

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.

Now cover the car, she instructed, picturing me ripping thorny branches from the nearby creosotes and palo verdes and draping them over the silver top of the car.

“Why?”

Her tone implied that I was quite stupid for not understanding. So no one finds us.

But what if I want to be found? What if there’s nothing out here but heat and dirt? We have no way to get home!

Home? she questioned, throwing cheerless images at me: the vacant apartment in San Diego, the Seeker’s most obnoxious expression, the dot that marked Tucson on the map... a brief, happier flash of the red canyon that slipped in by accident. Where would that be?

I turned my back on the car, ignoring her advice. I was in too far already. I wasn’t going to give up all hope of return. Maybe someone would find the car and then find me. I could easily and honestly explain what I was doing here to any rescuer: I was lost. I’d lost my way... lost my control... lost my mind.

I followed the wash at first, letting my body fall into its natural long-strided rhythm. It wasn’t the way I walked on the sidewalks to and from the university-it wasn’t my walk at all. But it fit the rugged terrain here and moved me smoothly forward with a speed that surprised me until I got used to it.

“What if I hadn’t come this way?” I wondered as I walked farther into the desert waste. “What if Healer Fords were still in Chicago? What if my path hadn’t taken us so close to them?”

It was that urgency, that lure-the thought that Jared and Jamie might be right here, somewhere in this empty place-that had made it impossible to resist this senseless plan.

I’m not sure, Melanie admitted. I think I might still have tried, but I was afraid while the other souls were near. I’m still afraid. Trusting you could kill them both.

We flinched together at the thought.

But being here, so close... It seemed like I had to try. Please-and suddenly she was pleading with me, begging me, no trace of resentment in her thoughts-please don’t use this to hurt them. Please.

“I don’t want to.... I don’t know if I can hurt them. I’d rather...”

What? Die myself? Than give a few stray humans up to the Seekers?

Again we flinched at the thought, but my revulsion at the idea comforted her. And it frightened me more than it soothed her.

When the wash started angling too far toward the north, Melanie suggested that we forget the flat, ashen path and take the direct line to the third landmark, the eastern spur of rock that seemed to point, fingerlike, toward the cloudless sky.

I didn’t like leaving the wash, just as I’d resisted leaving the car. I could follow this wash all the way back to the road, and the road back to the highway. It was miles and miles, and it would take me days to traverse, but once I stepped off this wash I was officially adrift.

Have faith, Wanderer. We’ll find Uncle Jeb, or he’ll find us.

If he’s still alive, I added, sighing and loping off my simple path into the brush that was identical in every direction. Faith isn’t a familiar concept for me. I don’t know that I buy into it.

Trust, then?

In who? You? I laughed. The hot air baked my throat when I inhaled.

Just think, she said, changing the subject, maybe we’ll see them by tonight.

The yearning belonged to us both; the image of their faces, one man, one child, came from both memories. When I walked faster, I wasn’t sure that I was completely in command of the motion.

It did get hotter-and then hotter, and then hotter still. Sweat plastered my hair to my scalp and made my pale yellow T-shirt cling unpleasantly wherever it touched. In the afternoon, scorching gusts of wind kicked up, blowing sand in my face. The dry air sucked the sweat away, crusted my hair with grit, and fanned my shirt out from my body; it moved as stiffly as cardboard with the dried salt. I kept walking.

I drank water more often than Melanie wanted me to. She begrudged me every mouthful, threatening me that we would want it much more tomorrow. But I’d already given her so much today that I was in no mood to listen. I drank when I was thirsty, which was most of the time.

My legs moved me forward without any thought on my part. The crunching rhythm of my steps was background music, low and tedious.

There was nothing to see; one twisted, brittle shrub looked exactly the same as the next. The empty homogeneity lulled me into a sort of daze-I was only really aware of the shape of the mountains’ silhouettes against the pale, bleached sky. I read their outlines every few steps, till I knew them so well I could have drawn them blindfolded.

The view seemed frozen in place. I constantly whipped my head around, searching for the fourth marker—a big dome-shaped peak with a missing piece, a curved absence scooped from its side that Melanie had only shown me this morning—as if the perspective would have changed from my last step. I hoped this last clue was it, because we'd be lucky to get that far. But I had a sense that Melanie was keeping more from me, and our journey's end was impossibly distant.

I snacked on my granola bars through the afternoon, not realizing until it was too late that I'd finished the last one.

When the sun set, the night descended with the same speed as it had yesterday. Melanie was prepared, already scouting out a place to stop.

Here, she told me. We'll want to stay as far from the cholla as possible. You toss in your sleep.

I eyed the fluffy-looking cactus in the failing light, so thick with bone-colored needles that it resembled fur, and shuddered. You want me to just sleep on the ground? Right here?

You see another option? She felt my panic, and her tone softened, as if with pity. Look—it's better than the car. At least it's flat. It's too hot for any critters to be attracted to your body heat and -

"Critters?" I demanded aloud. "Critters?"

There were brief, very unpleasant flashes of deadly-looking insects and coiled serpents in her memories.

Don't worry. She tried to soothe me as I arched up on my tiptoes, away from anything that might be hiding in the sand below, my eyes searching the blackness for some escape. Nothing's going to bother you unless you bother it first. After all, you're bigger than anything else out here. Another flash of memory, this time a medium-size canine scavenger, a coyote, flitted through our thoughts.

"Perfect," I moaned, sinking down into a crouch, though I was still afraid of the black ground beneath me. "Killed by wild dogs. Who would have thought it would end so... so trivially? How anticlimactic. The claw beast on the Mists Planet, sure. At least there'd be some dignity in being taken down by that."

Melanie's answering tone made me picture her rolling her eyes. Stop being a baby. Nothing is going to eat you. Now lie down and get some rest. Tomorrow will be harder than today.

"Thanks for the good news," I grumbled. She was turning into a tyrant. It made me think of the human axiom Give him an inch and he'll take a mile. But I was more exhausted than I realized, and as I settled unwillingly to the ground, I found it impossible not to slump down on the rough, gravelly dirt and let my eyes close.

It seemed like just minutes later when the morning dawned, blindingly bright and already hot enough to have me sweating. I was crusted in dirt and rocks when I woke; my right arm was pinned under me and had lost feeling. I shook out the tingles and then reached into my pack for some water.

Melanie did not approve, but I ignored her. I looked for the half-empty bottle I'd last drunk from, rummaging through the fulls and empties until I began to see a pattern.

With a slowly growing sense of alarm, I started counting. I counted twice. There were two more empties than there were fulls. I'd already used up more than half my water supply.

I told you that you were drinking too much.

I didn't answer her, but I pulled the pack on without taking a drink. My mouth felt horrible, dry and sandy and tasting of bile. I tried to ignore that, tried to stop running my sandpaper tongue over my gritty teeth, and started walking.

My stomach was harder to ignore than my mouth as the sun rose higher and hotter above me. It twisted and contracted at regular intervals, anticipating meals that didn't appear. By afternoon, the hunger had gone from uncomfortable to painful.

This is nothing, Melanie reminded me wryly. We've been hungrier.

You have, I retorted. I didn't feel like being an audience to her endurance memories right now.

I was beginning to despair when the good news came. As I swung my head across the horizon with a routine, halfhearted movement, the bulbous shape of the dome jumped out at me from the middle of a northern line of small peaks. The missing part was only a faint indentation from this vantage point.

Close enough, Melanie decided, as thrilled as I was to be making some progress. I turned north eagerly, my steps lengthening. Keep a lookout for the next. She remembered another formation for me, and I started craning my head around at once, though I knew it was useless to search for it this early.

It would be to the east. North and then east and then north again. That was the pattern.

The lift of finding another milestone kept me moving despite the growing weariness in my legs. Melanie urged me on chanting encouragements when I slowed thinking of Jared and Jamie when I turned anesthetic. My

progress was steady, and I waited till Melanie okayed each drink, even though the inside of my throat felt as though it was blistering.

I had to admit that I was proud of myself for being so tough. When the dirt road appeared, it seemed like a reward. It snaked toward the north, the direction I was already headed, but Melanie was skittish.

I don't like the look of it, she insisted.

The road was just a sallow line through the scrub, defined only by its smoother texture and lack of vegetation. Ancient tire tracks made a double depression, centered in the single lane.

When it goes the wrong way, we'll leave it. I was already walking down the middle of the tracks. It's easier than weaving through the creosote and watching out for cholla.

She didn't answer, but her unease made me feel a little paranoid. I kept up my search for the next formation-a perfect M, two matching volcanic points-but I also watched the desert around me more carefully than before.

Because I was paying extra attention, I noticed the gray smudge in the distance long before I could make out what it was. I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me and blinked against the dust that clouded them. The color seemed wrong for a rock, and the shape too solid for a tree. I squinted into the brightness, making guesses.

Then I blinked again, and the smudge suddenly jumped into a structured shape, closer than I'd been thinking. It was some kind of house or building, small and weathered to a dull gray.

Melanie's spike of panic had me dancing off the narrow lane and into the dubious cover of the barren brush.

Hold on, I told her. I'm sure it's abandoned.

How do you know? She was holding back so hard that I had to concentrate on my feet before I could move them forward.

Who would live out here? We souls live for society. I heard the bitter edge to my explanation and knew it was because of where I now stood-physically and metaphorically in the middle of nowhere. Why did I no longer belong to the society of souls? Why did I feel like I didn't... like I didn't want to belong? Had I ever really been a part of the community that was meant to be my own, or was that the reason behind my long line of lives lived in transience? Had I always been an aberration, or was this something Melanie was making me into? Had this planet changed me, or revealed me for what I already was?

Melanie had no patience for my personal crisis-she wanted me to get far away from that building as fast as possible. Her thoughts yanked and twisted at mine, pulling me out of my introspection.

Calm down, I ordered, trying to focus my thoughts, to separate them from hers. If there is anything that actually lives here, it would be human. Trust me on this; there is no such thing as a hermit among souls. Maybe your Uncle Jeb -

She rejected that thought harshly. No one could survive out in the open like this. Your kind would have searched any habitation thoroughly. Whoever lived here ran or became one of you. Uncle Jeb would have a better hiding place.

And if whoever lived here became one of us, I assured her, then they left this place. Only a human would live this way.... I trailed off, suddenly afraid, too.

What? She reacted strongly to my fright, freezing us in place. She scanned my thoughts, looking for something I'd seen to upset me.

But I'd seen nothing new. Melanie, what if there are humans out here-not Uncle Jeb and Jared and Jamie? What if someone else found us?

She absorbed the idea slowly, thinking it through. You're right. They'd kill us immediately. Of course.

I tried to swallow, to wash the taste of terror from my dry mouth.

There won't be anyone else. How could there be? she reasoned. Your kind are far too thorough. Only someone already in hiding would have had a chance. So let's go check it out-you're sure there are none of you, and I'm sure there are none of me. Maybe we can find something helpful, something we can use as a weapon.

I shuddered at her thoughts of sharp knives and long metal tools that could be turned into clubs. No weapons.

Ugh. How did such spineless creatures beat us?

Stealth and superior numbers. Any one of you, even your young, is a hundred times as dangerous as one of us. But you're like one termite in an anthill. There are millions of us, all working together in perfect harmony toward our goal.

Again, as I described the unity, I felt the dragging sense of panic and disorientation. Who was I?

We kept to the creosote as we approached the little structure. It looked to be a house, just a small shack beside the road, with no hint at all of any other purpose. The reason for its location here was a mystery-this spot had nothing to offer but emptiness and heat.

There was no sign of recent habitation. The door frame gaped, doorless, and only a few shards of glass clung to the empty window frames. Dust gathered on the threshold and spilled inside. The gray weathered walls seemed to lean away from the wind, as if it always blew from the same direction here.

I was able to contain my anxiety as I walked hesitantly to the vacant door frame; we must be just as alone here as we had been all day and all yesterday.

The shade the dark entry promised drew me forward, trumping my fears with its appeal. I still listened intently, but my feet moved ahead with swift, sure steps. I darted through the doorway, moving quickly to one side so as to have a wall at my back. This was instinctual, a product of Melanie's scavenging days. I stood frozen there, unnerved by my blindness, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

The little shack was empty, as we'd known it would be. There were no more signs of occupation inside than out. A broken table slanted down from its two good legs in the middle of the room, with one rusted metal chair beside it. Patches of concrete showed through big holes in the worn, grimy carpet. A kitchenette lined the wall with a rusted sink, a row of cabinets-some doorless-and a waist-high refrigerator that hung open, revealing its moldy black insides. A couch frame sat against the far wall, all the cushions gone. Still mounted above the couch, only a little crooked, was a framed print of dogs playing poker.

Homey, Melanie thought, relieved enough to be sarcastic. It's got more decor than your apartment.

I was already moving for the sink.

Dream on, Melanie added helpfully.

Of course it would be wasteful to have water running to this secluded place; the souls managed details like that better than to leave such an anomaly behind. I still had to twist the ancient knobs. One broke off in my hand, rusted through.

I turned to the cupboards next, kneeling on the nasty carpet to peek carefully inside. I leaned away as I opened the door, afraid I might be disturbing one of the venomous desert animals in its lair.

The first was empty, backless, so that I could see the wooden slats of the outside wall. The next had no door, but there was a stack of antique newspapers inside, covered with dust. I pulled one out, curious, shaking the dirt to the dirtier floor, and read the date.

From human times, I noted. Not that I needed a date to tell me that.

"Man Burns Three-Year-Old Daughter to Death," the headline screamed at me, accompanied by a picture of an angelic blond child. This wasn't the front page. The horror detailed here was not so hideous as to rate priority coverage. Beneath this was the face of a man wanted for the murders of his wife and two children two years before the print date; the story was about a possible sighting of the man in Mexico. Two people killed and three injured in a drunk-driving accident. A fraud and murder investigation into the alleged suicide of a prominent local banker. A suppressed confession setting an admitted child molester free. House pets found slaughtered in a trash bin.

I cringed, shoving the paper away from me, back into the dark cupboard.

Those were the exceptions, not the norm, Melanie thought quietly, trying to keep the fresh horror of my reaction from seeping into her memories of those years and recoloring them.

Can you see how we thought we might be able to do better, though? How we could have supposed that maybe you didn't deserve all the excellent things of this world?

Her answer was acidic. If you wanted to cleanse the planet, you could have blown it up.

Despite what your science fiction writers dream, we simply don't have the technology.

She didn't think my joke was funny.

Besides, I added, that would have been such a waste. It's a lovely planet. This unspeakable desert excepted, of course.

That's how we realized you were here, you know, she said, thinking of the sickening news headlines again. When the evening news was nothing but inspiring human-interest stories, when pedophiles and junkies were lining up at the hospitals to turn themselves in, when everything morphed into Mayberry, that's when you tipped your hand.

"What an awful alteration!" I said dryly, turning to the next cupboard.

I pulled the stiff door back and found the mother lode.

“Crackers!” I shouted, seizing the discolored, half-smashed box of Saltines. There was another box behind it, one that looked like someone had stepped on it. “Twinkies!” I crowed.

Look! Melanie urged, pointing a mental finger at three dusty bottles of bleach at the very back of the cupboard.

What do you want bleach for? I asked, already ripping into the cracker box. To throw in someone’s eyes? Or to brain them with the bottle?

To my delight, the crackers, though reduced to crumbs, were still inside their plastic sleeves. I tore one open and started shaking the crumbs into my mouth, swallowing them half chewed. I couldn’t get them into my stomach fast enough.

Open a bottle and smell it, she instructed, ignoring my commentary. That’s how my dad used to store water in the garage. The bleach residue kept the water from growing anything.

In a minute. I finished one sleeve of crumbs and started on the next. They were very stale, but compared to the taste in my mouth, they were ambrosia. When I finished the third, I became aware that the salt was burning the cracks in my lips and at the corners of my mouth.

I heaved out one of the bleach bottles, hoping Melanie was right. My arms felt weak and noodley, barely able to lift it. This concerned us both. How much had our condition deteriorated already? How much farther would we be able to go?

The bottle’s cap was so tight, I wondered if it had melted into place. Finally, though, I was able to twist it off with my teeth. I sniffed at the opening carefully, not especially wanting to pass out from bleach fumes. The chemical scent was very faint. I sniffed deeper. It was water, definitely. Stagnant, musty water, but water all the same. I took a small mouthful. Not a fresh mountain stream, but wet. I started guzzling.

Easy there, Melanie warned me, and I had to agree. We’d lucked into this cache, but it made no sense to squander it. Besides, I wanted something solid now that the salt burn had eased. I turned to the box of Twinkies and licked three of the smooshed-up cakes from the inside of the wrappers.

The last cupboard was empty.

As soon as the hunger pangs had eased slightly, Melanie’s impatience began to leak into my thoughts. Feeling no resistance this time, I quickly loaded my spoils into my pack, pitching the empty water bottles into the sink to make room. The bleach jugs were heavy, but theirs was a comforting weight. It meant I wouldn’t stretch out to sleep on the desert floor thirsty and hungry again tonight. With the sugar energy beginning to buzz through my veins, I loped back out into the bright afternoon.

The Host

CHAPTER 12

Failed

It’s impossible! You’ve got it wrong! Out of order! That can’t be it!”

I stared into the distance, sick with disbelief that was turning quickly to horror.

Yesterday morning I’d eaten the last mangled Twinkie for breakfast. Yesterday afternoon I’d found the double peak and turned east again. Melanie had given me what she promised was the last formation to find. The news had made me nearly hysterical with joy. Last night, I’d drunk the last of the water. That was day four.

This morning was a hazy memory of blinding sun and desperate hope. Time was running out, and I’d searched the skyline for the last milestone with a growing sense of panic. I couldn’t see any place where it could fit; the long, flat line of a mesa flanked by blunt peaks on either end, like sentinels. Such a thing would take space, and the mountains to the east and north were thick with toothy points. I couldn’t see where the flat mesa could be hiding between them.

Midmorning-the sun was still in the east, in my eyes-I’d stopped to rest. I’d felt so weak that it frightened me. Every muscle in my body had begun to ache, but it was not from all the walking. I could feel the ache of exertion and also the ache from sleeping on the ground, and these were different from the new ache. My body was drying out, and this ache was my muscles protesting the torture of it. I knew that I couldn’t keep going much longer.

I’d turned my back on the east to get the sun off my face for a moment.

That’s when I’d seen it. The long, flat line of the mesa, unmistakable with the bordering peaks. There it

was, so far away in the distant west that it seemed above a mirage, floating, hovering over the desert like a dark cloud. Every step we'd walked had been in the wrong direction. The last marker was farther to the west than we'd come in all our journeying.

"Impossible," I whispered again.

Melanie was frozen in my head, unthinking, blank, trying desperately to reject this new comprehension. I waited for her, my eyes tracing the undeniably familiar shapes, until the sudden weight of her acceptance and grief knocked me to my knees. Her silent keen of defeat echoed in my head and added one more layer to the pain. My breathing turned ragged—a soundless, tearless sobbing. The sun crept up my back; its heat soaked deep into the darkness of my hair.

My shadow was a small circle beneath me when I regained control. Painstakingly, I got back on my feet. Tiny sharp rocks were embedded in the skin on my legs. I didn't bother to brush these off. I stared at the floating mesa mocking me from the west for a long, hot time.

And finally, not really sure why I did it, I started walking forward. I knew only this: that it was me who moved and no one else. Melanie was so small in my brain—a tiny capsule of pain wrapped tightly in on her herself. There was no help from her.

My footsteps were a slow crunch, crunch across the brittle ground.

"He was just a deluded old lunatic, after all," I murmured to myself. A strange shudder rocked my chest, and a hoarse coughing ripped its way up my throat. The stream of gravelly coughs rattled on, but it wasn't until I felt my eyes pricking for tears that couldn't come that I realized I was laughing.

"There was... never... ever... anything out here!" I gasped between spasms of hysteria. I staggered forward as though I were drunk, my footprints trailing unevenly behind me.

No. Melanie uncurled from her misery to defend the faith she still clung to. I got it wrong or something. My fault.

I laughed at her now. The sound was sucked away by the scorching wind.

Wait, wait, she thought, trying to pull my attention from the joke of it all. You don't think... I mean, do you think that maybe they tried this?

Her unexpected fear caught me midlaugh. I choked on the hot air, my chest throbbing from my fit of morbid hysteria. By the time I could breathe again, all trace of my black humor was gone. Instinctively, my eyes swept the desert void, looking for some evidence that I was not the first to waste my life this way. The plain was impossibly vast, but I couldn't halt my frantic search for... remains.

No, of course not. Melanie was already comforting herself. Jared's too smart. He would never come out here unprepared like we did. He'd never put Jamie in danger.

I'm sure you're right, I told her, wanting to believe it as much as she did. I'm sure no one else in the whole universe could be this stupid. Besides, he probably never came to look. He probably never figured it out. Wish you hadn't.

My feet kept moving. I was barely aware of the action. It meant so little in the face of the distance ahead. And even if we were magically transported to the very base of the mesa, what then? I was absolutely positive there was nothing there. No one waited at the mesa to save us.

"We're going to die," I said. I was surprised that there was no fear in my rasping voice. This was just a fact like any other. The sun is hot. The desert is dry. We are going to die.

Yes. She was calm, too. This, death, was easier to accept than that our efforts had been guided by insanity.

"That doesn't bother you?"

She thought for a moment before answering.

At least I died trying. And I won. I never gave them away. I never hurt them. I did my best to find them. I tried to keep my promise.... I die for them.

I counted nineteen steps before I could respond. Nineteen sluggish, futile crunches across the sand.

"Then what am I dying for?" I wondered, the pricking feeling returning in my desiccated tear ducts. "I guess it's because I lost, then, right? Is that why?"

I counted thirty-four crunches before she had an answer to my question.

No, she thought slowly. It doesn't feel that way to me. I think... Well, I think that maybe... you're dying to be human. There was almost a smile in her thought as she heard the silly double meaning to the phrase. After all the planets and all the hosts you've left behind, you've finally found the place and the body you'd die for. I think you've found your home, Wanderer.

Ten crunches.

I didn't have the energy to open my lips anymore. Too bad I didn't get to stay here longer, then

I didn't have the energy to open my lips anymore. I oo bad I didn't get to stay here longer, then.

I wasn't sure about her answer. Maybe she was trying to make me feel better. A sop for dragging her out here to die. She had won; she had never disappeared.

