Without peeking.”

“You’re on,” I mumble, trying to disguise the fact that my throat is thick with tears.

“Don’t be afraid. You’ll be fine. You’re strong, you’re fast, and you’re smart.” He’s trying to convince himself, too.

Why am I leaving him? It’s such a long shot that Sharon is still human.

But when I saw her face on the news, I was so sure.

It was just a normal raid, one of a thousand. As usual when we felt isolated enough, safe enough, we had the TV on as we cleaned out the pantry and fridge. Just to get the weather forecast; there isn’t much entertainment in the dead-boring everything-is-perfect reports that pass for news among the parasites. It was the hair that caught my eye—the flash of deep, almost pink red that I’d only ever seen on one person.

I can still see the look on her face as she peeked at the camera from the corner of one eye. The look that said, I’m trying to be invisible; don’t see me. She walked not quite slowly enough, working too hard at keeping a casual pace. Trying desperately to blend in.

No body snatcher would feel that need.

What is Sharon doing walking around human in a huge city like Chicago? Are there others? Trying to find her doesn’t even seem like a choice, really. If there is a chance there are more humans out there, we have to locate them.

And I have to go alone. Sharon will run from anyone but me—well, she will run from me, too, but maybe she will pause long enough for me to explain. I am sure I know her secret place.

“And you?” I ask him in a thick voice. I’m not sure I can physically bear this looming goodbye. “Will you be safe?”

“Neither heaven nor hell can keep me apart from you, Melanie.”

Without giving me a chance to catch my breath or wipe away the fresh tears, she threw another at me.

Jamie curls up under my arm—he doesn’t fit the way he used to. He has to fold in on himself, his long, gangly limbs poking out in sharp angles. His arms are starting to turn hard and sinewy, but in this moment he’s a child, shaking, cowering almost. Jared is loading the car. Jamie would not show this fear if he were here. Jamie wants to be brave, to be like Jared.

“I’m scared,” he whispers.

I kiss his night-dark hair. Even here among the sharp, resinous trees, it smells like dust and sun. It feels like he is part of me, that to separate us will tear the skin where we are joined.

“You’ll be fine with Jared.” I have to sound brave, whether I feel that way or not.

“I know that. I’m scared for you. I’m scared you won’t come back. Like Dad.”

I flinch. When Dad didn’t come back—though his body did eventually, trying to lead the Seekers to us—it was the most horror and the most fear and the most pain I’d ever felt. What if I do that to Jamie again?

“I’ll come back. I always come back.”

“I’m scared,” he says again.

I have to be brave.

“I promise everything will be fine. I’m coming back. I promise. You know I won’t break a promise, Jamie. Not to you.”

The shaking slows. He believes me. He trusts me.

And another:

I can hear them on the floor below. They will find me in minutes, or seconds. I scrawl the words on a dirty shred of newsprint. They are nearly illegible, but if he finds them, he will understand:

Not fast enough. Love you love Jamie. Don’t go home.

Not only do I break their hearts, I steal their refuge, too. I picture our little canyon home abandoned, as it must be forever now. Or if not abandoned, a tomb. I see my body leading the Seekers to it. My face smiling as we catch them there...

"Enough," I said out loud, cringing away from the whiplash of pain. "Enough! You've made your point! I can't live without them either now. Does that make you happy? Because it doesn't leave me many choices, does it? Just one-to get rid of you. Do you want the Seeker inside you? Ugh!" I recoiled from the thought as if I would be the one to house her.

There is another choice, Melanie thought softly.

"Really?" I demanded with heavy sarcasm. "Show me one."

Look and see.

I was still staring at the mountain peak. It dominated the landscape, a sudden upthrust of rock surrounded by flat scrubland. Her interest pulled my eyes over the outline, tracing the uneven two-pronged crest.

A slow, rough curve, then a sharp turn north, another sudden turn back the other way, twisting back to the north for a longer stretch, and then the abrupt southern decline that flattened out into another shallow curve.

Not north and south, the way I'd always seen the lines in her piecemeal memories; it was up and down.

The profile of a mountain peak.

The lines that led to Jared and Jamie. This was the first line, the starting point.

I could find them.