My steps began to falter. My muscles screamed out to me for mercy, as if I had any means to soothe them. I think I would have stopped right there, but Melanie was, as always, tougher than I.

I could feel her now, not just in my head but in my limbs. My stride lengthened; the path I made was straighter. By sheer force of will, she dragged my half-dead carcass toward the impossible goal.

There was an unexpected joy to the pointless struggle. Just as I could feel her, she could feel my body. Our body, now; my weakness ceded control to her. She gloried in the freedom of moving our arms and legs forward, no matter how useless such a motion was. It was bliss simply because she could again. Even the pain of the slow death we had begun dimmed in comparison.

What do you think is out there? she asked me as we marched on toward the end. What will you see, after we're dead?

Nothing. The word was empty and hard and sure. There's a reason we call it the final death.

The souls have no belief in an afterlife?

We have so many lives. Anything more would be... too much to expect. We die a little death every time we leave a host. We live again in another. When I die here, that will be the end.

There was a long pause while our feet moved more and more slowly.

What about you? I finally asked. Do you still believe in something more, even after all of this? My thoughts raked over her memories of the end of the human world.

It seems like there are some things that can't die.

In our mind, their faces were close and clear. The love we felt for Jared and Jamie did feel very permanent. In that moment, I wondered if death was strong enough to dissolve something so vital and sharp. Perhaps this love would live on with her, in some fairytale place with pearly gates. Not with me.

Would it be a relief to be free of it? I wasn't sure. It felt like it was part of who I was now.

We only lasted a few hours. Even Melanie's tremendous strength of mind could ask no more than that of our failing body. We could barely see. We couldn't seem to find the oxygen in the dry air we sucked in and spit back out. The pain brought rough whimpers breaking through our lips.

You've never had it this bad, I teased her feebly as we staggered toward a dried stick of a tree standing a few feet taller than the low brush. We wanted to get to the thin streaks of shade before we fell.

No, she agreed. Never this bad.

We attained our purpose. The dead tree threw its cobwebby shadow over us, and our legs fell out from under us. We sprawled forward, never wanting the sun on our face again. Our head turned to the side on its own, searching for the burning air. We stared at the dust inches from our nose and listened to the gasping of our breath.

After a time, long or short we didn't know, we closed our eyes. Our lids were red and bright inside. We couldn't feel the faint web of shade; maybe it no longer touched us.

How long? I asked her.

I don't know, I've never died before.

An hour? More?

Your guess is as good as mine.

Where's a coyote when you really need one?

Maybe we'll get lucky... escaped claw beast or something... Her thought trailed off incoherently.

That was our last conversation. It was too hard to concentrate enough to form words. There was more pain than we thought there should be. All the muscles in our body rioted, cramping and spasming as they fought death.

We didn't fight. We drifted and waited, our thoughts dipping in and out of memories without a pattern. While we were still lucid, we hummed ourselves a lullaby in our head. It was the one we'd used to comfort Jamie when the ground was too hard, or the air was too cold, or the fear was too great to sleep. We felt his head press into the hollow just below our shoulder and the shape of his back under our arm. And then it seemed that it was our head cradled against a broader shoulder, and a new lullaby comforted us.

Our lids turned black, but not with death. Night had fallen, and this made us sad. Without the heat of day, we would probably last longer.

It was dark and silent for a timeless space. Then there was a sound.

It barely roused us. We weren't sure if we imagined it. Maybe it was a coyote. after all. Did we want that?

We didn't know. We lost our train of thought and forgot the sound.

Something shook us, pulled our numb arms, dragged at them. We couldn't form the words to wish that it would be quick now, but that was our hope. We waited for the cut of teeth. Instead, the dragging turned to pushing, and we felt our face roll toward the sky.

It poured over our face-wet, cool, and impossible. It dribbled over our eyes, washing the grit from them. Our eyes fluttered, blinking against the dripping.

We did not care about the grit in our eyes. Our chin arched up, desperately searching, our mouth opening and closing with blind, pathetic weakness, like a newly hatched bird.

We thought we heard a sigh.

And then the water flowed into our mouth, and we gulped at it and choked on it. The water vanished while we choked, and our weak hands grasped out for it. A flat, heavy thumping pounded our back until we could breathe. Our hands kept clutching the air, looking for the water.

We definitely heard a sigh this time.

Something pressed to our cracked lips, and the water flowed again. We guzzled, careful not to inhale it this time. Not that we cared if we choked, but we did not want the water taken away again.

We drank until our belly stretched and ached. The water trickled to a stop, and we cried out hoarsely in protest. Another rim was pressed to our lips, and we gulped frantically until it was empty, too.

Our stomach would explode with another mouthful, yet we blinked and tried to focus, to see if we could find more. It was too dark; we could not see a single star. And then we blinked again and realized that the darkness was much closer than the sky. A figure hovered over us, blacker than the night.

There was a low sound of fabric rubbing against itself and sand shifting under a heel. The figure leaned away, and we heard a sharp rip-the sound of a zipper, deafening in the absolute stillness of the night.

Like a blade, light cut into our eyes. We moaned at the pain of it, and our hand flew up to cover our closed eyes. Even behind our lids, the light was too bright. The light disappeared, and we felt the breath of the next sigh hit our face.

We opened our eyes carefully, more blind than before. Whoever faced us sat very still and said nothing. We began to feel the tension of the moment, but it felt far away, outside ourself. It was hard to care about anything but the water in our belly and where we could find more. We tried to concentrate, to see what had rescued us.

The first thing we could make out, after minutes of blinking and squinting, was the thick whiteness that fell from the dark face, a million splinters of pale in the night. When we grasped that this was a beard-like Santa Claus, we thought chaotically-the other pieces of the face were supplied by our memory. Everything fit into place: the big cleft-tipped nose, the wide cheekbones, the thick white brows, the eyes set deep into the wrinkled fabric of skin. Though we could see only hints of each feature, we knew how light would expose them.

"Uncle Jeb," we croaked in surprise. "You found us."

Uncle Jeb, squatting next to us, rocked back on his heels when we said his name.

"Well, now," he said, and his gruff voice brought back a hundred memories. "Well, now, here's a pickle."

The Host

CHAPTER 13

Sentenced

Are they here?" We choked out the words-they burst from us like the water in our lungs had, expelled. After water, this question was all that mattered. "Did they make it?"

Uncle Jeb's face was impossible to read in the darkness. "Who?" he asked.

"Jamie, Jared!" Our whisper burned like a shout. "Jared was with Jamie. Our brother! Are they here? Did they come? Did you find them, too?"

There was barely a pause.

"No." His answer was forceful, and there was no pity in it, no feeling at all.

"No," we whispered. We were not echoing him, we were protesting against getting our life back. What was the point? We closed our eyes again and listened to the pain in our body. We let that drown out the pain in our mind.

“Look,” Uncle Jeb said after a moment. “I, uh, have something to take care of. You rest for a bit, and I’ll be back for you.”

We didn’t hear the meaning in his words, just the sounds. Our eyes stayed closed. His footsteps crunched quietly away from us. We couldn’t tell which direction he went. We didn’t care anyway.

They were gone. There was no way to find them, no hope. Jared and Jamie had disappeared, something they knew well how to do, and we would never see them again.

The water and the cooler night air were making us lucid, something we did not want. We rolled over, to bury our face against the sand again. We were so tired, past the point of exhaustion and into some deeper, more painful state. Surely we could sleep. All we had to do was not think. We could do that.

We did.

When we woke, it was still night, but dawn was threatening on the eastern horizon—the mountains were lined with dull red. Our mouth tasted of dust, and at first we were sure that we had dreamed Uncle Jeb’s appearance. Of course we had.

Our head was clearer this morning, and we noticed quickly the strange shape near our right cheek—something that was not a rock or a cactus. We touched it, and it was hard and smooth. We nudged it, and the delicious sound of sloshing water came from inside.

Uncle Jeb was real, and he’d left us a canteen.

We sat up carefully, surprised when we didn’t break in two like a withered stick. Actually, we felt better. The water must have had time to work its way through some of our body. The pain was dull, and for the first time in a long while, we felt hungry again.

Our fingers were stiff and clumsy as we twisted the cap from the top of the canteen. It wasn’t all the way full, but there was enough water to stretch the walls of our belly again—it must have shrunk. We drank it all; we were done with rationing.

We dropped the metal canteen to the sand, where it made a dull thud in the predawn silence. We felt wide awake now. We sighed, preferring unconsciousness, and let our head fall into our hands. What now?

“Why did you give it water, Jeb?” an angry voice demanded, close behind our back.

We whirled, twisting onto our knees. What we saw made our heart falter and our awareness splinter apart.

There were eight humans half-circled around where I knelt under the tree. There was no question they were humans, all of them. I’d never seen faces contorted into such expressions—not on my kind. These lips twisted with hatred, pulled back over clenched teeth like wild animals. These brows pulled low over eyes that burned with fury.

Six men and two women, some of them very big, most of them bigger than me. I felt the blood drain from my face as I realized why they held their hands so oddly-gripped tightly in front of them, each balancing an object. They held weapons. Some held blades—a few short ones like those I had kept in my kitchen, and some longer, one huge and menacing. This knife had no purpose in a kitchen. Melanie supplied the name: a machete.

Others held long bars, some metal, some wooden. Clubs.

I recognized Uncle Jeb in their midst. Held loosely in his hands was an object I’d never seen in person, only in Melanie’s memories, like the big knife. It was a rifle.

I saw horror, but Melanie saw all this with wonder, her mind boggling at their numbers. Eight human survivors. She’d thought Jeb was alone or, in the best case scenario, with only two others. To see so many of her kind alive filled her with joy.

You’re an idiot, I told her. Look at them. See them.

I forced her to see it from my perspective: to see the threatening shapes inside the dirty jeans and light cotton shirts, brown with dust. They might have been human—as she thought of the word—once, but at this moment they were something else. They were barbarians, monsters. They hung over us, slaving for blood.

There was a death sentence in every pair of eyes.

Melanie saw all this and, though grudgingly, she had to admit that I was right. At this moment, her beloved humans were at their worst—like the newspaper stories we’d seen in the abandoned shack. We were looking at killers.

We should have been wiser; we should have died yesterday.

Why would Uncle Jeb keep us alive for this?

A shiver passed through me at the thought. I’d skimmed through the histories of human atrocities. I’d had no stomach for them. Perhaps I should have concentrated better. I knew there were reasons why humans let their enemies live, for a little while. Things they wanted from their minds or their bodies...

Of course it sprang into my head immediately—the one secret they would want from me. The one I could never, never tell them. No matter what they did to me. I would have to kill myself first.

I did not let Melanie see the secret I protected. I used her own defenses against her and threw up a wall in my head to hide behind while I thought of the information for the first time since implantation. There had been no reason to think of it before.

Melanie was hardly even curious on the other side of the wall; she made no effort to break through it. There were much more immediate concerns than the fact that she had not been the only one keeping information in reserve.

Did it matter that I protected my secret from her? I wasn't as strong as Melanie; I had no doubt she could endure torture. How much pain could I stand before I gave them anything they wanted?

My stomach heaved. Suicide was a repugnant option—worse because it would be murder, too. Melanie would be part of either torture or death. I would wait for that until I had absolutely no other choice.

No, they can't. Uncle Jeb would never let them hurt me.

Uncle Jeb doesn't know you're here, I reminded her.

Tell him!

I focused on the old man's face. The thick white beard kept me from seeing the set of his mouth, but his eyes did not seem to burn like the others'. From the corner of my eye, I could see a few of the men shift their gaze from me to him. They were waiting for him to answer the question that had alerted me to their presence. Uncle Jeb stared at me, ignoring them.

I can't tell him, Melanie. He won't believe me. And if they think I'm lying to them, they'll think I'm a Seeker. They must have experience enough to know that only a Seeker would come out here with a lie, a story designed for infiltration.

Melanie recognized the truth of my thought at once. The very word Seeker made her recoil with hatred, and she knew these strangers would have the same reaction.

It doesn't matter anyway. I'm a soul—that's enough for them.

The one with the machete—the biggest man there, black-haired with oddly fair skin and vivid blue eyes—made a sound of disgust and spit on the ground. He took a step forward, slowly raising the long blade.

Better fast than slow. Better that it was this brutal hand and not mine that killed us. Better that I didn't die a creature of violence, accountable for Melanie's blood as well as my own.

"Hold it, Kyle." Jeb's words were unhurried, almost casual, but the big man stopped. He grimaced and turned to face Melanie's uncle.

"Why? You said you made sure. It's one of them."

I recognized the voice—he was the same one who'd asked Jeb why he'd given me water.

"Well, yes, she surely is. But it's a little complicated."

"How?" A different man asked the question. He stood next to the big, dark-haired Kyle, and they looked so much alike that they had to be brothers.

"See, this here is my niece, too."

"Not anymore she's not," Kyle said flatly. He spit again and took another deliberate step in my direction, knife ready. I could see from the way his shoulders leaned into the action that words would not stop him again. I closed my eyes.

There were two sharp metallic clicks, and someone gasped. My eyes flew open again.

"I said hold it, Kyle." Uncle Jeb's voice was still relaxed, but the long rifle was gripped tightly in his hands now, and the barrels were pointed at Kyle's back. Kyle was frozen just steps from me; his machete hung motionless in the air above his shoulder.

"Jeb," the brother said, horrified, "what are you doing?"

"Step away from the girl, Kyle."

Kyle turned his back to us, whirling on Jeb in fury. "It's not a girl, Jeb!"

Jeb shrugged; the gun stayed steady in his hands, pointed at Kyle. "There are things to be discussed."

"The doctor might be able to learn something from it," a female voice offered gruffly.

I cringed at the words, hearing in them my worst fears. When Jeb had called me his niece just now, I'd foolishly let a spark of hope flame to life—perhaps there would be pity. I'd been stupid to think that, even for a second. Death would be the only pity I could hope for from these creatures.

I looked at the woman who'd spoken, surprised to see that she was as old as Jeb, maybe older. Her hair was dark gray rather than white, which is why I hadn't noticed her age before. Her face was a mass of wrinkles,

all of them turning down into angry lines. But there was something familiar about the features behind the lines.

Melanie made the connection between this ancient face and another, smoother face in her memory.

"Aunt Maggie? You're here? How? Is Sharon -" The words were all Melanie, but they gushed from my mouth, and I was unable to stop them. Sharing for so long in the desert had made her stronger, or me weaker. Or maybe it was just that I was concentrating on which direction the deathblow was going to fall from. I was bracing for our murder, and she was having a family reunion.

Melanie got only halfway through her surprised exclamation. The much-aged woman named Maggie lunged forward with a speed that belied her brittle exterior. She didn't raise the hand that held the black crowbar. That was the hand I was watching, so I didn't see her free hand swing out to slap me hard across the face.

My head snapped back and then forward. She slapped me again.

"You won't fool us, you parasite. We know how you work. We know how well you can mimic us."

I tasted blood inside my cheek.

Don't do that again, I scolded Melanie. I told you what they'd think.

Melanie was too shocked to answer.

"Now, Maggie," Jeb began in a soothing tone.

"Don't you 'Now, Maggie' me, you old fool! She's probably led a legion of them down on us." She backed away from me, her eyes measuring my stillness as if I were a coiled snake. She stopped beside her brother.

"I don't see anyone," Jeb retorted. "Hey!" he yelled, and I flinched in surprise. I wasn't the only one. Jeb waved his left hand over his head, the gun still clenched in the right. "Over here!"

"Shut up," Maggie growled, shoving his chest. Though I had good reason to know she was strong, Jeb didn't wobble.

"She's alone, Mag. She was pretty much dead when I found her-she's not in such great shape now. The centipedes don't sacrifice their own that way. They would have come for her much sooner than I did. Whatever else she is, she's alone."

I saw the image of the long, many-legged insect in my head, but I didn't make the connection.

He's talking about you, Melanie translated. She placed the picture of the ugly bug next to my memory of a bright silver soul. I didn't see a resemblance.

I wonder how he knows what you look like, Melanie wondered absently. My memories of a soul's true appearance had been new to her in the beginning.

I didn't have time to wonder with her. Jeb was walking toward me, and the others were close behind. Kyle's hand hovered at Jeb's shoulder, ready to restrain him or throw him out of the way, I couldn't tell.

Jeb put his gun in his left hand and extended the right to me. I eyed it warily, waiting for it to hit me.

"C'mon," he urged gently. "If I could carry you that far, I woulda brought you home last night. You're gonna have to walk some more."

"No!" Kyle grunted.

"I'm takin' her back," Jeb said, and for the first time there was a harsher tone to his voice. Under his beard, his jaw flexed into a stubborn line.

"Jeb!" Maggie protested.

"S my place, Mag. I'll do what I want."

"Old fool!" she snapped again.

Jeb reached down and grabbed my hand from where it lay curled into a fist against my thigh. He yanked me to my feet. It was not cruelty; it was merely as if he was in a hurry. Yet was it not the very worst form of cruelty to prolong my life for the reasons he had?

I rocked unsteadily. I couldn't feel my legs very well-just prickles like needle points as the blood flowed down.

There was a hiss of disapproval behind him. It came from more than one mouth.

"Okay, whoever you are," he said to me, his voice still kind. "Let's get out of here before it heats up."

The one who must have been Kyle's brother put his hand on Jeb's arm.

"You can't just show it where we live, Jeb."

"I suppose it doesn't matter," Maggie said harshly. "It won't get a chance to tell tales."

Jeb sighed and pulled a bandanna-all but hidden by his beard-from around his neck.

"This is silly," he muttered, but he rolled the dirty fabric, stiff with dry sweat, into a blindfold.

I kept perfectly still as he tied it over my eyes, fighting the panic that increased when I couldn't see my enemies

I couldn't see, but I knew it was Jeb who put one hand on my back and guided me; none of the others would have been so gentle.

We started forward, toward the north, I thought. No one spoke at first-there was just the sound of sand grinding under many feet. The ground was even, but I stumbled on my numb legs again and again. Jeb was patient; his guiding hand was almost chivalrous.

I felt the sun rise as we walked. Some of the footsteps were faster than others. They moved ahead of us until they were hard to hear. It sounded like it was the minority that stayed with Jeb and me. I must not have looked like I needed many guards-I was faint with hunger, and I swayed with every step; my head felt dizzy and hollow.

"You aren't planning to tell him, are you?"

It was Maggie's voice; it came from a few feet behind me, and it sounded like an accusation.

"He's got a right to know," Jeb replied. The stubborn note was back in his voice.

"It's an unkind thing you are doing, Jebediah."

"Life is unkind, Magnolia."

It was hard to decide who was the more terrifying of the two. Was it Jeb, who seemed so intent on keeping me alive? Or Maggie, who had first suggested the doctor-an appellation that filled me with instinctive, nauseated dread-but who seemed more worried about cruelty than her brother?

We walked in silence again for a few hours. When my legs buckled, Jeb lowered me to the ground and held a canteen to my lips as he had in the night.

"Let me know when you're ready," Jeb told me. His voice sounded kind, though I knew that was a false interpretation.

Someone sighed impatiently.

"Why are you doing this, Jeb?" a man asked. I'd heard the voice before; it was one of the brothers. "For Doc? You could have just told Kyle that. You didn't have to pull a gun on him."

"Kyle needs a gun pulled on him more often," Jeb muttered.

"Please tell me this wasn't about sympathy," the man continued. "After all you've seen..."

"After all I've seen, if I hadn't learned compassion, I wouldn't be worth much. But no, it was not about sympathy. If I had enough sympathy for this poor creature, I would have let her die."

I shivered in the oven-hot air.

"What, then?" Kyle's brother demanded.

There was a long silence, and then Jeb's hand touched mine. I grasped it, needing the help to get back on my feet. His other hand pressed against my back, and I started forward again.

"Curiosity," Jeb said in a low voice.

No one replied.

As we walked, I considered a few sure facts. One, I was not the first soul they'd captured. There was already a set routine here. This "Doc" had tried to get his answer from others before me.

Two, he had tried unsuccessfully. If any soul had forgone suicide only to crack under the humans' torture, they would not need me now. My death would have been mercifully swift.

Oddly, I couldn't bring myself to hope for a quick end, though, or to try to effect that outcome. It would be easy to do, even without doing the deed myself. I would only have to tell them a lie-pretend to be a Seeker, tell them my colleagues were tracking me right now, bluster and threaten. Or tell them the truth-that Melanie lived on inside me, and that she had brought me here.

They would see another lie, and one so richly irresistible-the idea that the human could live on after implantation-so tempting to believe from their perspective, so insidious, that they would believe I was a Seeker more surely than if I claimed it. They would assume a trap, get rid of me quickly, and find a new place to hide, far away from here.

You're probably right, Melanie agreed. It's what I would do.

But I wasn't in pain yet, and so either form of suicide was hard to embrace; my instinct for survival sealed my lips. The memory of my last session with my Comforter-a time so civilized it seemed to belong to a different planet-flashed through my head. Melanie challenging me to have her removed, a seemingly suicidal impulse, but only a bluff. I remembered thinking how hard it was to contemplate death from a comfortable chair.

Last night Melanie and I had wished for death, but death had been only inches away at the time. It was different now that I was on my feet again.

I don't want to die, either, Melanie whispered. But maybe you're wrong. Maybe that's not why they're

keeping us alive. I don't understand why they would... She didn't want to imagine the things they might do to us-I was sure she could come up with worse than I. What answer would they want from you that bad?

I'll never tell. Not you, not any human.

A bold declaration. But then, I wasn't in pain yet....

Another hour had passed-the sun was directly overhead, the heat of it like a crown of fire on my hair-when the sound changed. The grinding steps that I barely heard anymore turned to echoes ahead of me. Jeb's feet still crunched against the sand like mine, but someone in front of us had reached a new terrain.

"Careful, now," Jeb warned me. "Watch your head."

I hesitated, not sure what I was watching for, or how to watch with no eyes. His hand left my back and pressed down on my head, telling me to duck. I bent forward. My neck was stiff.

He guided me forward again, and I heard our footsteps make the same echoing sound. The ground didn't give like sand, didn't feel loose like rock. It was flat and solid beneath my feet.

The sun was gone-I could no longer feel it burn my skin or scorch my hair.

I took another step, and a new air touched my face. It was not a breeze. This was stagnant-I moved into it. The dry desert wind was gone. This air was still and cooler. There was the faintest hint of moisture to it, a mustiness that I could both smell and taste.

There were so many questions in my mind, and in Melanie's. She wanted to ask hers, but I kept silent. There was nothing either of us could say that would help us now.

"Okay, you can straighten up," Jeb told me.

I raised my head slowly.

Even with the blindfold, I could tell that there was no light. It was utterly black around the edges of the bandanna. I could hear the others behind me, shuffling their feet impatiently, waiting for us to move forward.

"This way," Jeb said, and he was guiding me again. Our footsteps echoed back from close by-the space we were in must have been quite small. I found myself ducking my head instinctively.

We went a few steps farther, and then we rounded a sharp curve that seemed to turn us back the way we'd come. The ground started to slant downward. The angle got steeper with every step, and Jeb gave me his rough hand to keep me from falling. I don't know how long I slipped and skidded my way through the darkness. The hike probably felt longer than it was with each minute slowed by my terror.

We took another turn, and then the floor started to climb upward. My legs were so numb and wooden that as the path got steeper, Jeb had to half drag me up the incline. The air got mustier and moister the farther we went, but the blackness didn't change. The only sounds were our footsteps and their nearby echoes.

The pathway flattened out and began to turn and twist like a serpent.

Finally, finally, there was a brightness around the top and bottom of my blindfold. I wished that it would slip, as I was too frightened to pull it off myself. It seemed to me that I wouldn't be so terrified if I could just see where I was and who was with me.

With the light came noise. Strange noise, a low murmuring babble. It sounded almost like a waterfall.

The babble got louder as we moved forward, and the closer it got, the less it sounded like water. It was too varied, low and high pitches mingling and echoing. If it had not been so discordant, it might have sounded like an uglier version of the constant music I'd heard and sung on the Singing World. The darkness of the blindfold suited that memory, the memory of blindness.

Melanie understood the cacophony before I did. I'd never heard the sound because I'd never been with humans before.

It's an argument, she realized. It sounds like so many people arguing.

She was drawn by the sound. Were there more people here, then? That there were even eight had surprised us both. What was this place?

Hands touched the back of my neck, and I shied away from them.

"Easy now," Jeb said. He pulled the blindfold off my eyes.

I blinked slowly, and the shadows around me settled into shapes I could understand: rough, uneven walls; a pocked ceiling; a worn, dusty floor. We were underground somewhere in a natural cave formation. We couldn't be that deep. I thought we'd hiked upward longer than we'd slid downward.

The rock walls and ceiling were a dark purpley brown, and they were riddled with shallow holes like Swiss cheese. The edges of the lower holes were worn down, but over my head the circles were more defined, and their rims looked sharp.

The light came from a round hole ahead of us, its shape not unlike the holes that peppered the cavern, but

larger. This was an entrance, a doorway to a brighter place. Melanie was eager, fascinated by the concept of more humans. I held back, suddenly worried that blindness might be better than sight.

Jeb sighed. "Sorry," he muttered, so low that I was certainly the only one to hear.

I tried to swallow and could not. My head started to spin, but that might have been from hunger. My hands were trembling like leaves in a stiff breeze as Jeb prodded me through the big hole.

The tunnel opened into a chamber so vast that at first I couldn't accept what my eyes told me. The ceiling was too bright and too high-it was like an artificial sky. I tried to see what brightened it, but it sent down sharp lances of light that hurt my eyes.

I was expecting the babble to get louder, but it was abruptly dead quiet in the huge cavern.

The floor was dim compared to the brilliant ceiling so far above. It took a moment for my eyes to make sense of all the shapes.

A crowd. There was no other word for it-there was a crowd of humans standing stock-still and silent, all staring at me with the same burning, hate-filled expressions I'd seen at dawn.

Melanie was too stunned to do anything more than count. Ten, fifteen, twenty... twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven...

I didn't care how many there were. I tried to tell her how little it mattered. It wouldn't take twenty of them to kill me. To kill us. I tried to make her see how precarious our position was, but she was beyond my warnings at the moment, lost in this human world she'd never dreamed was here.

One man stepped forward from the crowd, and my eyes darted first to his hands, looking for the weapon they would carry. His hands were clenched in fists but empty of any other threat. My eyes, adjusting to the dazzling light, made out the sun-gilded tint of his skin and then recognized it.

Choking on the sudden hope that dizzied me, I lifted my eyes to the man's face.

The Host

CHAPTER 14

Disputed

It was too much for both of us, seeing him here, now, after already accepting that we'd never see him again, after believing that we'd lost him forever. It froze me solid, made me unable to react. I wanted to look at Uncle Jeb, to understand his heartbreaking answer in the desert, but I couldn't move my eyes. I stared at Jared's face, uncomprehending.

Melanie reacted differently.

"Jared," she cried; through my damaged throat the sound was just a croak.

She jerked me forward, much the same way as she had in the desert, assuming control of my frozen body. The only difference was that this time, it was by force.

I wasn't able to stop her fast enough.

She lurched forward, raising my arms to reach out for him. I screamed a warning at her in my head, but she wasn't listening to me. She was barely aware that I was even there.

No one tried to stop her as she staggered toward him. No one but me. She was within inches of touching him, and still she didn't see what I saw. She didn't see how his face had changed in the long months of separation, how it had hardened, how the lines pulled in different directions now. She didn't see that the unconscious smile she remembered would not physically fit on this new face. Only once had she seen his face turn dark and dangerous, and that expression was nothing to the one he wore now. She didn't see, or maybe she didn't care.

His reach was longer than mine.

Before Melanie could make my fingers touch him, his arm shot out and the back of his hand smashed into the side of my face. The blow was so hard that my feet left the ground before my head slammed into the rock floor. I heard the rest of my body hit the floor with dull thumps, but I didn't feel it. My eyes rolled back in my head, and a ringing sound shimmered in my ears. I fought the dizziness that threatened to spin me unconscious.

Stupid, stupid, I whimpered at her. I told you not to do that!

Jared's here, Jared's alive, Jared's here. She was incoherent, chanting the words like they were lyrics to a song.

I tried to focus my eyes, but the strange ceiling was blinding. I twisted my head away from the light and then swallowed a sob as the motion sent daggers of agony through the side of my face.

I could barely handle the pain of this one spontaneous blow. What hope did I have of enduring an intensive, calculated onslaught?

There was a shuffle of feet beside me; my eyes moved instinctively to find the threat, and I saw Uncle Jeb standing over me. He had one hand half stretched out toward me, but he hesitated, looking away. I raised my head an inch, stifling another moan, to see what he saw.

Jared was walking toward us, and his face was the same as those of the barbarians in the desert-only it was beautiful rather than frightening in its fury. My heart faltered and then beat unevenly, and I wanted to laugh at myself. Did it matter that he was beautiful, that I loved him, when he was going to kill me?

I stared at the murder in his expression and tried to hope that rage would win out over expediency, but a true death wish evaded me.

Jeb and Jared locked eyes for a long moment. Jared's jaw clenched and unclenched, but Jeb's face was calm. The silent confrontation ended when Jared suddenly exhaled in an angry gust and took a step back.

Jeb reached down for my hand and put his other arm around my back to pull me up. My head whirled and ached; my stomach heaved. If it hadn't been empty for days, I might have thrown up. It was like my feet weren't touching the ground. I wobbled and pitched forward. Jeb steadied me and then gripped my elbow to keep me standing.

Jared watched all this with a teeth-baring grimace. Like an idiot, Melanie struggled to move toward him again. But I was over the shock of seeing him here and less stupid than she was now. She wouldn't break through again. I locked her away behind every bar I could create in my head.

Just be quiet. Can't you see how he loathes me? Anything you say will make it worse. We're dead.

But Jared's alive, Jared's here, she crooned.

The quiet in the cavern dissolved; whispers came from every side, all at the same time, as if I'd missed some cue. I couldn't make out any meanings in the hissing murmurs.

My eyes darted around the mob of humans-every one of them an adult, no smaller, younger figure among them. My heart ached at the absence, and Melanie fought to voice the question. I hushed her firmly. There wasn't anything to see here, nothing but anger and hatred on strangers' faces, or the anger and hatred on Jared's face.

Until another man pushed his way through the whispering throng. He was built slim and tall, his skeletal structure more obvious under his skin than most. His hair was washed out, either pale brown or a dark, nondescript blond. Like his bland hair and his long body, his features were mild and thin. There was no anger in his face, which was why it held my eye.

The others made way for this apparently unassuming man as if he had some status among them. Only Jared didn't defer to him; he held his ground, staring only at me. The tall man stepped around him, not seeming to notice the obstacle in his path any more than he would a pile of rock.

"Okay, okay," he said in an oddly cheery voice as he circled Jared and came to face me. "I'm here. What have we got?"

It was Aunt Maggie who answered him, appearing at his elbow.

"Jeb found it in the desert. Used to be our niece Melanie. It seemed to be following the directions he gave her." She flashed a dirty look at Jeb.

"Mm-hm," the tall, bony man murmured, his eyes appraising me curiously. It was strange, that appraisal. He looked as if he liked what he saw. I couldn't fathom why he would.

My gaze shied away from his, to another woman-a young woman who peered around his side, her hand resting on his arm-my eyes drawn by her vivid hair.

Sharon! Melanie cried.

Melanie's cousin saw the recognition in my eyes, and her face hardened.

I pushed Melanie roughly to the back of my head. Shhh!

"Mm-hm," the tall man said again, nodding. He reached one hand out to my face and seemed surprised when I recoiled from it, flinching into Jeb's side.

"It's okay," the tall man said, smiling a little in encouragement. "I won't hurt you."

He reached toward my face again. I shrunk into Jeb's side like before, but Jeb flexed his arm and nudged me forward. The tall man touched my jaw below my ear, his fingers gentler than I expected, and turned my face away. I felt his finger trace a line on the back of my neck, and I realized that he was examining the scar from my

insertion.

I watched Jared's face from the corner of my eye. What this man was doing clearly upset him, and I thought I knew why-how he must have hated that slender pink line on my neck.

Jared frowned, but I was surprised that some of the anger had drained from his expression. His eyebrows pulled together. It made him look confused.

The tall man dropped his hands and stepped away from me. His lips were pursed, his eyes alight with some challenge.

"She looks healthy enough, aside from some recent exhaustion, dehydration, and malnourishment. I think you've put enough water back into her so that the dehydration won't interfere. Okay, then." He made an odd, unconscious motion with his hands, as if he were washing them. "Let's get started."

Then his words and his brief examination fit together and I understood-this gentle-seeming man who had just promised not to hurt me was the doctor.

Uncle Jeb sighed heavily and closed his eyes.

The doctor held a hand out to me, inviting me to put mine in his. I clenched my hands into fists behind my back. He looked at me carefully again, appraising the terror in my eyes. His mouth turned down, but it was not a frown. He was considering how to proceed.

"Kyle, Ian?" he called, craning his neck to search the assembly for the ones he summoned. My knees wobbled when the two big black-haired brothers pressed their way forward.

"I think I need some help. Maybe if you were to carry -" the doctor, who did not look quite so tall standing beside Kyle, began to say.

"No."

Everyone turned to see where the dissent had come from. I didn't need to look, because I recognized the voice. I looked at him anyway.

Jared's eyebrows pressed down hard over his eyes; his mouth was twisted into a strange grimace. So many emotions ran across his face, it was hard to pin one down. Anger, defiance, confusion, hatred, fear... pain.

The doctor blinked, his face going slack with surprise. "Jared? Is there a problem?"

"Yes."

Everyone waited. Beside me, Jeb was holding the corners of his lips down as if they were trying to lift into a grin. If that was the case, then the old man had an odd sense of humor.

"And it is?" the doctor asked.

Jared answered through his teeth. "I'll tell you the problem, Doc. What's the difference between letting you have it or Jeb putting a bullet in its head?"

I trembled. Jeb patted my arm.

The doctor blinked again. "Well" was all he said.

Jared answered his own question. "The difference is, if Jeb kills it, at least it dies cleanly."

"Jared." The doctor's voice was soothing, the same tone he'd used on me. "We learn so much each time. Maybe this will be the time -"

"Hah!" Jared snorted. "I don't see much progress being made, Doc."

Jared will protect us, Melanie thought faintly.

It was hard to concentrate enough to form words. Not us, just your body.

Close enough... Her voice seemed to come from some distance, from outside my pounding head.

Sharon took a step forward so that she stood half in front of the doctor. It was a strangely protective stance.

"There's no point in wasting an opportunity," she said fiercely. "We all realize that this is hard for you, Jared, but in the end it's not your decision to make. We have to consider what's best for the majority."

Jared glowered at her. "No." The word was a snarl.

I could tell he had not whispered the word, yet it was very quiet in my ears. In fact, everything was suddenly quiet. Sharon's lips moved, her finger jabbed at Jared viciously, but all I heard was a soft hissing. Neither one of them took a step, but they seemed to be drifting away from me.

I saw the dark-haired brothers step toward Jared with angry faces. I felt my hand try to rise in protest, but it only twitched limply. Jared's face turned red when his lips parted, and the tendons in his neck strained like he was shouting, but I heard nothing. Jeb let go of my arm, and I saw the dull gray of the rifle's barrel swing up beside me. I cringed away from the weapon, though it was not pointed in my direction. This upset my balance, and I watched the room tip very slowly to one side.

"Jamie," I sighed as the light swirled away from my eyes.

Jared's face was suddenly very close, leaning over me with a fierce expression

Jared's face was suddenly very close, leaning over me with a fierce expression. "Jamie?" I breathed again, this time a question. "Jamie?"
Jeb's gruff voice answered from somewhere far away.
"The kid is fine. Jared brought him here."
I looked at Jared's tormented face, fast disappearing into the dark mist that covered my eyes.
"Thank you," I whispered.
And then I was lost in the darkness.

The Host

CHAPTER 15

Guarded

When I came to, there was no disorientation. I knew exactly where I was, roughly speaking, and I kept my eyes closed and my breathing even. I tried to learn as much as I could about my exact situation without giving away the fact that I was conscious again.

I was hungry. My stomach knotted and clenched and made angry noises. I doubted these noises would betray me-I was sure it had gurgled and complained as I slept.

My head ached fiercely. It was impossible to know how much of this was from fatigue and how much was from the knocks I'd taken.

I was lying on a hard surface. It was rough and... pocked. It was not flat, but oddly curved, as though I was lying in a shallow bowl. It was not comfortable. My back and hips throbbed from being curled into this position. That pain was probably what had woken me; I felt far from rested.

It was dark-I could tell that without opening my eyes. Not pitch-black, but very dark.

The air was even mustier than before-humid and corroded, with a peculiar acrid bite that seemed to cling to the back of my throat. The temperature was cooler than it had been in the desert, but the incongruous moisture made it almost as uncomfortable. I was sweating again, the water Jeb had given me finding its way out through my pores.

I could hear my breathing echo back to me from a few feet away. It could be that I was only close to one wall, but I guessed that I was in a very small space. I listened as hard as I could, and it sounded like my breathing echoed back from the other side as well.

Knowing that I was probably still somewhere in the cavern system Jeb had brought me to, I was fairly sure what I would see when I opened my eyes. I must be in some small hole in the rock, dark purple brown and riddled with holes like cheese.

It was silent except for the sounds my body made. Afraid to open my eyes, I relied on my ears, straining harder and harder against the silence. I couldn't hear anyone else, and this made no sense. They wouldn't have left me without a warden, would they? Uncle Jeb and his omnipresent rifle, or someone less sympathetic. To leave me alone... that wouldn't be in character with their brutality, their natural fear and hatred of what I was.

Unless...

I tried to swallow, but terror closed my throat. They wouldn't leave me alone. Not unless they thought I was dead, or had made sure that I would be. Not unless there were places in these caves that no one came back from.

The picture I'd been forming of my surroundings shifted dizzily in my head. I saw myself now at the bottom of a deep shaft or walled into a cramped tomb. My breathing sped up, tasting the air for staleness, for some sign that my oxygen was running low. The muscles around my lungs pulled outward, filling with air for the scream that was on the way. I clenched my teeth to keep it from escaping.

Sharp and close, something grated across the ground beside my head.

I shrieked, and the sound of it was piercing in the small space. My eyes flew open. I jerked away from the sinister noise, throwing myself against a jagged rock wall. My hands swung up to protect my face as my head thumped painfully against the low ceiling.

A dim light illuminated the perfectly round exit to the tiny bubble of a cave I was curled in. Jared's face was half lit as he leaned into the opening, one arm reaching toward me. His lips were tight with anger. A vein in his forehead pulsed as he watched my panicked reaction.

He didn't move: he just stared furiously while my heart restarted and my breathing evened out. I met his

glare, remembering how quiet he had always been-like a wraith when he wanted. No wonder I hadn't heard him sitting guard outside my cell.

But I had heard something. As I remembered that, Jared shoved his extended arm closer, and the grating noise repeated. I looked down. At my feet was a broken sheet of plastic serving as a tray. And on it...

I lunged for the open bottle of water. I was barely aware that Jared's mouth twisted with disgust as I jerked the bottle to my lips. I was sure that would bother me later, but all I cared about now was the water. I wondered if ever in my life I would take the liquid for granted again. Given that my life was not likely to be prolonged here, the answer was probably no.

Jared had disappeared, back through the circular entry. I could see a piece of his sleeve and nothing more. The dull light came from somewhere beside him. It was an artificial bluish color.

I'd gulped half the water down when a new scent caught my attention, informing me that water was not the only gift. I looked down at the tray again.

Food. They were feeding me?

It was the bread-a dark, unevenly shaped roll-that I smelled first, but there was also a bowl of some clear liquid with the tang of onions. As I leaned closer, I could see darker chunks on the bottom. Beside this were three stubby white tubes. I guessed they were vegetables, but I didn't recognize the variety.

It took only seconds for me to make these discoveries, but even in that short time, my stomach nearly jumped through my mouth trying to reach the food.

I ripped into the bread. It was very dense, studded with whole-grain kernels that caught in my teeth. The texture was gritty, but the flavor was wonderfully rich. I couldn't remember anything tasting more delicious to me, not even my mashed-up Twinkies. My jaw worked as fast as it could, but I swallowed most of the mouthfuls of tough bread half-chewed. I could hear each mouthful hit my stomach with a gurgle. It didn't feel as good as I thought it would. Too long empty, my stomach reacted to the food with discomfort.

I ignored that and moved on to the liquid-it was soup. This went down easier. Aside from the onions I'd smelled, the taste was mild. The green chunks were soft and spongy. I drank it straight from the bowl and wished the bowl were deeper. I tipped it back to make sure I'd gotten every drop.

The white vegetables were crunchy in texture, woody in taste. Some kind of root. They weren't as satisfying as the soup or as tasty as the bread, but I was grateful for their bulk. I wasn't full-not close-and I probably would have started on the tray next if I thought I'd be able to chew through it.

It didn't occur to me until I was finished that they shouldn't be feeding me. Not unless Jared had lost the confrontation with the doctor. Though why would Jared be my guard if that were the case?

I slid the tray away when it was empty, cringing at the noise it made. I stayed pressed against the back wall of my bubble as Jared reached in to retrieve it. This time he didn't look at me.

"Thank you," I whispered as he disappeared again. He said nothing; there was no change in his face. Even the bit of his sleeve did not show this time, but I was sure he was there.

I can't believe he hit me, Melanie mused, her thought incredulous rather than resentful. She was not over the surprise of it yet. I hadn't been surprised in the first place. Of course he had hit me.

I wondered where you were, I answered. It would be poor manners to get me into this mess and then abandon me.

She ignored my sour tone. I wouldn't have thought he'd be able to do it, no matter what. I don't think I could hit him.

Sure you could. If he'd come at you with reflective eyes, you'd have done the same. You're naturally violent. I remembered her daydreams of strangling the Seeker. That seemed like months ago, though I knew it was only days. It would make sense if it had been longer. It ought to take time to get oneself stuck in such a disastrous mire as the one I was in now.

Melanie tried to consider it impartially. I don't think so. Not Jared... and Jamie, there's no way I could hurt Jamie, even if he was... She trailed off, hating that line of thought.

I considered this and found it true. Even if the child had become something or someone else, neither she nor I could ever raise a hand to him.

That's different. You're like... a mother. Mothers are irrational here. Too many emotions involved.

Motherhood is always emotional-even for you souls.

I didn't answer that.

What do you think is going to happen now?

You're the expert on humans, I reminded her. It's probably not a good thing that they're giving me food. I

can think of only one reason they'd want me strong.

The few specifics I remembered of historical human brutalities tangled in my head with the stories in the old newspaper we'd read the other day. Fire-that was a bad one. Melanie had burned all the fingerprints off her right hand once in a stupid accident, grabbing a pan she hadn't realized was hot. I remembered how the pain had shocked her-it was so unexpectedly sharp and demanding.

It was just an accident, though. Quickly treated with ice, salves, medicine. No one had done it on purpose, continued on from the first sickening pain, drawing it out longer and longer...

I'd never lived on a planet where such atrocities could happen, even before the souls came. This place was truly the highest and the lowest of all worlds-the most beautiful senses, the most exquisite emotions... the most malevolent desires, the darkest deeds. Perhaps it was meant to be so. Perhaps without the lows, the highs could not be reached. Were the souls the exception to that rule? Could they have the light without the darkness of this world?

I... felt something when he hit you, Melanie interrupted. The words came slowly, one by one, as if she didn't want to think them.

I felt something, too. It was amazing how natural it was to use sarcasm now, after spending so much time with Melanie. He's got quite a backhand, doesn't he?

That's not what I meant. I mean... She hesitated for a long moment, and then the rest of the words came in a rush. I thought it was all me-the way we feel about him. I thought I was... in control of that.

The thoughts behind her words were clearer than the words themselves.

You thought you were able to bring me here because you wanted it so much. That you were controlling me instead of the other way around. I tried not to be annoyed. You thought you were manipulating me.

Yes. The chagrin in her tone was not because I was upset, but because she did not like being wrong. But... I waited.

It came in a rush once more. You're in love with him, too, separately from me. It feels different from the way I feel. Other. I didn't see that until he was there with us, until you saw him for the first time. How did that happen? How does a three-inch-long worm fall in love with a human being?

Worm?

Sorry. I guess you sort of have... limbs.