We could find them, she corrected me. You don't know all the directions. Just like with the cabin, I never gave you everything.

"I don't understand. Where does it lead? How does a mountain lead us?" My pulse beat faster as I thought of it: Jared was close. Jamie, within my reach.

She showed me the answer.

"They're just lines. And Uncle Jeb is just an old lunatic. A nut job, like the rest of my dad's family." I try to tug the book out of Jared's hands, but he barely seems to notice my effort.

"A nut job, like Sharon's mom?" he counters, still studying the dark pencil marks that deface the back cover of the old photo album. It's the one thing I haven't lost in all the running. Even the graffiti loony Uncle Jeb left on it during his last visit has sentimental value now.

"Point taken." If Sharon is still alive, it will be because her mother, loony Aunt Maggie, could give loony Uncle Jeb a run for the title of Craziest of the Crazy Stryder Siblings. My father had been only slightly touched by the Stryder madness-he didn't have a secret bunker in the backyard or anything. The rest of them, his sister and brothers, Aunt Maggie, Uncle Jeb, and Uncle Guy, were the most devoted of conspiracy theorists. Uncle Guy had died before the others disappeared during the invasion, in a car accident so commonplace that even Maggie and Jeb had struggled to make an intrigue out of it.

My father always affectionately referred to them as the Crazies. "I think it's time we visited the Crazies," Dad would announce, and then Mom would groan-which is why such announcements had happened so seldom.

On one of those rare visits to Chicago, Sharon had snuck me into her mother's hidey-hole. We got caught-the woman had booby traps every-where. Sharon was scolded soundly, and though I was sworn to secrecy, I'd had a sense Aunt Maggie might build a new sanctuary.

But I remember where the first is. I picture Sharon there now, living the life of Anne Frank in the middle of an enemy city. We have to find her and bring her home.

Jared interrupts my reminiscing. "Nut jobs are exactly the kind of people who will have survived. People who saw Big Brother when he wasn't there. People who suspected the rest of humanity before the rest of humanity turned dangerous. People with hiding places ready." Jared grins, still studying the lines. And then his voice is heavier. "People like my father. If he and my brothers had hidden rather than fought... Well, they'd still be here."

My tone is softer, hearing the pain in his. "Okay, I agree with the theory. But these lines don't mean anything."

"Tell me again what he said when he drew them."

I sigh. "They were arguing-Uncle Jeb and my dad. Uncle Jeb was trying to convince him that something was wrong, telling him not to trust anyone. Dad laughed it off. Jeb grabbed the photo album from the end table and started... almost carving the lines into the back cover with a pencil. Dad got mad, said my mom would be angry. Jeb said, 'Linda's mom asked you all to come up for a visit, right? Kind of strange, out of the blue? Got a little upset when only Linda would come? Tell you the truth, Trev, I don't think Linda will be minding anything

much when she gets back. Oh, she might act like it, but you'll be able to tell the difference. It didn't make sense at the time, but what he said really upset my dad. He ordered Uncle Jeb out of the house. Jeb wouldn't leave at first. Kept warning us not to wait until it was too late. He grabbed my shoulder and pulled me into his side. 'Don't let 'em get you, honey,' he whispered. 'Follow the lines. Start at the beginning and follow the lines. Uncle Jeb'll keep a safe place for you.' That's when Dad shoved him out the door."

Jared nods absently, still studying. "The beginning... the beginning... It has to mean something."

"Does it? They're just squiggles, Jared. It's not like a map-they don't even connect."

"There's something about the first one, though. Something familiar. I could swear I've seen it somewhere before."

I sigh. "Maybe he told Aunt Maggie. Maybe she got better directions."

"Maybe," he says, and continues to stare at Uncle Jeb's squiggles.

She dragged me back in time, to a much, much older memory-a memory that had escaped her for a long while. I was surprised to realize that she had only put these memories, the old and the fresh, together recently. After I was here. That was why the lines had slipped through her careful control despite the fact that they were one of the most precious of her secrets-because of the urgency of her discovery.

In this blurry early memory, Melanie sat in her father's lap with the same album-not so tattered then-open in her hands. Her hands were tiny, her fingers stubby. It was very strange to remember being a child in this body.