Not really. They're more like antennae. And I'm quite a bit longer than three inches when they're extended.

My point is, he's not your species.

My body is human, I told her. While I'm attached to it, I'm human, too. And the way you see Jared in your memories... Well, it's all your fault.

She considered that for a moment. She didn't like it much.

So if you had gone to Tucson and gotten a new body, you wouldn't love him anymore now?

I really, really hope that's true.

Neither of us was happy with my answer. I leaned my head against the top of my knees. Melanie changed the subject.

At least Jamie is safe. I knew Jared would take care of him. If I had to leave him, I couldn't have left him in better hands... I wish I could see him.

I'm not asking that! I cringed at the thought of the response that request would receive.

At the same time, I yearned to see the boy's face for myself. I wanted to be sure that he was really here, really safe-that they were feeding him and caring for him the way Melanie never could again. The way I, mother to no one, wanted to care for him. Did he have someone to sing to him at night? To tell him stories? Would this new, angry Jared think of little things like that? Did he have someone to curl up against when he was frightened?

Do you think they will tell him that I'm here? Melanie asked.

Would that help or hurt him? I asked back.

Her thought was a whisper. I don't know.... I wish I could tell him that I kept my promise.

You certainly did. I shook my head, amazed. No one can say that you didn't come back, just like always.

Thanks for that. Her voice was faint. I couldn't tell if she meant for my words now, or if she meant the bigger picture, bringing her here.

I was suddenly exhausted, and I could feel that she was, too. Now that my stomach had settled a bit and felt almost halfway full, the rest of my pains were not sharp enough to keep me awake. I hesitated before

moving, afraid to make any noise, but my body wanted to uncurl and stretch out. I did so as silently as I could, trying to find a piece of the bubble long enough for me. Finally, I had to stick my feet almost out the round opening. I didn't like doing it, worried that Jared would hear the movement close to him and think I was trying to escape, but he didn't react in any way. I pillowed the good side of my face against my arm, tried to ignore the way the curve of the floor cramped my spine, and closed my eyes.

I think I slept, but if I did, it wasn't deeply. The sound of footsteps was still very far away when I came fully awake.

This time I opened my eyes at once. Nothing had changed-I still could see the dull blue light through the round hole; I still could not see if Jared was outside it. Someone was coming this way-it was easy to hear that the footsteps were coming closer. I pulled my legs away from the opening, moving as quietly as I could, and curled up against the back wall again. I would have liked to be able to stand; it would have made me feel less vulnerable, more prepared to face whatever was coming. The low ceiling of the cave bubble would barely have allowed me to kneel.

There was a flash of movement outside my prison. I saw part of Jared's foot as he rose silently to his feet.

"Ah. Here you are," a man said. The words were so loud after all the empty silence that I jumped. I recognized the voice. One of the brothers I'd seen in the desert-the one with the machete, Kyle.

Jared didn't speak.

"We're not going to allow this, Jared." It was a different speaker, a more reasonable voice. Probably the younger brother, Ian. The brothers' voices were very similar-or they would have been, if Kyle weren't always half shouting, his tone always twisted with anger. "We've all lost somebody-hell, we've all lost everybody. But this is ridiculous."

"If you won't let Doc have it, then it's got to die," Kyle added, his voice a growl.

"You can't keep it prisoner here," Ian continued. "Eventually, it will escape and we'll all be exposed."

Jared didn't speak, but he took one side step that put him directly in front of the opening to my cell.

My heart pumped hard and fast as I understood what the brothers were saying. Jared had won. I was not to be tortured. I was not to be killed-not immediately, anyway. Jared was keeping me prisoner.

It seemed a beautiful word under the circumstances.

I told you he would protect us.

"Don't make this difficult, Jared," said a new male voice I didn't recognize. "It has to be done."

Jared said nothing.

"We don't want to hurt you, Jared. We're all brothers here. But we will if you make us." There was no bluff in Kyle's tone. "Move aside."

Jared stood rock still.

My heart started thumping faster than before, jerking against my ribs so hard that the hammering disrupted the rhythm of my lungs, made it difficult to breathe. Melanie was incapacitated with fear, unable to think in coherent words.

They were going to hurt him. Those lunatic humans were going to attack one of their own.

"Jared... please," Ian said.

Jared didn't answer.

A heavy footfall-a lunge-and the sound of something heavy hitting something solid. A gasp, a choking gurgle -

"No!" I cried, and launched myself through the round hole.

The Host

CHAPTER 16

Assigned

The ledge of the rock exit was worn down, but it scraped my palms and shins as I scrambled through it. It hurt, stiff as I was, to wrench myself erect, and my breath caught. My head swam as the blood flowed downward.

I looked for only one thing-where Jared was, so that I could put myself between him and his attackers.

They all stood frozen in place, staring at me. Jared had his back to the wall, his hands balled into fists and held low. In front of him, Kyle was hunched over, clutching his stomach. Ian and a stranger flanked him a few

head low. In front of him, Kyle was hunched over, clutching his stomach. Ian and a stranger hanked him a few feet back, their mouths open with shock. I took advantage of their surprise. In two long, shaky strides, I moved between Kyle and Jared.

Kyle was the first to react. I was less than a foot from him, and his primary instinct was to shove me away. His hand struck my shoulder and heaved me toward the floor. Before I could fall, something caught my wrist and yanked me back to my feet.

As soon as he realized what he'd done, Jared dropped my wrist like my skin was oozing acid.

"Get back in there," he roared at me. He shoved my shoulder, too, but it wasn't as hard as Kyle's push. It sent me staggering two feet back toward the hole in the wall.

The hole was a black circle in the narrow hallway. Outside the small prison, the bigger cave looked just the same, only longer and taller, a tube rather than a bubble. A small lamp-powered by what, I couldn't guess-lit the hallway dimly from the ground. It cast strange shadows on the features of the men, turning them into scowling monster faces.

I took a step toward them again, turning my back to Jared.

"I'm what you want," I said directly to Kyle. "Leave him alone."

No one said anything for a long second.

"Tricky bugger," Ian finally muttered, eyes wide with horror.

"I said get back in there," Jared hissed behind me.

I turned halfway, not wanting Kyle out of my sight. "It's not your duty to protect me at your own expense."

Jared grimaced, one hand rising to push me back toward the cell again.

I skipped out of the way; the motion moved me toward the ones who wanted to kill me.

Ian grabbed my arms and pinned them behind me. I struggled instinctively, but he was very strong. He bent my joints too far back and I gasped.

"Get your hands off her!" Jared shouted, charging.

Kyle caught him and spun him around into a wrestling hold, forcing his neck forward. The other man grabbed one of Jared's thrashing arms.

"Don't hurt him!" I screeched. I strained against the hands that imprisoned me.

Jared's free elbow rammed into Kyle's stomach. Kyle gasped and lost his grip. Jared twisted away from his attackers and then lunged back, his fist connecting with Kyle's nose. Dark red blood splattered the wall and the lamp.

"Finish it, Ian!" Kyle yelled. He put his head down and hurtled into Jared, throwing him into the other man.

"No!" Jared and I cried at the same moment.

Ian dropped my arms, and his hands wrapped around my throat, choking off my air. I clawed at his hands with my useless, stubby nails. He gripped me tighter, dragging my feet off the floor.

It hurt-the strangling hands, the sudden panic of my lungs. It was agony. I writhed, more trying to escape the pain than the murdering hands.

Click, click.

I'd only heard the sound once before, but I recognized it. So did everyone else. They all froze, Ian with his hands locked hard on my neck.

"Kyle, Ian, Brandt-back off!" Jeb barked.

No one moved-just my hands, still clawing, and my feet, twitching in the air.

Jared suddenly darted under Kyle's motionless arm and sprang at me. I saw his fist flying toward my face, and closed my eyes.

A loud thwack sounded inches behind my head. Ian howled, and I dropped to the floor. I crumpled there at his feet, gasping. Jared retreated after an angry glance in my direction and went to stand at Jeb's elbow.

"You're guests here, boys, and don't forget it," Jeb growled. "I told you not to go looking for the girl. She's my guest, too, for the moment, and I don't take kindly to any of my guests killing any of the others."

"Jeb," Ian moaned above me, his voice muffled by the hand held to his mouth. "Jeb. This is insane."

"What's your plan?" Kyle demanded. His face was smeared with blood, a violent, macabre sight. But there was no evidence of pain in his voice, only controlled and simmering anger. "We have a right to know. We have to decide whether this place is safe or if it's time to move on. So... how long will you keep this thing as your pet? What will you do with it when you're finished playing God? All of us deserve to know the answers to these questions."

Kyle's extraordinary words echoed behind the pulse thudding in my head. Keep me as a pet? Jeb had called me his guest. . . . Was that another word for prisoner? Was it possible that two humans existed that did not demand either my death or my torture-wrung confession? If so, it was nothing less than a miracle.

"Don't have your answers, Kyle," Jeb said. "It's not up to me."

I doubted any other response Jeb could have given would have confused them more. All four men, Kyle, Ian, the one I didn't know, and even Jared, stared at him with shock. I still crouched gasping at Ian's feet, wishing there was some way I could climb back into my hole unnoticed.

"Not up to you?" Kyle finally echoed, still disbelieving. "Who, then? If you're thinking of putting it to a vote, that's already been done. Ian, Brandt, and I are the duly designated appointees of the result."

Jeb shook his head—a tight movement that never took his eyes off the man in front of him. "It's not up for a vote. This is still my house."

"Who, then?" Kyle shouted.

Jeb's eyes finally flickered—to another face and then back to Kyle. "It's Jared's decision."

Everyone, me included, shifted their eyes to stare at Jared.

He gaped at Jeb, just as astonished as the rest, and then his teeth ground together with an audible sound. He threw a glare of pure hate in my direction.

"Jared?" Kyle asked, facing Jeb again. "That makes no sense!" He was not in control of himself now, almost spluttering in rage. "He's more biased than anyone else! Why? How can he be rational about this?"

"Jeb, I don't. . ." Jared muttered.

"She's your responsibility, Jared," Jeb said in a firm voice. "I'll help you out, of course, if there's any more trouble like this, and with keeping track of her and all that. But when it comes to making decisions, that's all yours." He raised one hand when Kyle tried to protest again. "Look at it this way, Kyle. If somebody found your Jodi on a raid and brought her back here, would you want me or Doc or a vote deciding what we did with her?"

"Jodi is dead," Kyle hissed, blood spraying off his lips. He glared at me with much the same expression Jared had just used.

"Well, if her body wandered in here, it would still be up to you. Would you want it any other way?"

"The majority —"

"My house, my rules," Jeb interrupted harshly. "No more discussion on this. No more votes. No more execution attempts. You three spread the word—this is how it works from now on. New rule."

"Another one?" Ian muttered under his breath.

Jeb ignored him. "If, unlikely as it may be, somehow this ever happens again, whoever the body belongs to makes the call." Jeb poked the barrel of the gun toward Kyle, then jerked it a few inches toward the hall behind him. "Get out of here. I don't want to see you anywhere around this place again. You let everyone know that this corridor is off-limits. No one's got any reason for being here except Jared, and if I catch someone skulking around, I'm asking questions second. You got that? Move. Now." He jabbed the gun at Kyle again.

I was amazed that the three assassins immediately stalked back up the hallway, not even pausing to give me or Jeb a parting grimace.

I deeply wanted to believe that the gun in Jeb's hands was a bluff.

From the first time I'd seen him, Jeb had shown every outward appearance of kindness. He had not touched me once in violence; he had not even looked at me with recognizable hostility. Now it seemed that he was one of only two people here who meant me no harm. Jared might have fought to keep me alive, but it was plain that he was intensely conflicted about that decision. I sensed that he could change his mind at any time. From his expression, it was clear that part of him wanted this over with—especially now that Jeb had put the decision on his shoulders. While I made this analysis, Jared glowered at me with disgust in every line of his expression.

However, as much as I wanted to believe that Jeb was bluffing, while I watched the three men disappear into the darkness away from me, it was obvious there was no way he could be. Under the front he presented, Jeb must have been just as deadly and cruel as the rest of them. If he hadn't used that gun in the past—used it to kill, not just to threaten—no one would have obeyed him this way.

Desperate times, Melanie whispered. We can't afford to be kind in the world you've created. We're fugitives, an endangered species. Every choice is life-or-death.

Shh. I don't have time for a debate. I need to focus.

Jared was facing Jeb now, one hand held out in front of him, palm up, fingers curled limply. Now that the

others were gone, their bodies slumped into a looser stance. Jeb was even grinning under his thick beard, as though he'd enjoyed the standoff at gunpoint. Strange human.

"Please don't put this on me, Jeb," Jared said. "Kyle is right about one thing-I can't make a rational decision."

"No one said you had to decide this second. She's not going anywhere." Jeb glanced down at me, still grinning. The eye closest to me-the one Jared couldn't see-closed quickly and opened again. A wink. "Not after all the trouble she took to get here. You've got plenty of time to think it through."

"There's nothing to think through. Melanie is dead. But I can't-I can't-Jeb, I can't just..." Jared couldn't seem to finish the sentence.

Tell him.

I'm not ready to die right this second.

"Don't think about it, then," Jeb told him. "Maybe you'll figure something out later. Give it some time."

"What are we going to do with it? We can't keep watch on it round the clock."

Jeb shook his head. "That's exactly what we're going to have to do for a while. Things will calm down. Even Kyle can't preserve a murderous rage for more than a few weeks."

"A few weeks? We can't afford to play guard down here for a few weeks. We have other things -"

"I know, I know." Jeb sighed. "I'll figure something out."

"And that's only half the problem." Jared looked at me again; a vein in his forehead pulsed. "Where do we keep it? It's not like we have a cell block."

Jeb smiled down at me. "You're not going to give us any trouble, now, are you?"

I stared at him mutely.

"Jeb," Jared muttered, upset.

"Oh, don't worry about her. First of all, we'll keep an eye on her. Secondly, she'd never be able to find her way out of here-she'd wander around lost until she ran into somebody. Which leads us to number three: she's not that stupid." He raised one thick white eyebrow at me. "You're not going to go looking for Kyle or the rest of them, are you? I don't think any of them are very fond of you."

I just stared, wary of his easy, chatty tone.

"I wish you wouldn't talk to it like that," Jared muttered.

"I was raised in a politer time, kid. I can't help myself." Jeb put one hand on Jared's arm, patting lightly. "Look, you've had a full night. Let me take the next watch here. Get some sleep."

Jared seemed about to object, but then he looked at me again and his expression hardened.

"Whatever you want, Jeb. And... I don't-I won't accept responsibility for this thing. Kill it if you think that's best."

I flinched.

Jared scowled at my reaction, then turned his back abruptly and walked the same way the others had gone. Jeb watched him go. While he was distracted, I crept back into my hole.

I heard Jeb settle slowly to the ground beside the opening. He sighed and stretched, popping a few joints. After a few minutes, he started whistling quietly. It was a cheery tune.

I curled myself around my bent knees, pressing my back into the farthest recess of the little cell. Tremors started at the small of my back and ran up and down my spine. My hands shook, and my teeth chattered softly together, despite the soggy heat.

"Might as well lie down and get some sleep," Jeb said, whether to me or to himself, I wasn't sure. "Tomorrow's bound to be a tough one."

The shivers passed after a time-maybe half an hour. When they were gone, I felt exhausted. I decided to take Jeb's advice. Though the floor felt even more uncomfortable than before, I was unconscious in seconds.

The smell of food woke me. This time I was groggy and disoriented when I opened my eyes. An instinctive sense of panic had my hands trembling again before I was fully conscious.

The same tray sat on the ground beside me, identical offerings on it. I could both see and hear Jeb. He sat in front of the cave in profile, looking straight ahead down the long round corridor and whistling softly.

Driven by my fierce thirst, I sat up and grabbed the open bottle of water.

"Morning," Jeb said, nodding in my direction.

I froze, my hand on the bottle, until he turned his head and started whistling again.

Only now, not quite so desperately thirsty as before, did I notice the odd, unpleasant aftertaste to the water. It matched the acrid taste of the air, but it was slightly stronger. The tang lingered in my mouth, inescapable.

I ate quickly, this time saving the soup for last. My stomach reacted more happily today, accepting the food with better grace. It barely gurgled.

My body had other needs, though, now that the loudest ones had been sated. I looked around my dark, cramped hole. There weren't a lot of options visible. But I could barely contain my fear at the thought of speaking up and making a request, even of the bizarre but friendly Jeb.

I rocked back and forth, debating. My hips ached from curving to the bowled shape of the cave.

"Ahem," Jeb said.

He was looking at me again, his face a deeper color under the white hair than usual.

"You've been stuck in here for a while," he said. "You need to... get out?"

I nodded.

"Don't mind a walk myself." His voice was cheerful. He sprang to his feet with surprising agility.

I crawled to the edge of my hole, staring out at him cautiously.

"I'll show you our little washroom," he continued. "Now, you should know that we're going to have to go through... kind of the main plaza, so to speak. Don't worry. I think everyone will have gotten the message by now." Unconsciously, he stroked the length of his gun.

I tried to swallow. My bladder was so full it was a constant pain, impossible to ignore. But to parade right through the middle of the hive of angry killers? Couldn't he just bring me a bucket?

He measured the panic in my eyes-watched the way I automatically shrank back farther into the hole-and his lips pursed in speculation. Then he turned and started walking down the dark hall. "Follow me," he called back, not looking to see if I obeyed.

I had one vivid flash of Kyle finding me here alone, and was after Jeb before a second passed, scrambling awkwardly through the opening and then hobbling along on my stiff legs as fast as I could to catch up. It felt both horrible and wonderful to stand straight again-the pain was sharp, but the relief was greater.

I was close behind him when we reached the end of the hall; darkness loomed through the tall broken oval of the exit. I hesitated, looking back at the small lamp he'd left on the floor. It was the only light in the dark cave. Was I supposed to bring it?

He heard me stop and turned to peer at me over his shoulder. I nodded toward the light, then looked back at him.

"Leave it. I know my way." He held out his free hand to me. "I'll guide you."

I stared at the hand for a long moment, and then, feeling the urgency in my bladder, I slowly put my hand on his palm, barely touching it-the way I would have touched a snake if for some reason I was ever forced to.

Jeb led me through the blackness with sure, quick steps. The long tunnel was followed by a series of bewildering twists in opposing directions. As we rounded yet another sharp V in the path, I knew I was hopelessly turned around. I was sure this was on purpose, and the reason Jeb had left the lamp behind. He wouldn't want me knowing too much about how to find my way out of this labyrinth.

I was curious as to how this place had come to be, how Jeb had found it, and how the others had wound up here. But I forced my lips tightly together. It seemed to me that keeping silent was my best bet now. What I was hoping for, I wasn't sure. A few more days of life? Just a cessation of pain? Was there anything else left? All I knew was that I wasn't ready to die, as I'd told Melanie before; my survival instinct was every bit as developed as the average human's.

We turned another corner, and the first light reached us. Ahead, a tall, narrow crevice glowed with light from another room. This light was not artificial like the little lamp by my cave. It was too white, too pure.

We couldn't move through the narrow fracture in the rock side by side. Jeb went first, towing me close behind. Once through-and able to see again-I pulled my hand out of Jeb's light grip. He didn't react in any way except to put his newly freed hand back on the gun.

We were in a short tunnel, and a brighter light shone through a rough arched doorway. The walls were the same holey purple rock.

I could hear voices now. They were low, less urgent than the last time I'd heard the babble of a human crowd. No one was expecting us today. I could only imagine what the response would be to my appearance with Jeb. My palms were cold and wet; my breath came in shallow gasps. I leaned as close as I could to Jeb without actually touching him.

"Easy," he murmured, not turning. "They're more afraid of you than you are of them."

I doubted that. And even if there were any way that it could be true, fear turned into hatred and violence in the human heart.

"I won't let anybody hurt you," Jeb mumbled as he reached the archway. "Anyway, might as well get used to this."

I wanted to ask what that meant, but he stepped through into the next room. I crept in after him, half a step behind, keeping myself hidden by his body as much as possible. The only thing harder than moving myself forward into that room was the thought of falling behind Jeb and being caught alone here.

Sudden silence greeted our entrance.

We were in the gigantic, bright cavern again, the one they'd first brought me to. How long ago was that? I had no idea. The ceiling was still too bright for me to make out exactly how it was lit. I hadn't noticed before, but the walls were not unbroken—dozens of irregular gaps opened to adjoining tunnels. Some of the openings were huge, others barely large enough for a man to fit through stooped over; some were natural crevices, others were, if not man-made, at least enhanced by someone's hands.

Several people stared at us from the recesses of those crevices, frozen in the act of coming or going. More people were out in the open, their bodies caught in the middle of whatever movement our entrance had interrupted. One woman was bent in half, reaching for her shoelaces. A man's motionless arms hung in the air, raised to illustrate some point he'd been making to his companions. Another man wobbled, caught off balance in a sudden stop. His foot came down hard as he struggled to keep steady; the thud of its fall was the only sound in the vast space. It echoed through the room.

It was fundamentally wrong for me to feel grateful to that hideous weapon in Jeb's hands... but I did. I knew that without it we would probably have been attacked. These humans would not stop themselves from hurting Jeb if it meant they could get to me. Though we might be attacked despite the gun. Jeb could only shoot one of them at a time.

The picture in my head had turned so grisly that I couldn't bear it. I tried to focus on my immediate surroundings, which were bad enough.

Jeb paused for a moment, the gun held at his waist, pointing outward. He stared all around the room, seeming to lock his gaze one by one with each person in it. There were fewer than twenty here; it did not take long. When he was satisfied with his study, he headed for the left wall of the cavern. Blood thudding in my ears, I followed in his shadow.

He did not walk directly across the cavern, instead keeping close to the curve of the wall. I wondered at his path until I noticed a large square of darker ground that took up the center of the floor—a very large space. No one stood on this darker ground. I was too frightened to do more than notice the anomaly; I didn't even guess at a reason.

There were small movements as we circled the silent room. The bending woman straightened, twisting at the waist to watch us go. The gesturing man folded his arms across his chest. All eyes narrowed, and all faces tightened into expressions of rage. However, no one moved toward us, and no one spoke. Whatever Kyle and the others had told these people about their confrontation with Jeb, it seemed to have had the effect Jeb was hoping for.