They were on the first page.

"Do you remember where this is?" Dad asks, pointing to the old gray picture at the top of the page. The paper looks thinner than the other photographs, as if it has worn down-flatter and flatter and flatter-since some great-great-grandpa took it.

"It's where we Stryders come from," I answer, repeating what I've been taught.

"Right. That's the old Stryder ranch. You went there once, but I bet you don't remember it. I think you were eighteen months old." Dad laughs. "It's been Stryder land since the very beginning...."

And then the memory of the picture itself. A picture she'd looked at a thousand times without ever seeing it. It was black and white, faded to grays. A small rustic wooden house, far away on the other side of a desert field; in the foreground, a split-rail fence; a few equine shapes between the fence and the house. And then, behind it all, the sharp, familiar profile...

There were words, a label, scrawled in pencil across the top white border:

Stryder Ranch, 1904, in the morning shadow of...

"Picacho Peak," I said quietly.

He'll have figured it out, too, even if they never found Sharon. I know Jared will have put it together. He's smarter than me, and he has the picture; he probably saw the answer before I did. He could be so close....

The thought had her so filled with yearning and excitement that the blank wall in my head slipped entirely.

I saw the whole journey now, saw her and Jared's and Jamie's careful trek across the country, always by night in their inconspicuous stolen vehicle. It took weeks. I saw where she'd left them in a wooded preserve outside the city, so different from the empty desert they were used to. The cold forest where Jared and Jamie would hide and wait had felt safer in some ways-because the branches were thick and concealing, unlike the spindly desert foliage that hid little-but also more dangerous in its unfamiliar smells and sounds.

Then the separation, a memory so painful we skipped through it, flinching. Next came the abandoned building she'd hidden in, watching the house across the street for her chance. There, concealed within the walls or in the secret basement, she hoped to find Sharon.

I shouldn't have let you see that, Melanie thought. The faintness of her silent voice gave away her fatigue. The assault of memories, the persuasion and coercion, had tired her. You'll tell them where to find her. You'll kill her, too.

"Yes," I mused aloud. "I have to do my duty."

Why? she murmured, almost sleepily. What happiness will it bring you?

I didn't want to argue with her, so I said nothing.

The mountain loomed larger ahead of us. In moments, we would be beneath it. I could see a little rest stop with a convenience store and a fast food restaurant bordered on one side by a flat, concrete space-a place for mobile homes. There were only a few in residence now, with the heat of the coming summer making things uncomfortable.

What now? I wondered. Stop for a late lunch or an early dinner? Fill my gas tank and then continue on to Tucson in order to reveal my fresh discoveries to the Seeker?

The thought was so repellent that my jaw locked against the sudden heave of my empty stomach. I

The thought was so repetitive that my jaw locked against the sudden heave of my empty stomach. I slammed on the brake reflexively, screeching to a stop in the middle of the lane. I was lucky; there were no cars to hit me from behind. There were also no drivers to stop and offer their help and concern. For this moment, the highway was empty. The sun beat down on the pavement, making it shimmer, disappear in places.

This shouldn't have felt like a betrayal, the idea of continuing on my right and proper course. My first language, the true language of the soul that was spoken only on our planet of origin, had no word for betrayal or traitor. Or even loyalty-because without the existence of an opposite, the concept had no meaning.

And yet I felt a deep well of guilt at the very idea of the Seeker. It would be wrong to tell her what I knew. Wrong, how? I countered my own thought viciously. If I stopped here and listened to the seductive suggestions of my host, I would truly be a traitor. That was impossible. I was a soul.

And yet I knew what I wanted, more powerfully and vividly than anything I had ever wanted in all the eight lives I'd lived. The image of Jared's face danced behind my eyelids when I blinked against the sun-not Melanie's memory this time, but my memory of hers. She forced nothing on me now. I could barely feel her in my head as she waited-I imagined her holding her breath, as if that were possible-for me to make my decision.

I could not separate myself from this body's wants. It was me, more than I'd ever intended it to be. Did I want or did it want? Did that distinction even matter now?

In my rearview mirror, the glint of the sun off a distant car caught my eye.

I moved my foot to the accelerator, starting slowly toward the little store in the shadow of the peak. There was really only one thing to do.

The Host

CHAPTER 10

Turned

The electric bell rang, announcing another visitor to the convenience store. I started guiltily and ducked my head behind the shelf of goods we were examining.

Stop acting like a criminal, Melanie advised.

I'm not acting, I replied tersely.

The palms of my hands felt cold under a thin sheen of sweat, though the small room was quite hot. The wide windows let in too much sun for the loud and laboring air-conditioning unit to keep up.

Which one? I demanded.

The bigger one, she told me.

I grabbed the larger pack of the two available, a canvas sling that looked well able to hold more than I could carry. Then I walked around the corner to where the bottled water was shelved.

We can carry three gallons, she decided. That gives us three days to find them.

I took a deep breath, trying to tell myself that I wasn't going along with this. I was simply trying to get more coordinates from her, that was all. When I had the whole story, I would find someone-a different Seeker, maybe, one less repulsive than the one assigned to me-and pass the information along. I was just being thorough, I promised myself.

My awkward attempt to lie to myself was so pathetic that Melanie didn't pay any attention to it, felt no worry at all. It must be too late for me, as the Seeker had warned. Maybe I should have taken the shuttle.

Too late? I wish! Melanie grumbled. I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. I can't even raise my hand! Her thought was a moan of frustration.

I looked down at my hand, resting against my thigh rather than reaching for the water as she wanted to do so badly. I could feel her impatience, her almost desperate desire to be on the move. On the run again, just as if my existence were no more than a short interruption, a wasted season now behind her.

She gave the mental equivalent of a snort at that, and then she was back to business. C'mon, she urged me. Let's get going! It will be dark soon.

With a sigh, I pulled the largest shrink-wrapped flat of water bottles from the shelf. It nearly hit the floor before I caught it against a lower shelf edge. My arms felt as though they'd popped halfway out of their sockets.

"You're kidding me!" I exclaimed aloud.

Shut up!

"Excuse me?" a short stooped man the other customer asked from the end of the aisle

LEAPED INTO A SHORT, SCOOPED MAN, THE ONLY CUSTOMER, AWAY FROM THE END OF THE AISLE.

“Uh-nothing,” I mumbled, not meeting his gaze. “This is heavier than I expected.”

“Would you like some help?” he offered.

“No, no,” I answered hastily. “I’ll just take a smaller one.”

He turned back to the selection of potato chips.

No, you will not, Melanie assured me. I’ve carried heavier loads than this. You’ve let us get all soft, Wanderer, she added in irritation.

Sorry, I responded absently, bemused by the fact that she had used my name for the first time.

Lift with your legs.

I struggled with the flat of water, wondering how far I could possibly be expected to carry it. I managed to get it to the front register, at least. With great relief, I edged its weight onto the counter. I put the bag on top of the water, and then added a box of granola bars, a roll of doughnuts, and a bag of chips from the closest display.

Water is way more important than food in the desert, and we can only carry so much -

I’m hungry, I interrupted. And these are light.

It’s your back, I guess, she said grudgingly, and then she ordered, Get a map.

I placed the one she wanted, a topographical map of the county, on the counter with the rest. It was no more than a prop in her charade.

The cashier, a white-haired man with a ready smile, scanned the bar codes.

“Doing some hiking?” he asked pleasantly.

“The mountain is very beautiful.”

“The trailhead is just up that -” he said, starting to gesture.

“I’ll find it,” I promised quickly, pulling the heavy, badly balanced load back off the counter.

“Head down before it gets dark, sweetie. You don’t want to get lost.”

“I will.”

Melanie was thinking sulfurous thoughts about the kind old man.

He was being nice. He’s sincerely concerned about my welfare, I reminded her.

You’re all very creepy, she told me acidly. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to talk to strangers?

I felt a deep tug of guilt as I answered. There are no strangers among my kind.

I can’t get used to not paying for things, she said, changing the subject. What’s the point of scanning them?

Inventory, of course. Is he supposed to remember everything we took when he needs to order more? Besides, what’s the point of money when everyone is perfectly honest? I paused, feeling the guilt again so strongly that it was an actual pain. Everyone but me, of course.