As we passed through the grove of human statues, I recognized Sharon and Maggie eyeing us from the wide mouth of one opening. Their expressions were blank, their eyes cold. They did not look at me, only Jeb. He ignored them.

It felt like years later when we finally reached the far side of the cavern. Jeb headed for a medium-sized exit, black against the brightness of this room. The eyes on my back made my scalp tingle, but I didn't dare to look behind me. The humans were still silent, but I worried that they might follow. It was a relief to slip into the darkness of the new passageway. Jeb's hand touched my elbow to guide me, and I did not shrink away from it. The babble of voices didn't pick up again behind us.

"That went better than I expected," Jeb muttered as he steered me through the cave. His words surprised me, and I was glad I didn't know what he'd thought would happen.

The ground sloped downward under my feet. Ahead, a dim light kept me from total blindness.

"Bet you've never seen anything like my place here." Jeb's voice was louder now, back to the chatty tone he'd used before. "It's really something, isn't it?"

He paused briefly in case I might respond, and then went on.

"Found this place back in the seventies. Well, it found me. I fell through the roof of the big room—probably shoulda died from the fall, but I'm too tough for my own good. Took me a while to find a way out. I was hungry enough to eat rock by the time I managed it.

"I was the only one left on the ranch by then, so I didn't have anyone to show it to. I explored every nook and cranny, and I could see the possibilities. I decided this might be a good card to keep up my sleeve, just in

and cranny, and I could see the possibilities. I decided this might be a good card to keep up my sleeve, just in case. That's how we Stryders are-we like to be prepared."

We passed the dim light-it came from a fist-sized hole in the ceiling, making a small circle of brightness on the floor. When it was behind us, I could see another spot of illumination far ahead.

"You're probably curious as to how this all got here." Another pause, shorter than the last. "I know I was. I did a little research. These are lava tubes-can you beat that? This used to be a volcano. Well, still is a volcano, I expect. Not quite dead, as you'll see in a bit. All these caves and holes are bubbles of air that got caught in the cooling lava. I've put quite a bit of work into it over the last few decades. Some of it was easy-connecting the tubes just took a little elbow grease. Other parts took more imagination. Did you see the ceiling in the big room? That took me years to get right."

I wanted to ask him how, but I couldn't bring myself to speak. Silence was safest.

The floor began to slant downward at a steeper angle. The terrain was broken into rough steps, but they seemed secure enough. Jeb led me down them confidently. As we dropped lower and lower into the ground, the heat and humidity increased.

I stiffened when I heard a babble of voices again, this time from ahead. Jeb patted my hand kindly.

"You'll like this part-it's always everyone's favorite," he promised.

A wide, open arch shimmered with moving light. It was the same color as the light in the big room, pure and white, but it flickered at a strange dancing pace. Like everything else that I couldn't understand in this cavern, the light frightened me.

"Here we are," Jeb said enthusiastically, pulling me through the archway. "What do you think?"

The Host

CHAPTER 17

Visited

The heat hit me first-like a wall of steam, the moist, thick air rolled over me and dewed on my skin. My mouth opened automatically as I tried to pull a breath from the abruptly denser air. The smell was stronger than before-that same metallic tang that clung in my throat and flavored the water here.

The murmuring babble of bass and soprano voices seemed to issue from every side, echoing off the walls. I squinted anxiously through the swirling cloud of moisture, trying to make out where the voices came from. It was bright here-the ceiling was dazzling, like in the big room but much closer. The light danced off the vapor, creating a shimmering curtain that almost blinded me. My eyes struggled to adjust, and I clutched at Jeb's hand in panic.

I was surprised that the strangely fluid babble did not respond in any way to our entrance. Perhaps they couldn't see us yet, either.

"It's a bit close in here," Jeb said apologetically, fanning at the steam in front of his face. His voice was relaxed, conversational in tone, and loud enough to make me jump. He spoke as if we were not surrounded. And the babble continued, oblivious to his voice.

"Not that I'm complaining," he continued. "I'd be dead several times over if this place didn't exist. The very first time I got stuck in the caves, of course. And now, we'd never be able to hide out here without it. With no hiding place, we're all dead, right?"

He nudged me with his elbow, a conspiratorial gesture.

"Mighty convenient, how it's laid out. Couldn't have planned it much better if I'd sculpted it myself out of play dough."

His laugh cleared a section of mist, and I saw the room for the first time.

Two rivers flowed through the dank, high-domed space. This was the chatter that filled my ears-the water gushing over and under the purple volcanic rock. Jeb spoke as if we were alone because we were.

It was really only one river and one small stream. The stream was closest; a shallow braided ribbon of silver in the light from above, coursing between low stone banks that it seemed constantly in danger of overrunning. A feminine, high-pitched murmur purred from its gentle ripples.

The male, bass gurgle came from the river, as did the thick clouds of vapor that rose from the gaping holes in the ground by the far wall. The river was black, submerged under the floor of the cavern, exposed by wide, round erosions along the length of the room. The holes looked dark and dangerous. The river barely visible as it

rushed powerfully toward an invisible and unfathomable destination. The water seemed to simmer, such was the heat and steam it produced. The sound of it, too, was like that of boiling water.

From the ceiling hung a few long, narrow stalactites, dripping toward the stalagmites beneath each one. Three of them had met, forming thin black pillars between the two bodies of flowing water.

“Got to be careful in here,” Jeb said. “Quite a current in the hot spring. If you fall in, you’re gone. Happened once before.” He bowed his head at the memory, his face sober.

The swift black eddies of the subterranean river were suddenly horrible to me. I imagined being caught in their scalding current and shuddered.

Jeb put his hand lightly on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. Just watch your step and you’ll be fine. Now,” he said, pointing to the far end of the cavern, where the shallow stream ran into a dark cave, “the first cave back there is the bathing room. We’ve dug the floor out to make a nice, deep tub. There’s a schedule for taking baths, but privacy’s not usually an issue—it’s black as pitch. The room’s nice and warm so close to the steam, but the water won’t burn you like the hot spring here. There’s another cave just past that one, through a crevice. We’ve widened the entrance up to a comfortable size. That room is the farthest we can follow the stream—it drops underground there. So we’ve got that room fixed up as the latrine. Convenient and sanitary.” His voice had assumed a complacent tone, as if he felt credit was due to him for nature’s creations. Well, he had discovered and improved the place—I supposed some pride was justified.

“We don’t like to waste batteries, and most of us know the floor here by heart, but since it’s your first time, you can find your way with this.”

Jeb pulled a flashlight from his pocket and held it out. The sight of it reminded me of the moment he’d found me dying in the desert, when he’d checked my eyes and known what I was. I didn’t know why the memory made me sad.

“Don’t get any crazy ideas about maybe the river taking you out of here or something. Once that water goes underground, it doesn’t come back up,” he cautioned me.

Since he seemed to be waiting for some acknowledgment of his warning, I nodded once. I took the flashlight from his hand slowly, being careful not to make any quick movements that might startle him.

He smiled in encouragement.

I followed his directions quickly—the sound of the rushing water was not making my discomfort any easier to bear. It felt very strange to be out of his sight. What if someone had hidden in these caves, guessing I would have to come here eventually? Would Jeb hear the struggle over the cacophony of the rivers?

I shone the flashlight all around the bathing room, looking for any sign of an ambush. The odd flickering shadows it made were not comforting, but I found no substance to my fears. Jeb’s tub was more the size of a small swimming pool and black as ink. Under the surface, a person would be invisible as long as they could hold their breath.... I hurried through the slender crack at the back of the room to escape my imaginings. Away from Jeb, I was nearly overwhelmed with panic—I couldn’t breathe normally; I could barely hear over the sound of my pulse racing behind my ears. I was more running than walking when I made my way back to the room with the rivers.

To find Jeb standing there, still in the same pose, still alone, was like a balm to my splintered nerves. My breathing and my heartbeat slowed. Why this crazy human should be such a comfort to me, I couldn’t understand. I supposed it was like Melanie had said, desperate times.

“Not too shabby, eh?” he asked, a grin of pride on his face.

I nodded once again and returned the flashlight.

“These caves are a great gift,” he said as we started back toward the dark passageway. “We wouldn’t be able to survive in a group like this without them. Magnolia and Sharon were getting along real well—shockingly well—up there in Chicago, but they were pushing their luck hiding two. It’s mighty nice to have a community again. Makes me feel downright human.”

He took my elbow once more as we climbed the rough stair-case out.

“I’m sorry about the, um, accommodations we’ve got you in. It was the safest place I could think of. I’m surprised those boys found you as quick as they did.” Jeb sighed. “Well, Kyle gets real... motivated. But I suppose it’s all for the best. Might as well get used to how things are going to be. Maybe we can find something more hospitable for you. I’ll think on it.... While I’m with you, at least, you don’t really have to cram yourself into that little hole. You can sit in the hall with me if you prefer. Though with Jared...” He trailed off.

I listened to his apologetic words in wonder; this was so much more kindness than I’d hoped for, more compassion than I’d thought this species was capable of giving their enemies. I patted the hand on my elbow

lightly, hesitantly, trying to convey that I understood and wouldn't cause a problem. I was sure Jared much preferred to have me out of sight.

Jeb had no trouble translating my wordless communication. "That's a good girl," he said. "We'll figure this all out somehow. Doc can just concentrate on healin' human folks. You're much more interesting alive, I think."

Our bodies were close enough that he was able to feel me tremble.

"Don't worry. Doc's not going to bother you now."

I couldn't stop shivering. Jeb could only promise me now. There was no guarantee that Jared would not decide my secret was more important than protecting Melanie's body. I knew that such a fate would make me wish Ian had succeeded last night. I swallowed, feeling the bruising that seemed to go all the way through my neck to the inside walls of my throat.

You never know how much time you'll have, Melanie had said so many days ago, when my world was still under control.

Her words echoed in my head as we reentered the big room, the main plaza of Jeb's human community. It was full, like the first night, everyone there to glare at us with eyes that blazed anger and betrayal when they looked at him and murder when they looked at me. I kept my gaze down on the rock under my feet. From the corner of my eye, I could see that Jeb held his gun ready again.

It was only a matter of time, indeed. I could feel it in the atmosphere of hate and fear. Jeb could not protect me long.

It was a relief to scrape back through the narrow crevice, to look forward to the winding black labyrinth and my cramped hiding place; I could hope to be alone there.

Behind me, a furious hissing, like a nest of goaded snakes, echoed in the big cavern. The sound made me wish Jeb would lead me through the labyrinth at a quicker pace.

Jeb chuckled under his breath. He seemed to get stranger the longer I was around him. His sense of humor mystified me as much as his motivations did.

"It gets a bit tedious down here sometimes, you know," he murmured to me, or to himself. With Jeb, it was hard to tell. "Maybe when they get over being cheesed off at me, they'll realize they appreciate all the excitement I'm providing."

Our path through the dark twisted in a serpentine fashion. It didn't feel at all familiar. Perhaps he took a different route to keep me lost. It seemed to take more time than before, but finally I could see the dim blue light of the lamp shining from around the next curve.

I braced myself, wondering if Jared would be there again. If he was, I knew he would be angry. I was sure he wouldn't approve of Jeb taking me for a field trip, no matter how necessary it might have been.

As soon as we rounded the corner, I could see that there was a figure slumped against the wall beside the lamp, casting a long shadow toward us, but it was obviously not Jared. My hand clutched at Jeb's arm, an automatic spasm of fear.

And then I really looked at the waiting figure. It was smaller than me-that was how I'd known it was not Jared-and thin. Small, but also too tall and too wiry. Even in the dim light of the blue lamp, I could see that his skin was dyed to a deep brown by the sun, and that his silky black hair now fell unkempt past his chin.

My knees buckled.

My hand, grasping Jeb's arm in panic, held on for support.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" Jeb exclaimed, obviously irritated. "Can't nobody keep a secret around this place for more'n twenty-four hours? Gol' darn, this burns me up! Bunch of gossipmongers..." He trailed off into a grumble.

I didn't even try to understand the words Jeb was saying; I was locked in the fiercest battle of my life-of every life I'd ever lived.

I could feel Melanie in each cell of my body. My nerve endings tingled in recognition of her familiar presence. My muscles twitched in anticipation of her direction. My lips trembled, trying to open. I leaned forward toward the boy in the hall, my body reaching because my arms would not.

Melanie had learned many things the few times I'd ceded or lost my command to her, and I truly had to struggle against her-so hard that fresh sweat beaded on my brow. But I was not dying in the desert now. Nor was I weak and dizzy and taken off guard by the appearance of someone I'd given up for lost; I'd known this moment might come. My body was resilient, quick to heal-I was strong again. The strength of my body gave strength to my control, to my determination.

I drove her from my limbs, chased her from every hold she'd found, thrust her back into the recesses of my

mind, and chained her there.

Her surrender was sudden and total. Aaah, she sighed, and it was almost a moan of pain.

I felt strangely guilty as soon as I'd won.

I'd already known that she was more to me than a resistant host who made life unnecessarily difficult. We'd become companions, even confidantes during our past weeks together-ever since the Seeker had united us against a common enemy. In the desert, with Kyle's knife over my head, I'd been glad that if I had to die I would not be the one to kill Melanie; even then, she was more than a body to me. But now it seemed like something beyond that. I regretted causing her pain.

It was necessary, though, and she didn't seem to grasp that. Any word we said wrong, any poorly considered action would mean a quick execution. Her reactions were too wild and emotional. She would get us into trouble.

You have to trust me now, I told her. I'm just trying to keep us alive. I know you don't want to believe your humans could hurt us...

But it's Jamie, she whispered. She yearned for the boy with an emotion so strong that it weakened my knees again.

I tried to look at him impartially-this sullen-faced teenager slumped against the tunnel wall with his arms folded tightly across his chest. I tried to see him as a stranger and plan my response, or lack of response, accordingly. I tried, but I failed. He was Jamie, he was beautiful, and my arms-mine, not Melanie's-longed to hold him. Tears filled my eyes and trickled down my face. I could only hope they were invisible in the dim light.

"Jeb," Jamie said-a gruff greeting. His eyes passed swiftly over me and away.

His voice was so deep! Could he really be so old? I realized with a double pang of guilt that I'd just missed his fourteenth birthday. Melanie showed me the day, and I saw that it was the same day as the first dream with Jamie. She'd struggled so hard all through the waking hours to keep her pain to herself, to cloud her memories in order to protect the boy, that he'd come out in her dream. And I'd e-mailed the Seeker.

I shuddered now in disbelief that I'd ever been so callous.

"Whatcha doing here, kid?" Jeb demanded.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jamie demanded back.

Jeb went silent.

"Was that Jared's idea?" Jamie pressed.

Jeb sighed. "Okay, so you know. What good does that do you, eh? We only wanted to -"

"To protect me?" he interrupted, surly.

When did he get so bitter? Was it my fault? Of course it was.

Melanie began sobbing in my head. It was distracting, loud-it made Jeb and Jamie's voices sound farther away.

"Fine, Jamie. So you don't need protecting. What do you want?"

This quick capitulation seemed to throw Jamie off. His eyes darted between Jeb's face and mine while he struggled to come up with a request.

"I-I want to talk with her... with it," he finally said. His voice was higher when he was unsure.

"She doesn't say much," Jeb told him, "but you're welcome to try, kid."

Jeb pried my fingers off his arm. When he was free, he turned his back to the nearest wall, leaning into it as he eased himself to the floor. He settled in there, fidgeting until he found a comfortable position. The gun stayed balanced in the cradle of his lap. Jeb's head lolled back against the wall, and his eyes closed. In seconds, he looked like he was asleep.

I stood where he'd left me, trying to keep my eyes off Jamie's face and failing.

Jamie was surprised again by Jeb's easy acquiescence. He watched the old man recline on the floor with wide eyes that made him look younger. After a few minutes of perfect stillness from Jeb, Jamie looked back up at me, and his eyes tightened.

The way he stared at me-angry, trying hard to be brave and grown-up, but also showing the fear and pain so clearly in his dark eyes-had Melanie sobbing louder and my knees shaking. Rather than take a chance with another collapse, I moved slowly to the tunnel wall across from Jeb and slid down to the floor. I curled up around my bent legs, trying to be as small as possible.

Jamie watched me with cautious eyes and then took four slow steps forward until he stood over me. His glance flitted to Jeb, who hadn't moved or opened his eyes, and then Jamie knelt down at my side. His face was suddenly intense, and it made him look more adult than any expression yet. My heart throbbed for the sad man

in the tiny boy's face.

"You're not Melanie," he said in a low voice.

It was harder not to speak to him because I was the one who wanted to speak. Instead, after a brief hesitation, I shook my head.

"You're inside her body, though."

Another pause, and I nodded.

"What happened to your... to her face?"

I shrugged. I didn't know what my face looked like, but I could imagine.

"Who did this to you?" he pressed. With a hesitant finger, he almost touched the side of my neck. I held still, feeling no urge to cringe away from this hand.

"Aunt Maggie, Jared, and Ian," Jeb listed off in a bored voice. We both jumped at the sound. Jeb hadn't moved, and his eyes were still closed. He looked so peaceful, as if he had answered Jamie's question in his sleep.

Jamie waited for a moment, then turned back to me with the same intense expression.

"You're not Melanie, but you know all her memories and stuff, right?"

I nodded again.

"Do you know who I am?"

I tried to swallow the words, but they slipped through my lips. "You're Jamie." I couldn't help how my voice wrapped around the name like a caress.

He blinked, startled that I had broken my silence. Then he nodded. "Right," he whispered back.

We both looked at Jeb, who remained still, and back at each other.

"Then you remember what happened to her?" he asked.

I winced, and then nodded slowly.

"I want to know," he whispered.

I shook my head.

"I want to know," Jamie repeated. His lips trembled. "I'm not a kid. Tell me."

"It's not... pleasant," I breathed, unable to stop myself. It was very hard to deny this boy what he wanted.

His straight black eyebrows pulled together and up in the middle over his wide eyes. "Please," he whispered.

I glanced at Jeb. I thought that maybe he was peeking from between his lashes now, but I couldn't be sure.

My voice was soft as breathing. "Someone saw her go into a place that was off-limits. They knew something was wrong. They called the Seekers."

He flinched at the title.

"The Seekers tried to get her to surrender. She ran from them. When they had her cornered, she jumped into an open elevator shaft."

I recoiled from the memory of pain, and Jamie's face went white under his tan.

"She didn't die?" he whispered.

"No. We have very skilled Healers. They mended her quickly. Then they put me in her. They hoped I would be able to tell them how she had survived so long." I had not meant to say so much; my mouth snapped shut. Jamie didn't seem to notice my slip, but Jeb's eyes opened slowly and fixed on my face. No other part of him moved, and Jamie didn't see the change.

"Why didn't you let her die?" he asked. He had to swallow hard; a sob was threatening in his voice. This was all the more painful to hear because it was not the sound a child makes, frightened of the unknown, but the fully comprehending agony of an adult. It was so hard not to reach out and put my hand on his cheek. I wanted to hug him to me and beg him not to be sad. I curled my hands into fists and tried to concentrate on his question. Jeb's eyes flickered to my hands and back to my face.

"I wasn't in on the decision," I murmured. "I was still in a hibernation tank in deep space when that happened."

Jamie blinked again in surprise. My answer was nothing he'd expected, and I could see him struggling with some new emotion. I glanced at Jeb; his eyes were bright with curiosity.

The same curiosity, though more wary, won out with Jamie. "Where were you coming from?" he asked.

In spite of myself, I smiled at his unwilling interest. "Far away. Another planet."

"What was -" he started to ask, but he was interrupted by another question.

"What the hell?" Jared shouted at us, frozen with fury in the act of rounding the corner at the end of the tunnel. "Damn it, Jeb! We agreed not to -"

number. Damn it, Jeb: we agreed not to -

Jamie wrenched himself upright. "Jeb didn't bring me here. But you should have."

Jeb sighed and got slowly to his feet. As he did so, the gun rolled from his lap onto the floor. It stopped only a few inches from me. I scooted away, uncomfortable.

Jared had a different reaction. He lunged toward me, closing the length of the hallway in a few running strides. I cowered into the wall and covered my face with my arms. Peeking around my elbow, I watched him jerk the gun up from the floor.

"Are you trying to get us killed?" he almost screamed at Jeb, shoving the gun into the old man's chest.

"Calm down, Jared," Jeb said in a tired voice. He took the gun in one hand. "She wouldn't touch this thing if I left it down here alone with her all night. Can't you see that?" He stabbed the barrel of the gun toward me, and I cringed away. "She's no Seeker, this one."

"Shut up, Jeb, just shut up!"

"Leave him alone," Jamie shouted. "He didn't do anything wrong."

"You!" Jared shouted back, turning on the slim, angry figure. "You get out of here now, or so help me!"

Jamie balled his fists and stood his ground.

Jared's fists came up, too.

I was rooted in place with shock. How could they scream at each other this way? They were family, the bonds between them stronger than any blood tie. Jared wouldn't hit Jamie—he couldn't! I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what to do. Anything that brought me to their attention would only make them angrier.

For once, Melanie was calmer than I was. He can't hurt Jamie, she thought confidently. It's not possible.

I looked at them, facing off like enemies, and panicked.

We should never have come here. See how unhappy we've made them, I moaned.

"You shouldn't have tried to keep this a secret from me," Jamie said between his teeth. "And you shouldn't have hurt her." One of his hands unclenched and flew out to point at my face.

Jared spit on the floor. "That's not Melanie. She's never coming back, Jamie."

"That's her face," Jamie insisted. "And her neck. Don't the bruises there bother you?"

Jared dropped his hands. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You will either leave right now, Jamie, and give me some space, or I will make you leave. I am not bluffing. I can't deal with any more right now, okay? I'm at my limit. So can we please have this conversation later?" He opened his eyes again; they were full of pain.

Jamie looked at him, and the anger drained slowly from his face. "Sorry," he muttered after a moment. "I'll go... but I'm not promising that I won't come back."

"I can't think about that now. Go. Please."

Jamie shrugged. He threw one more searching look at me, and then he left, his quick, long stride making me ache again for the time I'd missed.

Jared looked at Jeb. "You, too," he said in a flat voice.

Jeb rolled his eyes. "I don't think you've had a long enough break, to be honest. I'll keep an eye on -"

"Go."

Jeb frowned thoughtfully. "Okay. Sure." He started down the hall.