Melanie shied away from my feelings, worried by the depth of them, worried that I might change my mind. Instead she focused on her raging desire to be away from here, to be moving toward her objective. Her anxiety leaked through to me, and I walked faster.

I carried the stack to the car and set it on the ground beside the passenger door.

“Let me help you with that.”

I jerked up to see the other man from the store, a plastic bag in his hand, standing beside me.

“Ah... thank you,” I finally managed, my pulse thudding behind my ears.

We waited, Melanie tensed as if to run, while he lifted our acquisitions into the car.

There’s nothing to fear. He’s being kind, too.

She continued to watch him distrustfully.

“Thank you,” I said again as he shut the door.

“My pleasure.”

He walked off to his own vehicle without a backward glance at us. I climbed into my seat and grabbed the bag of potato chips.

Look at the map, she said. Wait till he’s out of sight.

No one is watching us, I promised her. But, with a sigh, I unfolded the map and ate with one hand. It was probably a good idea to have some sense of where we were headed.

Where are we headed? I asked her. We’ve found the starting point, so what now?

Look around, she commanded. If we can’t see it here, we’ll try the south side of the peak.

See what?

She placed the memorized image before me: a ragged zigzagging line, four tight switchbacks, the fifth point strangely blunt, like it was broken. Now I saw it as I should, a jagged range of four pointed mountain peaks with the broken-looking fifth...

I scanned the skyline, east to west across the northern horizon. It was so easy it felt false, as though I'd made the image up only after seeing the mountain silhouette that created the northeast line of the horizon.

That's it, Melanie almost sang in her excitement. Let's go! She wanted me to be out of the car, on my feet, moving.

I shook my head, bending over the map again. The mountain ridge was so far in the distance I couldn't guess at the miles between us and it. There was no way I was walking out of this parking lot and into the empty desert unless I had no other option.

Let's be rational, I suggested, tracing my finger along a thin ribbon on the map, an unnamed road that connected to the freeway a few miles east and then continued in the general direction of the range.

Sure, she agreed complacently. The faster the better.

We found the unpaved road easily. It was just a pale scar of flat dirt through the sparse shrubbery, barely wide enough for one vehicle. I had a feeling that the road would be overgrown with lack of use in a different region-some place with more vital vegetation, unlike the desert plants that needed decades to recover from such a violation. There was a rusted chain stretched across the entrance, screwed into a wooden post on one end, looped loosely around another post at the other. I moved quickly, pulling the chain free and piling it at the base of the first post, hurrying back to my running car, hoping no one would pass and stop to offer me help. The highway stayed clear as I drove onto the dirt and then rushed back to refasten the chain.

We both relaxed when the pavement disappeared behind us. I was glad that there was apparently no one left I would have to lie to, whether with words or silence. Alone, I felt less of a renegade.

Melanie was perfectly at home here in the middle of nothing. She knew the names of all the spiny plants around us. She hummed their names to herself, greeting them like old friends.

Creosote, ocotillo, cholla, prickly pear, mesquite...

Away from the highway, the trappings of civilization, the desert seemed to take on a new life for Melanie. Though she appreciated the speed of the jolting car-our vehicle didn't have the ground clearance necessary for this off-road trip, as the shocks reminded me with every pit in the dirt-she itched to be on her feet, loping through the safety of the baking desert.

We would probably have to walk, and all too soon for my taste, but when that time came, I doubted it would satisfy her. I could feel the real desire beneath the surface. Freedom. To move her body to the familiar rhythm of her long stride with only her will for guidance. For a moment, I allowed myself to see the prison that was life without a body. To be carried inside but unable to influence the shape around you. To be trapped. To have no choices.

I shuddered and refocused on the rough road, trying to stave off the mingled pity and horror. No other host had made me feel such guilt for what I was. Of course, none of the others had stuck around to complain about the situation.

The sun was close to the tips of the western hills when we had our first disagreement. The long shadows created strange patterns across the road, making it hard to avoid the rocks and craters.

There it is! Melanie crowed as we caught sight of another formation farther east: a smooth wave of rock, interrupted by a sudden spur that swung a thin, long finger out against the sky.