"Jeb?" Jared called after him.

"Yeah?"

"If I asked you to shoot it right now, would you do it?"

Jeb kept walking slowly, not looking at us, but his words were clear. "I'd have to. I follow my own rules. So don't ask me unless you really mean it."

He disappeared into the dark.

Jared watched him go. Before he could turn his glower on me, I ducked into my uncomfortable sanctuary and curled up in the back corner.

The Host

CHAPTER 18

I spent the rest of the day, with one brief exception, in total silence.

That exception occurred when Jeb brought food for both Jared and me several hours later. As he set the tray inside the entrance to my tiny cave, he smiled at me apologetically.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“You’re welcome,” he told me.

I heard Jared grunt, irritated by our small exchange.

That was the only sound Jared made all day. I was sure he was out there, but there was never so much as an audible breath to confirm that conviction.

It was a very long day-very cramped and very dull. I tried every position I could imagine, but I could never quite manage to get all of me stretched out comfortably at once. The small of my back began a steady throbbing.

Melanie and I thought a lot about Jamie. Mostly we worried that we had damaged him by coming here, that we were injuring him now. What was a kept promise in comparison with that?

Time lost meaning. It could have been sunset, it could have been dawn-I had no references here, buried in the earth. Melanie and I ran out of topics for discussion. We flipped through our joint memories apathetically, like switching TV channels without stopping to watch anything in particular. I napped once but could not fall soundly asleep because I was so uncomfortable.

When Jeb finally came back, I could have kissed his leathery face. He leaned into my cell with a grin stretching his cheeks.

“Bout time for another walk?” he asked me.

I nodded eagerly.

“I’ll do it,” Jared growled. “Give me the gun.”

I hesitated, crouched awkwardly in the mouth of my cave, until Jeb nodded at me.

“Go ahead,” he told me.

I climbed out, stiff and unsteady, and took Jeb’s offered hand to balance myself. Jared made a sound of revulsion and turned his face away. He was holding the gun tightly, his knuckles white over the barrel. I didn’t like to see it in his hands. It bothered me more than it did with Jeb.

Jared didn’t make allowances for me the way Jeb had. He stalked off into the black tunnel without pausing for me to catch up.

It was hard-he didn’t make much noise and he didn’t guide me, so I had to walk with one hand in front of my face and one hand on the wall, trying not to run into the rock. I fell twice on the uneven floor. Though he did not help me, he did wait till he could hear that I was on my feet again to continue. Once, hurrying through a straighter section of the tube, I got too close and my searching hand touched his back, traced across the shape of his shoulders, before I realized that I hadn’t reached another wall. He jumped ahead, jerking out from under my fingers with an angry hiss.

“Sorry,” I whispered, feeling my cheeks turn warm in the darkness.

He didn’t respond, but sped his pace so that following was even more difficult.

I was confused when, finally, some light appeared ahead of me. Had we taken a different route? This was not the white brilliance of the biggest cavern. It was muted, pale and silvery. But the narrow crevice we’d had to pass through seemed the same.... It wasn’t until I was inside the giant, echoing space that I realized what caused the difference.

It was nighttime; the light that shone dimly from above mimicked the light of the moon rather than the sun. I used the less-blinding illumination to examine the ceiling, trying to ferret out its secret. High, so very high above me, a hundred tiny moons shone their diluted light toward the dim, distant floor. The little moons were scattered in patternless clusters, some farther away than others. I shook my head. Even though I could look directly at the light now, I still didn’t understand it.

“C’mon,” Jared ordered angrily from several paces ahead.

I flinched and hurried to follow. I was sorry I’d let my attention wander. I could see how much it irritated him to have to speak to me.

I didn’t expect the help of a flashlight when we reached the room with the rivers, and I didn’t receive it. It was dimly lit now, too, like the big cave, but with only twenty-odd miniature moons here. Jared clenched his jaw and stared at the ceiling while I walked hesitantly into the room with the inky pool. I guessed that if I stumbled into the fierce underground hot spring and disappeared, Jared would probably see it as a kind intervention of fate.

I think he would be sad, Melanie disagreed as I edged my way around the black bathing room, hugging the

wall. If we fell.

I doubt it. He might be reminded of the pain of losing you the first time, but he would be happy if I disappeared.

Because he doesn't know you, Melanie whispered, and then faded away as if she were suddenly exhausted.

I stood frozen where I was, surprised. I wasn't sure, but it felt as though Melanie had just given me a compliment.

"Move it," Jared barked from the other room.

I hurried as fast as the darkness and my fear would allow.

When we returned, Jeb was waiting by the blue lamp; at his feet were two lumpy cylinders and two uneven rectangles. I hadn't noticed them before. Perhaps he'd gone to get them while we were away.

"Are you sleeping here tonight or am I?" Jeb asked Jared in a casual tone.

Jared looked at the shapes by Jeb's feet.

"I am," he answered curtly. "And I only need one bedroll."

Jeb raised a thick eyebrow.

"It's not one of us, Jeb. You left this on me-so butt out."

"She's not an animal, either, kid. And you wouldn't treat a dog this way."

Jared didn't answer. His teeth ground together.

"Never figured you for a cruel man," Jeb said softly. But he picked up one of the cylinders, put his arm through a strap, and slung it over his shoulder, then stuffed one rectangle-a pillow-under his arm.

"Sorry, honey," he said as he passed me, patting my shoulder.

"Cut that out!" Jared growled.

Jeb shrugged and ambled away. Before he was out of sight, I hurried to disappear into my cell; I hid in its darkest reaches, coiling myself into a tight ball that I hoped was too small to see.

Instead of lurking silently and invisibly in the outside tunnel, Jared spread his bedroll directly in front of the mouth of my prison. He plumped his pillow a few times, possibly trying to rub it in that he had one. He lay down on the mat and crossed his arms over his chest. That was the piece of him that I could see through the hole-just his crossed arms and half of his stomach.

His skin was that same dark gold tan that had haunted my dreams for the last half year. It was very strange to have that piece of my dream in solid reality not five feet from me. Surreal.

"You won't be able to sneak past me," he warned. His voice was softer than before-sleepy. "If you try..." He yawned. "I will kill you."

I didn't respond. The warning struck me as a bit of an insult. Why would I try to sneak past him? Where would I go? Into the hands of the barbarians out there waiting for me, all of them wishing that I would make exactly that kind of stupid attempt? Or, supposing I could somehow sneak past them, back out into the desert that had nearly baked me to death the last time I'd tried to cross it? I wondered what he thought me capable of. What plan did he think I was hatching to overthrow their little world? Did I really seem so powerful? Wasn't it clear how pathetically defenseless I was?

I could tell when he was deeply asleep because he started twitching the way Melanie remembered he occasionally did. He only slept so restlessly when he was upset. I watched his fingers clench and unclench, and I wondered if he was dreaming that they were wrapped around my neck.

The days that followed-perhaps a week of them, it was impossible to keep track-were very quiet. Jared was like a silent wall between me and everything else in the world, good or bad. There was no sound but that of my own breathing, my own movements; there were no sights but the black cave around me, the circle of dull light, the familiar tray with the same rations, the brief, stolen glimpses of Jared; there were no touches but the pitted rocks against my skin; there were no tastes but the bitter water, the hard bread, the bland soup, the woody roots, over and over again.

It was a very strange combination: constant terror, persistent aching physical discomfort, and excruciating monotony. Of the three, the killer boredom was the hardest to take. My prison was a sensory-deprivation chamber.

Together, Melanie and I worried that we were going to go mad.

We both hear a voice in our head, she pointed out. That's never a good sign.

We're going to forget how to speak, I worried. How long has it been since anyone talked to us?

Four days ago you thanked Jeb for bringing us food, and he said you were welcome. Well, I think it was

four days ago. Four long sleeps ago, at least. She seemed to sigh. Stop chewing your nails-it took me years to break that habit.

But the long, scratchy nails bothered me. I don't really think we need to worry about bad habits in the long term.

Jared didn't let Jeb bring food again. Instead, someone brought it to the end of the hall and Jared retrieved it. I got the same thing-bread, soup, and vegetables-twice every day. Sometimes there were extra things for Jared, packaged foods with brand names I recognized-Red Vines, Snickers, Pop-Tarts. I tried to imagine how the humans had gotten their hands on these delicacies.

I didn't expect him to share-of course not-but I wondered sometimes if he thought I was hoping he would. One of my few entertainments was hearing him eat his treats, because he always did so ostentatiously, perhaps rubbing it in the way he had with the pillow that first night.

Once, Jared slowly ripped open a bag of Cheetos-showy about it as usual-and the rich smell of fake powdered cheese rolled through my cave... delicious, irresistible. He ate one slowly, letting me hear each distinct crunch.

My stomach growled loudly, and I laughed at myself. I hadn't laughed in so long; I tried to remember the last time and couldn't-just that strange bout of macabre hysteria in the desert, which really didn't count as laughter. Even before I'd come here, there hadn't been much I'd found funny.

But this seemed hilarious to me for some reason-my stomach yearning after that one small Cheeto-and I laughed again. A sign of madness, surely.

I didn't know how my reaction offended him, but he got up and disappeared. After a long moment, I could hear him eating the Cheetos again, but from farther away. I peeked out of the hole to see that he was sitting in the shadows at the end of the corridor, his back to me. I pulled my head inside, afraid he might turn and catch me watching. From then on, he stayed down at that end of the hall as much as possible. Only at night did he stretch out in front of my prison.

Twice a day-or rather twice a night, as he never took me when the others were about-I got to walk to the room with the rivers; it was a highlight, despite the terror, as it was the only time I was not hunched into the unnatural shapes my small cave forced on me. Each time I had to crawl back inside was harder than the last.

Three times that week, always during the sleeping hours, someone came to check on us.

The first time it was Kyle.

Jared's sudden lunge to his feet woke me. "Get out of here," he warned, holding the gun ready.

"Just checking," Kyle said. His voice was far away but loud and rough enough that I was sure it was not his brother. "Someday you might not be here. Someday you might sleep too soundly."

Jared's only answer was to cock the gun.

I heard Kyle's laughter trailing behind him as he left.

The other two times I didn't know who it was. Kyle again, or maybe Ian, or maybe someone whose name I hadn't learned. All I knew was that twice more I was woken by Jared jumping to his feet with the gun pointed at the intruder. No more words were spoken. Whoever was just checking didn't bother to make conversation. When they were gone, Jared went back to sleep quickly. It took me longer to quiet my heart.

The fourth time was something new.

I was not quite asleep when Jared started awake, rolling to his knees in a swift movement. He came up with the gun in his hands and a curse on his lips.

"Easy," a voice murmured from the distance. "I come in peace."

"Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying," Jared growled.

"I just want to talk." The voice came closer. "You're buried down here, missing the important discussions.... We miss your take on things."

"I'm sure," Jared said sarcastically.

"Oh, put the gun down. If I was planning to fight you, I would have come with four guys this time."

There was a short silence, and when Jared spoke again, his voice carried a hint of dark humor. "How's your brother these days?" he asked. Jared seemed to enjoy the question. It relaxed him to tease his visitor. He sat down and slouched against the wall halfway in front of my prison, at ease, but with the gun still ready.

My neck ached, seeming to comprehend that the hands that had crushed and bruised it were very close by.

"He's still fuming about his nose," Ian said. "Oh, well-it's not the first time it's been broken. I'll tell him you said you were sorry."

"I'm not."

"I know. No one is ever sorry for hitting Kyle."

I know. NO ONE IS EVER SOHLY FOR MISSING KYLE.

They laughed quietly together; there was a sense of camaraderie in their amusement that seemed wildly out of place while Jared held a gun loosely pointed in Ian's direction. But then, the bonds that were forged in this desperate place must have been very strong. Thicker than blood.

Ian sat down on the mat next to Jared. I could see his profile in silhouette, a black shape against the blue light. I noticed that his nose was perfect-straight, aquiline, the kind of nose that I'd seen in pictures of famous sculptures. Did that mean that others found him more bearable than the brother whose nose was often broken? Or that he was better at ducking?

"So what do you want, Ian? Not just an apology for Kyle, I imagine."

"Did Jeb tell you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"They've given up the search. Even the Seekers."

Jared didn't comment, but I could feel the sudden tension in the air around him.

"We've been keeping a close watch for some change, but they never seemed overly anxious. The search never strayed from the area where we abandoned the car, and for the past few days they were clearly looking for a body rather than a survivor. Then two nights ago we caught a lucky break-the search party left some trash in the open, and a pack of coyotes raided their base camp. One of them was coming back late and surprised the animals. The coyotes attacked and dragged the Seeker a good hundred yards into the desert before the rest of them heard its screams and came to the rescue. The other Seekers were armed, of course. They scared the coyotes off easily, and the victim wasn't seriously hurt, but the event seems to have answered any questions they might have had about what happened to our guest here."

I wondered how they were able to spy on the Seekers who searched for me-to see so much. I felt strangely exposed by the idea. I didn't like the picture in my head: the humans invisible, watching the souls they hated. The thought made the skin on the back of my neck prickle.

"So they packed up and left. The Seekers gave up the search. All the volunteers went home. No one is looking for it." His profile turned toward me, and I hunched down, hoping it was too dark to see me in here-that, like his face, I would appear as only a black shape. "I imagine it's been declared officially dead, if they keep track of those things the way we used to. Jeb's been saying 'I told you so' to anyone who'll stand still long enough to hear it."

Jared grumbled something incoherent; I could only pick out Jeb's name. Then he inhaled a sharp breath, blew it out, and said, "All right, then. I guess that's the end of it."

"That's what it looks like." Ian hesitated for a moment and then added, "Except... Well, it's probably nothing at all."

Jared tensed again; he didn't like having his intelligence edited. "Go on."

"No one but Kyle thinks much of it, and you know how Kyle is."

Jared grunted his assent to that.

"You've got the best instincts for this kind of thing; I wanted your opinion. That's why I'm here, taking my life into my hands to infiltrate the restricted area," Ian said dryly, and then his voice was utterly serious again. "You see, there's this one... a Seeker, no doubt about that-it packs a Glock."

It took me a second to understand the word he used. It wasn't a familiar part of Melanie's vocabulary. When I understood that he was talking about a kind of gun, the wistful, envious tone in his voice made me feel slightly ill.

"Kyle was the first to notice how this one stood out. It didn't seem important to the rest-certainly not part of the decision-making process. Oh, it had suggestions enough, from what we could see, but no one seemed to listen to it. Wish we could've heard what it was saying..."

My skin prickled anxiously again.

"Anyway," Ian continued, "when they called off the search, this one wasn't happy with the decision. You know how the parasites are always so... very pleasant? This was weird-it's the closest I've ever seen them come to an argument. Not a real argument, because none of the others argued back, but the unhappy one sure looked like it was arguing with them. The core group of Seekers disregarded it-they're all gone."

"But the unhappy one?" Jared asked.

"It got in a car and drove halfway to Phoenix. Then it drove back to Tucson. Then it drove west again."

"Still searching?"

"Or very confused. It stopped at that convenience store by the peak. Talked to the parasite that worked there though that one had already been questioned"

more, though that one had already been questioned.

“Huh,” Jared grunted. He was interested now, concentrating on the puzzle.

“Then it went for a hike up the peak-stupid little thing. Had to be burning alive, wearing black from head to toe.”

A spasm rocked through my body; I found myself off the floor, cringing against the back wall of my cell. My hands flew up instinctively to protect my face. I heard a hiss echo through the small space, and only after it faded did I realize it was mine.

“What was that?” Ian asked, his voice shocked.

I peeked through my fingers to see both of their faces leaning through the hole toward me. Ian’s was black, but part of Jared’s was lit, his features hard as stone.

I wanted to be still, invisible, but tremors I couldn’t control were shaking violently down my spine.

Jared leaned away and came back with the lamp in his hands.

“Look at its eyes,” Ian muttered. “It’s frightened.”

I could see both their expressions now, but I looked only at Jared. His gaze was tightly focused on me, calculating. I guessed he was thinking through what Ian had said, looking for the trigger to my behavior.

My body wouldn’t stop shaking.

She’ll never give up, Melanie moaned.

I know, I know, I moaned back.

When had our distaste turned to fear? My stomach knotted and heaved. Why couldn’t she just let me be dead like the rest of them had? When I was dead, would she hunt me still?

“Who is the Seeker in black?” Jared suddenly barked at me.

My lips trembled, but I didn’t answer. Silence was safest.

“I know you can talk,” Jared growled. “You talk to Jeb and Jamie. And now you’re going to talk to me.”

He climbed into the mouth of the cave, huffing with surprise at how tightly he had to fold himself to manage it. The low ceiling forced him to kneel, and that didn’t make him happy. I could see he’d rather stand over me.

I had nowhere to run. I was already wedged into the deepest corner. The cave barely had room for the two of us. I could feel his breath on my skin.

“Tell me what you know,” he ordered.

The Host

CHAPTER 19

Abandoned

Who is the Seeker in black? Why is it still searching?” Jared’s shout was deafening, echoing at me from all sides.

I hid behind my hands, waiting for the first blow.

“Ah-Jared?” Ian murmured. “Maybe you should let me...”

“Stay out of it!”

Ian’s voice got closer, and the rocks grated as he tried to follow Jared into the small space that was already too full. “Can’t you see it’s too scared to talk? Leave it alone for a sec -“

I heard something scrape the floor as Jared moved, and then a thud. Ian cursed. I peered through my fingers to see that Ian was no longer visible and Jared had his back to me.

Ian spit and groaned. “That’s twice,” he growled, and I understood that the punch meant for me had been diverted by Ian’s interference.

“I’m ready to go for three,” Jared muttered, but he turned back around to face me, bringing light with him; he’d grabbed the lamp with the hand that had struck Ian. The cave seemed almost brilliant after so much darkness.

Jared spoke to me again, scrutinizing my face in the new illuminations, making each word a sentence. “Who. Is. The. Seeker.”

I dropped my hands and stared into his pitiless eyes. It bothered me that someone else had suffered for my silence—even someone who had once tried to kill me. This was not how torture was supposed to work.

Jared’s expression wavered as he read the change in mine. “I don’t have to hurt you,” he said quietly, not

as sure of himself. "But I do have to know the answer to my question."

This wasn't even the right question-not a secret I was in any way bound to protect.

"Tell me," he insisted, his eyes tight with frustration and deep unhappiness.

Was I truly a coward? I would rather have believed that I was-that my fear of pain was stronger than anything else. The real reason I opened my mouth and spoke was so much more pathetic.

I wanted to please him, this human who hated me so fiercely.

"The Seeker," I began, my voice rough and hoarse; I hadn't spoken in a long time.

He interrupted, impatient. "We already know it's a Seeker."

"No, not just any Seeker," I whispered. "My Seeker."

"What do you mean, your Seeker?"

"Assigned to me, following me. She's the reason -" I caught myself just before I spoke the word that would have meant our death. Just before I could say we. The ultimate truth that he would see as the ultimate lie-playing on his deepest wishes, his deepest pain. He would never see that it was possible for his wish to be true. He would only see a dangerous liar looking out through the eyes he'd loved.

"The reason?" he prompted.

"The reason I ran away," I breathed. "The reason I came here."

Not entirely true, but not entirely a lie, either.

Jared stared at me, his mouth half-open, as he tried to process this. From the corner of my eye, I could see that Ian was peering through the hole again, his vivid blue eyes wide with surprise. There was blood, dark on his pale lips.

"You ran away from a Seeker? But you're one of them!" Jared struggled to compose himself, to get back to his interrogation. "Why would it follow you? What did it want?"

I swallowed; the sound seemed unnaturally loud. "She wanted you. You and Jamie."

His expression hardened. "And you were trying to lead it here?"

I shook my head. "I didn't... I..." How could I explain it? He'd never accept the truth.

"What?"

"I... didn't want to tell her. I don't like her."

He blinked, confused again. "Don't you all have to like everyone?"

"We're supposed to," I admitted, coloring with shame.

"Who did you tell about this place?" Ian asked over Jared's shoulder. Jared scowled but kept his eyes on my face.

"I couldn't tell-I didn't know.... I just saw the lines. The lines on the album. I drew them for the Seeker... but we didn't know what they were. She still thinks they're a road map." I couldn't seem to stop talking. I tried to make the words come slower, to protect myself from a slip.

"What do you mean you didn't know what they were? You're here." Jared's hand flexed toward me but dropped before it closed the small distance.

"I... I was having trouble with my... with the... with her memory. I didn't understand... I couldn't access everything. There were walls. That's why the Seeker was assigned to me, waiting for me to unlock the rest." Too much, too much. I bit my tongue.

Ian and Jared exchanged a look. They'd never heard anything like this before. They didn't trust me, but they wanted so desperately to believe it was possible. They wanted it too much. That made them fear.

Jared's voice whipped out with a sudden harshness. "Were you able to access my cabin?"

"Not for a long time."

"And then you told the Seeker."

"No."

"No? Why not?"

"Because... by the time I could remember it... I didn't want to tell her."

Ian's eyes were frozen wide.

Jared's voice changed, became low, almost tender. So much more dangerous than the shouting. "Why didn't you want to tell her?"

My jaw locked hard. It was not the secret, but still, it was a secret he would have to beat out of me. In this moment, my determination to hold my tongue had less to do with self-preservation than it did with a stupid, grudging kind of pride. I would not tell this man who despised me that I loved him.

He watched the defiance flash in my eyes, and he seemed to understand what it would take to get this

answer. He decided to skip it-or maybe to come back to it later, save it for last, in case I wouldn't be able to answer any more questions when he was done with me.

"Why weren't you able to access everything? Is that... normal?"

This question was very dangerous, too. For the first time so far, I told an outright lie.

"She fell a long way. The body was damaged."

Lying did not come easily to me; this lie fell flat. Jared and Ian both reacted to the false note. Jared's head cocked to the side; one of Ian's ink black eyebrows rose.

"Why isn't this Seeker giving up like the rest?" Ian asked.

I was abruptly exhausted. I knew they could keep this up all night, would keep this up all night if I continued to answer, and eventually I would make a mistake. I slumped against the wall and closed my eyes.

"I don't know," I whispered. "She's not like other souls. She's... annoying."

Ian laughed once-a startled sound.

"And you-are you like other... souls?" Jared asked.