She was all for turning immediately into the brush, no matter what that did to the car.

Maybe we're supposed to go all the way to the first landmark, I pointed out. The little dirt road continued to wind in more or less the right direction, and I was terrified to leave it. How else would I find my way back to civilization? Wasn't I going back?

I imagined the Seeker right at this moment, as the sun touched the dark, zigzagging line of the western horizon. What would she think when I didn't arrive in Tucson? A spasm of glee made me laugh out loud. Melanie also enjoyed the picture of the Seeker's furious irritation. How long would it take her to go back to San Diego to see if this had all been a ploy to get rid of her? And then what steps would she take when I wasn't there? When I wasn't anywhere?

I just couldn't picture very clearly where I would be at that point.

Look, a dry wash. It's wide enough for the car-let's follow it, Melanie insisted.

I'm not sure we're supposed to go that way yet.

It will be dark soon and we'll have to stop. You're wasting time! She was silently shouting in her frustration.

Or saving time, if I'm right. Besides, it's my time, isn't it?

She didn't answer in words. She seemed to stretch inside my mind, reaching back toward the convenient

wash.

I'm the one doing this, so I'm doing it my way.

Melanie fumed wordlessly in response.

Why don't you show me the rest of the lines? I suggested. We could see if anything is visible before night falls.

No, she snapped. I'll do that part my way.

You're being childish.

Again she refused to answer. I continued toward the four sharp peaks, and she sulked.

When the sun disappeared behind the hills, night washed across the landscape abruptly; one minute the desert was sunset orange, and then it was black. I slowed, my hand fumbling around the dashboard, searching for the switch for the headlights.

Have you lost your mind? Melanie hissed. Do you have any idea how visible headlights would be out here? Someone is sure to see us.

So what do we do now?

Hope the seat reclines.

I let the engine idle as I tried to think of options besides sleeping in the car, surrounded by the black emptiness of the desert night. Melanie waited patiently, knowing I would find none.

This is crazy, you know, I told her, throwing the car into park and twisting the keys out of the ignition. The whole thing. There can't really be anyone out here. We won't find anything. And we're going to get hopelessly lost trying. I had an abstract sense of the physical danger in what we were planning-wandering out into the heat with no backup plan, no way to return. I knew Melanie understood the danger far more clearly, but she held the specifics back.

She didn't respond to my accusations. None of these problems bothered her. I could see that she'd rather wander alone in the desert for the rest of her life than go back to the life I'd had before. Even without the threat of the Seeker, this was preferable to her.

I leaned the seat back as far as it would go. It wasn't close to far enough for comfort. I doubted that I would be able to sleep, but there were so many things I wasn't allowing myself to think about that my mind was vacant and uninteresting. Melanie was silent, too.

I closed my eyes, finding little difference between my lids and the moonless night, and drifted into unconsciousness with unexpected ease.

The Host

CHAPTER 11

Dehydrated

Okay! You were right, you were right!" I said the words out loud. There was no one around to hear me.

Melanie wasn't saying "I told you so." Not in so many words. But I could feel the accusation in her silence.

I was still unwilling to leave the car, though it was useless to me now. When the gas ran out, I had let it roll forward with the remaining momentum until it took a nosedive into a shallow gorge-a thick rivulet cut by the last big rain. Now I stared out the windshield at the vast, vacant plain and felt my stomach twist with panic.

We have to move, Wanderer. It's only going to get hotter.

If I hadn't wasted more than a quarter of a tank of gas stubbornly pushing on to the very base of the second landmark-only to find that the third milestone was no longer visible from that vantage and to have to turn around and backtrack-we would have been so much farther down this sandy wash, so much closer to our next goal. Thanks to me, we were going to have to travel on foot now.

I loaded the water, one bottle at a time, into the pack, my motions unnecessarily deliberate; I added the remaining granola bars just as slowly. All the while, Melanie ached for me to hurry. Her impatience made it hard to think, hard to concentrate on anything. Like what was going to happen to us.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, she chanted until I lurched, stiff and awkward, out of the car. My back throbbed as I straightened up. It hurt from sleeping so contorted last night, not from the weight of the pack; the pack wasn't that heavy when I used my shoulders to lift it.