I opened my eyes and stared at him wearily for a long moment. What a stupid question, I thought. Then I shut my eyes tight, buried my face against my knees, and wrapped my arms around my head.

Either Jared understood that I was done speaking or his body was complaining too loudly to be ignored. He grunted a few times as he squeezed himself out of the opening of my cave, taking the lamp with him, and then groaned quietly as he stretched.

"That was unexpected," Ian whispered.

"Lies, of course," Jared whispered back. I could just barely make out their words. They probably didn't realize how the sound echoed back to me in here. "Only... I can't quite figure out what it wants us to believe-where it's trying to lead us."

"I don't think it's lying. Well, except the one time. Did you notice?"

"Part of the act."

"Jared, when have you ever met a parasite who could lie about anything? Except a Seeker, of course."

"Which it must be."

"Are you serious?"

"It's the best explanation."

"She-it is the furthest thing from a Seeker I've ever seen. If a Seeker had any idea how to find us, it would have brought an army."

"And they wouldn't have found anything. But she-it got in, didn't it?"

"It's almost been killed half a dozen -"

"Yet it's still breathing, isn't it?"

They were quiet for a long time. So long that I started to think about moving out of the cramped ball I was curled in, but I didn't want to make any noise by lying down. I wished Ian would leave so I could sleep. The adrenaline left me so worn out when it drained from my system.

"I think I'm going to go talk to Jeb," Ian eventually whispered.

"Oh, that's a great idea." Jared's voice was thick with sarcasm.

"Do you remember that first night? When it jumped between you and Kyle? That was bizarre."

"It was just trying to find a way to stay alive, to escape...."

"By giving Kyle the go-ahead to kill her-it? Good plan."

"It worked."

"Jeb's gun worked. Did she know he was on his way?"

"You're overthinking this, Ian. That's what it wants."

"I don't think you're right. I don't know why... but I don't think she wants us to think about her at all." I heard Ian get to his feet. "You know what's really twisted?" he muttered, his voice no longer a whisper.

"What's that?"

"I felt guilty-guilty as hell-watching her flinch away from us. Seeing the black marks on her neck."

"You can't let it get to you like that." Jared was suddenly disturbed. "It's not human. Don't forget that."

"Just because she isn't human, do you think that means she doesn't feel pain?" Ian asked as his voice faded into the distance. "That she doesn't feel just like a girl who's been beaten-beaten by us?"

"Get a hold of yourself," Jared hissed after him.

"See you around, Jared."

Jared didn't relax for a long time after Ian left; he paced for a while, back and forth in front of the cave, and

then sat on the mat, blocking my light, and muttered incomprehensibly to himself. I gave up waiting for him to fall asleep, and stretched out as well as I could on the bowl-like floor. He jumped when my movement made noise, and then started muttering to himself again.

“Guilty,” he grumbled in scathing tones. “Letting it get to him. Just like Jeb, like Jamie. Can’t let this go on. Stupid to let it live.”

Goose bumps rose on my arms, but I tried to ignore them. If I panicked every time he thought about killing me, I’d never have a moment’s peace. I turned onto my stomach to bend my spine in the other direction, and he jerked again and then lapsed into silence. I was sure he was still brooding when I finally drifted to sleep.

When I woke up, Jared was sitting on the mat where I could see him, elbows on knees, his head leaning against one fist.

I didn’t feel as if I’d slept more than an hour or two, but I was too sore to try to go back to sleep right away. Instead, I fretted about Ian’s visit, worrying that Jared would work even harder to keep me secluded after Ian’s strange reaction. Why couldn’t Ian have kept his mouth shut about feeling guilty? If he knew he was capable of guilt, why did he go around strangling people in the first place? Melanie was irritated with Ian, too, and nervous about the outcome of his qualms.

Our worries were interrupted after just a few minutes.

“S just me,” I heard Jeb call. “Don’t get worked up.”

Jared cocked the gun.

“Go ahead and shoot me, kid. Go ahead.” The sound of Jeb’s voice got closer with every word.

Jared sighed and put the gun down. “Please leave.”

“Need to talk to you,” Jeb said, huffing as he sat down across from Jared. “Hey, there,” he said in my direction, nodding.

“You know how much I hate that,” Jared muttered.

“Yep.”

“Ian already told me about the Seekers -“

“I know. I was just talkin’ with him about it.”

“Great. Then what do you want?”

“Not so much what I want. It’s what everybody needs. We’re running low on just about everything. We need a real comprehensive supply run.”

“Oh,” Jared muttered; this topic was not what he’d been tensed for. After a short pause he said, “Send Kyle.”

“Okay,” Jeb said easily, bracing himself against the wall to rise again.

Jared sighed. It seemed his suggestion had been a bluff. He folded as soon as Jeb took him up on it. “No. Not Kyle. He’s too...”

Jeb chuckled. “Almost got us in some real hot water the last time he was out alone, didn’t he? Not one to think things through. Ian, then?”

“He thinks things through too much.”

“Brandt?”

“He’s no good for the long trips. Starts getting panicked a few weeks in. Makes mistakes.”

“Okay, you tell me who, then.”

The seconds passed and I heard Jared suck in a breath now and then, each time as if he was about to give Jeb an answer, but then he just exhaled and said nothing.

“Ian and Kyle together?” Jeb asked. “Maybe they could balance each other out.”

Jared groaned. “Like the last time? Okay, okay, I know it has to be me.”

“You’re the best,” Jeb agreed. “You changed our lives when you showed up here.”

Melanie and I nodded to ourselves; this didn’t surprise either of us.

Jared is magic. Jamie and I were perfectly safe while Jared’s instincts guided us; we never came close to getting caught. If it had been Jared in Chicago, I’m sure he would have made it out fine.

Jared jerked his shoulder toward me. “What about... ?”

“I’ll keep an eye on her when I can. And I’ll expect you to take Kyle with you. That oughta help.”

“That won’t be enough-Kyle gone and you keeping an eye on her when you can. She... it won’t last long.”

Jeb shrugged. “I’ll do my best. That’s all I can do.”

Jared started to shake his head slowly back and forth.

“How long can you stay down here?” Jeb asked him

HOW LONG CAN YOU STAY DOWN HERE? JEB ASKED HIM.

"I don't know," Jared whispered.

There was a long silence. After a few minutes, Jeb began whistling tunelessly.

Finally, Jared let out a huge breath that I hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"I'll leave tonight." The words were slow, full of resignation but also relief. His voice changed slightly, got a little less defensive. It was as though he was making the transition back to who he'd been here before I showed up. Letting one responsibility slide from his shoulders and putting another, more welcome one in its place.

He was giving up on keeping me alive, letting nature-or rather mob justice-take its course. When he returned, and I was dead, he wouldn't hold anyone responsible. He would not mourn. All this I could hear in those three words.

I knew the human exaggeration for sorrow-a broken heart. Melanie remembered speaking the phrase herself. But I'd always thought of it as a hyperbole, a traditional description for something that had no real physiological link, like a green thumb. So I wasn't expecting the pain in my chest. The nausea, yes, the swelling in my throat, yes, and, yes, the tears burning in my eyes. But what was the ripping sensation just under my rib cage? It made no logical sense.

And it wasn't just ripping, but twisting and pulling in different directions. Because Melanie's heart broke, too, and it was a separate sensation, as if we'd grown another organ to compensate for our twin awarenesses. A double heart for a double mind. Twice the pain.

He's leaving, she sobbed. We'll never see him again. She didn't question the fact that we were going to die.

I wanted to weep with her, but someone had to keep her head. I bit my hand to hold the moan back.

"That's probably best," Jeb said.

"I'll need to get some things organized...." Already Jared's mind was far, far away from this claustrophobic corridor.

"I'll take over here, then. Have a safe trip."

"Thanks. Guess I'll see you when I see you, Jeb."

"Guess so."

Jared handed the gun back to Jeb, stood up, and brushed absently at the dust on his clothes. Then he was off, hurrying down the hall with his familiar quick step, his mind on other things. Not one glance in my direction, not one more thought for my fate.

I listened to the fading sound of his footsteps until they were gone. Then, forgetting Jeb's existence, I pressed my face into my hands and sobbed.

The Host

CHAPTER 20

Freed

Jeb let me cry myself out without interrupting. He didn't comment all through the following sniffles. It was only when I'd been completely silent for a good half hour that he spoke.

"Still awake in there?"

I didn't answer. I was too much in the habit of silence.

"You want to come out here and stretch?" he offered. "My back is aching just thinking about that stupid hole."

Ironically, considering my week of maddening silence, I wasn't in the mood for company. But his offer wasn't one I could refuse. Before I could think about it, my hands were pulling me through the exit.

Jeb was sitting with crossed legs on the mat. I watched him for some reaction as I shook out my arms and legs and rolled my shoulders, but he had his eyes closed. Like the time of Jamie's visit, he looked asleep.

How long had it been since I'd seen Jamie? And how was he now? My already sore heart gave a painful little lurch.

"Feel better?" Jeb asked, his eyes opening.

I shrugged.

"It's going to be okay, you know." He grinned a wide, face-stretching grin. "That stuff I said to Jared

Well, I won't say I lied, exactly, because it's all true if you look at it from a certain angle, but from another angle, it wasn't so much the truth as it was what he needed to hear."

I just stared; I didn't understand a word of what he was saying.

"Anyway, Jared needs a break from this. Not from you, kid," he added quickly, "but from the situation. He'll gain some perspective while he's away."

I wondered how he seemed to know exactly which words and phrases would cut at me. And, more than that, why should Jeb care if his words hurt me, or even if my back was aching and throbbing? His kindness toward me was frightening in its own way because it was incomprehensible. At least Jared's actions made sense. Kyle's and Ian's murder attempts, the doctor's cheerful eagerness to hurt me—these behaviors also were logical. Not kindness. What did Jeb want from me?

"Don't look so glum," Jeb urged. "There's a bright side to this. Jared was being real pigheaded about you, and now that he's temporarily out of the picture, it's bound to make things more comfortable."

My eyebrows furrowed as I tried to decide what he meant.

"For example," he went on. "This space here we usually use for storage. Now, when Jared and the guys get back, we're going to need someplace to put all the stuff they bring home with them. So we might as well find a new place for you now. Something a little bigger, maybe? Something with a bed?" He smiled again as he dangled the carrot in front of me.

I waited for him to snatch it away, to tell me he was joking.

Instead, his eyes—the color of faded blue jeans—became very, very gentle. Something about the expression in them brought the lump back to my throat.

"You don't have to go back in that hole, honey. The worst part's over."

I found that I couldn't doubt the earnest look on his face. For the second time in an hour, I put my face in my hands and cried.

He got to his feet and patted me awkwardly on the shoulder. He didn't seem comfortable with tears. "There, there," he mumbled.

I got control of myself more quickly this time. When I wiped the wet from my eyes and smiled tentatively at him, he nodded in approval.

"That's a girl," he said, patting me again. "Now, we'll have to hang out here until we're sure Jared's really gone and can't catch us." He grinned conspiratorially. "Then we'll have some fun!"

I remembered that his idea of fun was usually along the lines of an armed standoff.

He chuckled at my expression. "Don't worry about it. While we're waiting, you might as well try to get some rest. I'll bet even that skinny mattress would feel pretty good to you right now."

I looked from his face to the mat on the floor and back.

"Go on," he said. "You look like you could use a good sleep. I'll keep watch over you."

Touched, new moisture in my eyes, I sank down on the mat and laid my head on the pillow. It was heavenly, despite Jeb's calling it thin. I stretched out to my full height, pointing my toes and reaching out with my fingers. I heard my joints popping. Then I let myself wilt into the mattress. It felt as if it were hugging me, erasing all the sore spots. I sighed.

"Does me good to see that," Jeb muttered. "It's like an itch you can't scratch, knowing someone is suffering under your own roof."

He eased himself to the floor a few yards away and started humming quietly. I was asleep before he'd finished the first bar.

When I woke up, I knew that I'd been solidly asleep for a long time—a longer stretch than I'd slept since coming here. No pains, no frightening interruptions. I would have felt pretty good, except that waking on the pillow reminded me that Jared was gone. It still smelled like him. And in a good way, not the way I smelled.

Back to just dreams. Melanie sighed forlornly.

I remembered my dream only vaguely, but I knew it had featured Jared, as was usual when I was able to sleep deeply enough to dream.

"Morning, kid," Jeb said, sounding chipper.

I peeled back my lids to look at him. Had he sat against the wall all night? He didn't look tired, but I suddenly felt guilty for monopolizing the better accommodations.

"So the guys are long gone," he said enthusiastically. "How 'bout a tour?" He stroked the gun slung through a strap at his waist with an unconscious gesture.

My eyes opened wider, stared at him in disbelief. A tour?

“Now, don’t turn sissy on me. Nobody’s going to bother you. And you’ll need to be able to find your way around eventually.”

He held out a hand to help me up.

I took it automatically, my head spinning as I tried to process what he was saying. I would need to find my way around? Why? And what did he mean “eventually”? How long did he expect me to last?

He pulled me to my feet and led me forward.

I’d forgotten what it was like to move through the dark tunnels with a hand guiding me. It was so easy-walking barely took any concentration at all.

“Let’s see,” Jeb murmured. “Maybe the right wing first. Set up a decent place for you. Then the kitchens...” He went on planning his tour, continuing as we stepped through the narrow crevice into the bright tunnel that led to the even brighter big room. When the sound of voices reached us, I felt my mouth go dry. Jeb kept right on chatting at me, either missing or ignoring my terror.

“I’ll bet the carrots are sprouted today,” he was saying as he led me into the main plaza. The light blinded me, and I couldn’t see who was there, but I could feel their eyes on me. The sudden silence was as ominous as ever.

“Yep,” Jeb answered himself. “Now, I always think that looks real pretty. A nice spring green like that is a treat to see.”

He stopped and held his hand out, inviting me to look. I squinted in the direction he gestured, but my eyes kept darting around the room as I waited for them to adjust. It took a moment, but then I saw what he was talking about. I also saw that there were maybe fifteen people here today, all of them regarding me with hostile eyes. But they were busy with something else, too.

The wide, dark square that took up the center of the big cavern was no longer dark. Half of it was fuzzy with spring green, just as Jeb had said. It was pretty. And amazing.

No wonder no one stood on this space. It was a garden.

“Carrots?” I whispered.

He answered at normal volume. “This half that’s greening up. The other half is spinach. Should be up in a few days.”

The people in the room had gone back to work, still peeking at me now and then but mostly concentrating on what they were doing. It was easy enough to understand their actions-and the big barrel on wheels, and the hoses-now that I recognized the garden.

“Irrigating?” I whispered again.

“That’s right. Dries out pretty quick in this heat.”

I nodded in agreement. It was still early, I guessed, but I was already sweaty. The heat from the intense radiance overhead was stifling in the caves. I tried to examine the ceiling again, but it was too bright to stare at.

I tugged Jeb’s sleeve and squinted up at the dazzling light. “How?”

Jeb smiled, seeming thrilled with my curiosity. “Same way the magicians do it-with mirrors, kid. Hundreds of ‘em. Took me long enough to get them all up there. It’s nice to have extra hands around here when they need cleaning. See, there’s only four small vents in the ceiling here, and that wasn’t enough light for what I had in mind. What do you think of it?”

He pulled his shoulders back, proud again.

“Brilliant,” I whispered. “Astonishing.”

Jeb grinned and nodded, enjoying my reaction.

“Let’s keep on,” he suggested. “Got a lot to do today.”

He led me to a new tunnel, a wide, naturally shaped tube that ran off from the big cave. This was new territory. My muscles all locked up; I moved forward with stiff legs, unbending knees.

Jeb patted my hand but otherwise ignored my nerves. “This is mostly sleeping quarters and some storage. The tubes are closer to the surface here, so it was easier to get some light.”

He pointed up at a bright, slender crack in the tunnel ceiling overhead. It threw a hand-sized spot of white onto the floor.

We reached a broad fork-not really a fork, because there were too many tines. It was an octopus-like branching of passageways.

“Third from the left,” he said, and looked at me expectantly.

“Third from the left?” I repeated.

“That’s right. Don’t forget. It’s easy to get lost around here, and that wouldn’t be safe for you. Folks’d just

as soon stab you as send you in the right direction.”

I shuddered. “Thanks,” I muttered with quiet sarcasm.

He laughed as if my answer had delighted him. “No point in ignoring the truth. Doesn’t make it worse to have it said out loud.”

It didn’t make it better, either, but I didn’t say that. I was beginning to enjoy myself just a little. It was so nice to have someone talk to me again. Jeb was, if nothing else, interesting company.

“One, two, three,” he counted off, then he led me down the third hallway from the left. We started passing round entrances covered by a variety of makeshift doors. Some were curtained off with patterned sheets of fabric; others had big pieces of cardboard duct-taped together. One hole had two real doors—one red-painted wood, one gray metal-leaning over the opening.

“Seven,” Jeb counted, and stopped in front of a smallish circle, the tallest point just a few inches higher than my head. This one protected its privacy with a pretty jade green screen—the kind that might divide the space in an elegant living room. There was a pattern of cherry blossoms embroidered across the silk.

“This is the only space I can think of for now. The only one that’s fitted up decent for human habitation. It will be empty for a few weeks, and we’ll figure something better out for you by the time it’s needed again.”

He folded the screen aside, and a light that was brighter than that in the hallway greeted us.

The room he revealed gave me a strange feeling of vertigo—probably because it was so much taller than it was wide. Standing inside it was like standing in a tower or a silo, not that I had ever been in such places, but those were the comparisons Melanie made. The ceiling, twice as high as the room was wide, was a maze of cracks. Like vines of light, the cracks circled around and almost met. This seemed dangerous to me—unstable. But Jeb showed no fear of cave-ins as he led me farther in.

There was a double-sized mattress on the floor, with about a yard of space on three sides of it. The two pillows and two blankets twisted into two separate configurations on either half of the mattress made it look as if this room housed a couple. A thick wooden pole—something like a rake handle—was braced horizontally against the far wall at shoulder height with the ends lodged in two of the Swiss cheese holes in the rock. Over it were draped a handful of T-shirts and two pairs of jeans. A wooden stool was flush with the wall beside the makeshift clothes rack, and on the floor beneath it was a stack of worn paperback books.

“Who?” I said to Jeb, whispering again. This space so obviously belonged to someone that I no longer felt like we were alone.

“Just one of the guys out on the raid. Won’t be back for a while. We’ll find you something by then.”

I didn’t like it—not the room, but the idea of staying in it. The presence of the owner was strong despite the simple belongings. No matter who he was, he would not be happy to have me here. He would hate it.

Jeb seemed to read my mind—or maybe the expression on my face was clear enough that he didn’t have to.

“Now, now,” he said. “Don’t worry about that. This is my house, and this is just one of my many guest rooms. I say who is and isn’t my guest. Right now, you are my guest, and I am offering you this room.”

I still didn’t like it, but I wasn’t going to upset Jeb, either. I vowed that I would disturb nothing, if it meant sleeping on the floor.

“Well, let’s keep moving. Don’t forget: third from the left, seventh in.”

“Green screen,” I added.

“Exactly.”

Jeb took me back through the big garden room, around the perimeter to the opposite side, and through the biggest tunnel exit. When we passed the irrigators, they stiffened and turned, afraid to have me behind their backs.

This tunnel was well lit, the bright crevices coming at intervals too regular to be natural.

“We go even closer to the surface now. It gets drier, but it gets hotter, too.”

I noticed that almost immediately. Instead of being steamed, we were now being baked. The air was less stuffy and stale. I could taste the desert dust.

There were more voices ahead. I tried to steel myself against the inevitable reaction. If Jeb insisted on treating me like... like a human, like a welcome guest, I was going to have to get used to this. No reason to let it make me nauseous over and over again. My stomach began an unhappy rolling anyway.

“This way’s the kitchen,” Jeb told me.

At first I thought we were in another tunnel, one crowded with people. I pressed myself against the wall, trying to keep my distance.

The kitchen was a long corridor with a high ceiling, higher than it was wide, like my new quarters. The

light was bright and not. Instead of thin crevices through deep rock, this place had huge open noles.

“Can’t cook in the daytime, of course. Smoke, you know. So we mainly use this as the mess hall until nightfall.”

All conversation had come to an abrupt halt, so Jeb’s words were clear for everyone to hear. I tried to hide behind him, but he kept walking farther in.

We’d interrupted breakfast, or maybe it was lunch.

The humans-almost twenty at a quick estimate-were very close here. It wasn’t like the big cavern. I wanted to keep my eyes on the floor, but I couldn’t stop them from flashing around the room. Just in case. I could feel my body tensing to run for it, though where I would run, I didn’t know.

Against both sides of the hallway, there were long piles of rock. Mostly rough, purple volcanic stone, with some lighter-colored substance-cement?-running between them, creating seams, holding them together. On top of these piles were different stones, browner in color, and flat. They were glued together with the light gray grout as well. The final product was a relatively even surface, like a counter or a table. It was clear that they were used for both.

The humans sat on some, leaned on others. I recognized the bread rolls they held suspended between the table and their mouths, frozen with disbelief as they took in Jeb and his one-person tour.

Some of them were familiar. Sharon, Maggie, and the doctor were the closest group to me. Melanie’s cousin and aunt glared at Jeb furiously-I had an odd conviction that I could have stood on my head and bellowed songs out of Melanie’s memory at the top of my lungs and they still would not have looked at me-but the doctor eyed me with a frank and almost friendly curiosity that made me feel cold deep inside my bones.

At the back end of the hall-shaped room, I recognized the tall man with ink black hair and my heart stuttered. I’d thought Jared was supposed to take the hostile brothers with him to make Jeb’s job of keeping me alive slightly easier. At least it was the younger one, Ian, who had belatedly developed a conscience-not quite as bad as leaving Kyle behind. That consolation did not slow my racing pulse, however.

“Everybody full so quick?” Jeb asked loudly and sarcastically.

“Lost our appetites,” Maggie muttered.

“How ’bout you,” he said, turning to me. “You hungry?”

A quiet groan went through our audience.

I shook my head-a small but frantic motion. I didn’t even know whether I was hungry, but I knew I couldn’t eat in front of this crowd that would gladly have eaten me.

“Well, I am,” Jeb grumbled. He walked down the aisle between the counters, but I did not follow. I couldn’t stand the thought of being within easy reach of the rest. I stayed pressed against the wall where I stood. Only Sharon and Maggie watched him go to a big plastic bin on one counter and grab a roll. Everyone else watched me. I was certain that if I moved an inch, they would pounce. I tried not to breathe.

“Well, let’s just keep on movin’,” Jeb suggested around a mouthful of bread as he ambled back to me. “Nobody seems able to concentrate on their lunch. Easily distracted, this set.”

I was watching the humans for sudden movements, not really seeing their faces after that first moment when I recognized the few I could put names to. So it wasn’t until Jamie stood up that I noticed him there.

He was a head shorter than the adults beside him, but taller than the two smaller children who perched on the counter on his other side. He hopped lightly off his seat and followed behind Jeb. His expression was tight, compressed, like he was trying to solve a difficult equation in his head. He examined me through narrow eyes as he approached on Jeb’s heels. Now I wasn’t the only one in the room holding my breath. The others’ gazes shifted back and forth between Melanie’s brother and me.

Oh, Jamie, Melanie thought. She hated the sad, adult expression on his face, and I probably hated it even more. She didn’t feel as guilty as I did for putting it there.

If only we could take it away. She sighed.

It’s too late. What could we do to make it better now?

I didn’t mean the question more than rhetorically, but I found myself searching for an answer, and Melanie searched, too. We found nothing in the brief second we had to consider the matter; there was nothing to be found, I was sure. But we both knew we would be searching again when we were done with this asinine tour and had a chance to think. If we lived that long.

“Whatcha need, kid?” Jeb asked without looking at him.

“Just wondering what you’re doing,” Jamie answered, his voice striving for nonchalance and only just failing.

Jeb stopped when he got to me and turned to look at Jamie. “Takin’ her for a tour of the place. Just like I

Jeb stopped when he got to me and turned to look at Jamie. I took her for a tour of the place. Just like I do for any newcomer.”

There was another low grumble.

“Can I come?” Jamie asked.

I saw Sharon shake her head feverishly, her expression outraged. Jeb ignored her.

“Doesn’t bother me... if you can mind your manners.”

Jamie shrugged. “No problem.”

I had to move then-to knot my fingers together in front of me. I wanted so badly to push Jamie’s untidy hair out of his eyes and then leave my arm around his neck. Something that would not go over well, I was sure.

“Let’s go,” Jeb said to us both. He took us back out the way we had come. Jeb walked on one side of me, Jamie on the other. Jamie seemed to be trying to stare at the floor, but he kept glancing up at my face-just like I couldn’t help glancing down at his. Whenever our eyes met, we looked away again quickly.

We were about halfway down the big hall when I heard the quiet footsteps behind us. My reaction was instantaneous and unthinking. I skittered to one side of the tunnel, sweeping Jamie along with one arm so that I was between him and whatever was coming for me.

“Hey!” he protested, but he did not knock my arm away.

Jeb was just as quick. The gun twirled out of its strap with blinding speed.

Ian and the doctor both raised their hands above their heads.

“We can mind our manners, too,” the doctor said. It was hard to believe that this soft-spoken man with the friendly expression was the resident torturer; he was all the more terrifying to me because his exterior was so benign. A person would be on her guard on a dark and ominous night, a person would be ready. But on a clear, sunny day? How would she know to flee when she couldn’t see any place for danger to hide?

Jeb squinted at Ian, the barrel of the gun shifting to follow his gaze.

“I don’t mean any trouble, Jeb. I’ll be just as mannerly as Doc.”

“Fine,” Jeb said curtly, stowing his gun. “Just don’t test me. I haven’t shot anybody in a real long time, and I sort of miss the thrill of it.”

I gasped. Everyone heard that and turned to see my horrified expression. The doctor was the first one to laugh, but even Jamie joined in briefly.

“It’s a joke,” Jamie whispered to me. His hand strayed from his side, almost as if he was reaching for mine, but he quickly shoved it into the pocket of his shorts. I let my arm-still stretched protectively in front of his body-drop, too.

“Well, the day’s wasting,” Jeb said, still a little surly. “You’ll all have to keep up, ’cause I’m not waiting on you.” He stalked forward before he was done speaking.

The Host

CHAPTER 21

Named

I kept tight to Jeb’s side, a little in front of him. I wanted to be as far as possible from the two men following us. Jamie walked somewhere in the middle, not sure of where he wanted to be.

I wasn’t able to concentrate much on the rest of Jeb’s tour. My attention was not focused on the second set of gardens he led me through-one with corn growing waist-high in the blistering heat of the brilliant mirrors-or the wide but low-ceilinged cavern he called the “rec room.” That one was pitch-black and deep underground, but he told me they brought in lights when they wanted to play. The word play didn’t make sense to me, not here in this group of tense, angry survivors, but I didn’t ask him to explain. There was more water here, a tiny, noxiously sulfurous spring that Jeb said they sometimes used as a second latrine because it was no good for drinking.

My attention was divided between the men walking behind us and the boy at my side.

Ian and the doctor did mind their manners surprisingly well. No one attacked me from behind-though I thought my eyes might get lodged in the back of my head from trying to see if they were about to. They just followed quietly, sometimes talking to each other in low voices. Their comments revolved around names I didn’t know and nicknames for places and things that might or might not have been inside these caves. I couldn’t understand any of it

Jamie said nothing, but he looked at me a lot. When I wasn't trying to keep an eye on the others, I was often peeking at him, too. This left little time to admire the things Jeb showed me, but he didn't seem to notice my preoccupations.

Some of the tunnels were very long—the distances hidden beneath the ground here were mind-boggling. Often they were pitch-black, but Jeb and the others never so much as paused, clearly familiar with their whereabouts and long since accustomed to traveling in darkness. It was harder for me than it was when Jeb and I were alone. In the dark, every noise sounded like an attack. Even the doctor's and Ian's casual chatter seemed like a cover for some nefarious move.

Paranoid, Melanie commented.

If that's what it takes to keep us alive, so be it.

I wish you would pay more attention to Uncle Jeb. This is fascinating.

Do what you want with your time.

I can only hear and see what you hear and see, Wanderer, she told me. Then she changed the subject. Jamie looks okay, don't you think? Not too unhappy.

He looks... wary.

We were just coming into some light after the longest trek so far in the humid blackness.

"This here is the southernmost spur of the tube system," Jeb explained as we walked. "Not super convenient, but it gets good light all day long. That's why we made it the hospital wing. This is where Doc does his thing."

The moment Jeb announced where we were, my body froze and my joints locked; I skidded to a halt, my feet planted against the rock floor. My eyes, wide with terror, flickered between Jeb's face and the face of the doctor.

Had this all been a ruse, then? Wait for stubborn Jared to be out of the picture and then lure me back here? I couldn't believe I'd walked to this place under my own power. How stupid I was!

Melanie was just as aghast. We might as well have gift-wrapped ourselves for them!

They stared back at me, Jeb expressionless, the doctor looking as surprised as I felt—though not as horrified.

I would have flinched, ripped myself away from the touch of a hand on my arm, if the hand had not been so familiar.

"No," Jamie said, his hand hesitantly resting just below my elbow. "No, it's okay. Really. Right, Uncle Jeb?" Jamie looked trustingly at the old man. "It's okay, right?"

"Sure it is." Jeb's faded blue eyes were calm and clear. "Just showing you my place, kid, that's all."

"What are you talking about?" Ian grumbled from behind us, sounding annoyed that he didn't understand.

"Did you think we brought you here on purpose, for Doc?" Jamie said to me instead of answering Ian. "Because we wouldn't do that. We promised Jared."

I stared at his earnest face, trying to believe.

"Oh!" Ian said as he understood, and then he laughed. "That wasn't a bad plan. I'm surprised I didn't think of it."

Jamie scowled at the big man and patted my arm before removing his hand. "Don't be scared," he said.

Jeb took up where he'd left off. "So this big room here is fitted up with a few cots in case anyone gets sick or hurt. We've been pretty lucky on that count. Doc doesn't have much to work with in an emergency." Jeb grinned at me. "Your folks threw out all our medicines when they took over things. Hard to get our hands on what we need."

I nodded slightly; the movement was absentminded. I was still reeling, trying to get my bearings. This room looked innocent enough, as if it were only used for healing, but it made my stomach twist and contract.

"What do you know about alien medicine?" the doctor asked suddenly, his head cocked to the side. He watched my face with expectant curiosity.

I stared at him wordlessly.

"Oh, you can talk to Doc," Jeb encouraged me. "He's a pretty decent guy, all things considered."

I shook my head once. I meant to answer the doctor's question, to tell them that I knew nothing, but they misunderstood.

"She's not giving away any trade secrets," Ian said sourly. "Are you, sweetheart?"

"Manners, Ian," Jeb barked.

"Is it a secret?" Jamie asked, guarded but clearly curious.

I shook my head again. They all stared at me in confusion. Doc shook his head, too, slowly, baffled.

I took a deep breath, then whispered, "I'm not a Healer. I don't know how they-the medications-work. Only that they do work- they heal, rather than merely treating symptoms. No trial and error. Of course the human medicines were discarded."

All four of them stared with blank expressions. First they were surprised when I didn't answer, and now they were surprised when I did. Humans were impossible to please.

"Your kind didn't change too much of what we left behind," Jeb said thoughtfully after a moment. "Just the medical stuff, and the spaceships instead of planes. Other than that, life seems to go on just the same as ever... on the surface."

"We come to experience, not to change," I whispered. "Health takes priority over that philosophy, though."

I shut my mouth with an audible snap. I had to be more careful. The humans hardly wanted a lecture on soul philosophy. Who knew what would anger them? Or what would snap their fragile patience?

Jeb nodded, still thoughtful, and then ushered us onward. He wasn't as enthusiastic as he continued my tour through the few connecting caves here in the medical wing, not as involved in the presentation. When we turned around and headed back into the black corridor, he lapsed into silence. It was a long, quiet walk. I thought through what I'd said, looking for something that might have offended. Jeb was too strange for me to guess if that was the case. The other humans, hostile and suspicious as they were, at least made sense. How could I hope to make sense of Jeb?

The tour ended abruptly when we reentered the huge garden cavern where the carrot sprouts made a bright green carpet across the dark floor.

"Show's over," Jeb said gruffly, looking at Ian and the doctor. "Go do something useful."

Ian rolled his eyes at the doctor, but they both turned good-naturedly enough and made their way toward the biggest exit-the one that led to the kitchen, I remembered. Jamie hesitated, looking after them but not moving.

"You come with me," Jeb told him, slightly less gruff this time. "I've got a job for you."

"Okay," Jamie said. I could see that he was pleased to have been chosen.

Jamie walked beside me again as we headed back toward the sleeping-quarters section of the caves. I was surprised, as we chose the third passageway from the left, that Jamie seemed to know exactly where we were going. Jeb was slightly behind us, but Jamie stopped at once when we reached the green screen that covered the seventh apartment. He moved the screen aside for me but stayed in the hall.

"You okay to sit tight for a while?" Jeb asked me.

I nodded, grateful at the thought of hiding again. I ducked through the opening and then stood a few feet in, not sure what to do with myself. Melanie remembered that there were books here, but I reminded her of my vow to not touch anything.

"I got things to do, kid," Jeb said to Jamie. "Food ain't gonna fix itself, you know. You up to guard duty?"

"Sure," Jamie said with a bright smile. His thin chest swelled with a deep breath.

My eyes widened in disbelief as I watched Jeb place the rifle in Jamie's eager hands.

"Are you crazy?" I shouted. My voice was so loud that I didn't recognize it at first. It felt like I'd been whispering forever.

Jeb and Jamie looked up at me, shocked. I was out in the hallway with them in a second.

I almost reached for the hard metal of the barrel, almost ripped it from the boy's hands. What stopped me wasn't the knowledge that a move like that would surely get me killed. What stopped me was the fact that I was weaker than the humans in this way; even to save the boy, I could not make myself touch the weapon.

I turned on Jeb instead.

"What are you thinking? Giving the weapon to a child? He could kill himself!"

"Jamie's been through enough to be called a man, I think. He knows how to handle himself around a gun."

Jamie's shoulders straightened at Jeb's praise, and he gripped the gun tighter to his chest.

I gaped at Jeb's stupidity. "What if they come for me with him here? Did you think of what could happen? This isn't a joke! They'll hurt him to get to me!"

Jeb remained calm, his face placid. "Don't think there'll be any trouble today. I'd bet on it."

"Well, I wouldn't!" I was yelling again. My voice echoed off the tunnel walls-someone was sure to hear, but I didn't care. Better they come while Jeb was still here. "If you're so sure, then leave me here alone. Let what happens happen. But don't put Jamie in danger!"

"Is it the kid you're worried about, or are you just afraid that he'll turn the gun on you?" Jeb asked, his voice almost languid.

I blinked, my anger derailed. That thought had not even occurred to me. I glanced blankly at Jamie, met his surprised gaze, and saw that the idea was shocking to him, too.

It took me a minute to recover my side of the argument, and by the time I did, Jeb's expression had changed. His eyes were intent, his mouth pursed-as if he were about to fit the last piece into a frustrating puzzle.

"Give the gun to Ian or any of the others. I don't care," I said, my voice slow and even. "Just leave the boy out of this."

Jeb's sudden face-wide grin reminded me, strangely, of a pouncing cat.

"It's my house, kid, and I'll do what I want. I always do."

Jeb turned his back and ambled away down the hall, whistling as he went. I watched him go, my mouth hanging open. When he disappeared, I turned to Jamie, who was watching me with a sullen expression.

"I'm not a child," he muttered in a deeper tone than usual, his chin jutting out belligerently. "Now, you should... you should go in your room."

The order was less than severe, but there was nothing else I could do. I'd lost this disagreement by a large margin.

I sat down with my back against the rock that formed one side of the cave opening-the side where I could hide behind the half-opened screen but still watch Jamie. I wrapped my arms around my legs and began doing what I knew I would be doing as long as this insane situation continued: I worried.

I also strained my eyes and ears for some sound of approach, to be ready. No matter what Jeb said, I would prevent anyone from challenging Jamie's guard. I would give myself up before they asked.

Yes, Melanie agreed succinctly.

Jamie stood in the hallway for a few minutes, the gun tight in his hands, unsure as to how to do his job. He started pacing after that, back and forth in front of the screen, but he seemed to feel silly after a couple of passes. Then he sat down on the floor beside the open end of the screen. The gun eventually settled on his folded legs, and his chin into his cupped hands. After a long time, he sighed. Guard duty was not as exciting as he'd been expecting.

I did not get bored watching him.

After maybe an hour or two, he started looking at me again, flickering glances. His lips opened a few times, and then he thought better of whatever he was going to say.

I laid my chin on my knees and waited as he struggled. My patience was rewarded.

"That planet you were coming from before you were in Melanie," he finally said. "What was it like there? Was it like here?"

The direction of his thoughts caught me off guard. "No," I said. With only Jamie here, it felt right to speak normally instead of whispering. "No, it was very different."

"Will you tell me what it was like?" he asked, cocking his head to one side the way he used to when he was really interested in one of Melanie's bedtime stories.

So I told him.

I told him all about the See Weeds' waterlogged planet. I told him about the two suns, the elliptical orbit, the gray waters, the unmoving permanence of roots, the stunning vistas of a thousand eyes, the endless conversations of a million soundless voices that all could hear.

He listened with wide eyes and a fascinated smile.

"Is that the only other place?" he asked when I fell silent, trying to think of anything I'd missed. "Are the See Weeds"-he laughed once at the pun-"the only other aliens?"

I laughed, too. "Hardly. No more than I'm the only alien on this world."

"Tell me."

So I told him about the Bats on the Singing World-how it was to live in musical blindness, how it was to fly. I told him about the Mists Planet-how it felt to have thick white fur and four hearts to keep warm, how to give claw beasts a wide berth.

I started to tell him about the Planet of the Flowers, about the color and the light, but he interrupted me with a new question.

"What about the little green guys with the triangle heads and the big black eyes? The ones who crashed in Roswell and all that. Was that you guys?"

"Nope, not us."

"Was it all fake?"

"I don't know-maybe, maybe not. It's a big universe, and there's a lot of company out there."

"I don't know-maybe, maybe not. It's a big universe, and there's a lot of company out there."

How did you come here, men-if you weren't the little green guys, who were you? You had to have bodies to move and stuff, right?"

"Right," I agreed, surprised at his grasp of the facts at hand. I shouldn't have been surprised-I knew how bright he was, his mind like a thirsty sponge. "We used our Spider selves in the very beginning, to get things started."

"Spiders?"

I told him about the Spiders-a fascinating species. Brilliant, the most incredible minds we'd ever come across, and each Spider had three of them. Three brains, one in each section of their segmented bodies. We'd yet to find a problem they couldn't solve for us. And yet they were so coldly analytical that they rarely came up with a problem they were curious enough to solve for themselves. Of all our hosts, the Spiders welcomed our occupation the most. They barely noticed the difference, and when they did, they seemed to appreciate the direction we provided. The few souls who had walked on the surface of the Spiders' planet before implantation told us that it was cold and gray-no wonder the Spiders only saw in black and white and had a limited sense of temperature. The Spiders lived short lives, but the young were born knowing everything their parent had, so no knowledge was lost.

I'd lived out one of the short life terms of the species and then left with no desire to return. The amazing clarity of my thoughts, the easy answers that came to any question almost without effort, the march and dance of numbers were no substitute for emotion and color, which I could only vaguely understand when inside that body. I wondered how any soul could be content there, but the planet had been self-sufficient for thousands of Earth years. It was still open for settling only because the Spiders reproduced so quickly-great sacs of eggs.

I started to tell Jamie how the offensive had been launched here. The Spiders were our best engineers-the ships they made for us danced nimbly and undetectably through the stars. The Spiders' bodies were almost as useful as their minds: four long legs to each segment-from which they'd earned their nickname on this planet-and twelve-fingered hands on each leg. These six-jointed fingers were as slender and strong as steel threads, capable of the most delicate procedures. About the mass of a cow, but short and lean, the Spiders had no trouble with the first insertions. They were stronger than humans, smarter than humans, and prepared, which the humans were not....

I stopped short, midsentence, when I saw the crystalline sparkle on Jamie's cheek.

He was staring straight ahead at nothing, his lips pressed in a tight line. A large drop of salt water rolled slowly down the cheek closest to me.

Idiot, Melanie chastised me. Didn't you think what your story would mean to him?

Didn't you think of warning me sooner?

She didn't answer. No doubt she'd been as caught up in the storytelling as I was.

"Jamie," I murmured. My voice was thick. The sight of his tear had done strange things to my throat. "Jamie, I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Jamie shook his head. "'S okay. I asked. I wanted to know how it happened.'" His voice was gruff, trying to hide the pain.

It was instinctive, the desire to lean forward and wipe that tear away. I tried at first to ignore it; I was not Melanie. But the tear hung there, motionless, as if it would never fall. Jamie's eyes stayed fixed on the blank wall, and his lips trembled.

He wasn't far from me. I stretched my arm out to brush my fingers against his cheek; the tear spread thin across his skin and disappeared. Acting on instinct again, I left my hand against his warm cheek, cradling his face.

For a short second, he pretended to ignore me.

Then he rolled toward me, his eyes closed, his hands reaching. He curled into my side, his cheek against the hollow of my shoulder, where it had once fit better, and sobbed.

These were not the tears of a child, and that made them more profound-made it more sacred and painful that he would cry them in front of me. This was the grief of a man at the funeral for his entire family.

My arms wound around him, not fitting as easily as they used to, and I cried, too.

"I'm sorry," I said again and again. I apologized for everything in those two words. That we'd ever found this place. That we'd chosen it. That I'd been the one to take his sister. That I'd brought her back here and hurt him again. That I'd made him cry today with my insensitive stories.

I didn't drop my arms when his anguish quieted; I was in no hurry to let him go. It seemed as though my body had been starving for this from the beginning, but I'd never understood before now what would feed the hunger. The mysterious bond of mother and child-so strong on this planet-was not a mystery to me any longer.

hanger. The mysterious bond of mother and child-so strong on this planet-was not a mystery to me any longer. There was no bond greater than one that required your life for another's. I'd understood this truth before; what I had not understood was why. Now I knew why a mother would give her life for her child, and this knowledge would forever shape the way I saw the universe.

"I know I've taught you better than that, kid."

We jumped apart. Jamie lurched to his feet, but I curled closer to the ground, cringing into the wall.

Jeb leaned down and picked up the gun we'd both forgotten from the floor. "You've got to mind a gun better than this, Jamie." His tone was very gentle-it softened the criticism. He reached out to tousle Jamie's shaggy hair.

Jamie ducked under Jeb's hand, his face scarlet with mortification.

"Sorry," he muttered, and turned as if to flee. He stopped after just a step, though, and swiveled back to look at me. "I don't know your name," he said.

"They called me Wanderer," I whispered.

"Wanderer?"

I nodded.

He nodded, too, then hurried away. The back of his neck was still red.

When he was gone, Jeb leaned against the rock and slid down till he was seated where Jamie had been. Like Jamie, he kept the gun cradled in his lap.

"That's a real interesting name you've got there," he told me. He seemed to be back to his chatty mood. "Maybe sometime you'll tell me how you got it. Bet that's a good story. But it's kind of a mouthful, don't you think? Wanderer?"

I stared at him.

"Mind if I call you Wanda, for short? It flows easier."

He waited this time for a response. Finally, I shrugged. It didn't matter to me whether he called me "kid" or some strange human nickname. I believed it was meant kindly.

"Okay, then, Wanda." He smiled, pleased at his invention. "It's nice to have a handle on you. Makes me feel like we're old friends."

He grinned that huge, cheek-stretching grin, and I couldn't help grinning back, though my smile was more rueful than delighted. He was supposed to be my enemy. He was probably insane. And he was my friend. Not that he wouldn't kill me if things turned out that way, but he wouldn't like doing it. With humans, what more could you ask of a friend?

The Host

CHAPTER 22

Cracked

Jeb put his hands behind his head and looked up at the dark ceiling, his face thoughtful. His chatty mood had not passed.

"I've wondered a lot what it's like-getting caught, you know. Saw it happen more than once, come close a few times myself. What would it be like, I wondered. Would it hurt, having something put in your head? I've seen it done, you know."

My eyes widened in surprise, but he wasn't looking at me.

"Seems like you all use some kind of anesthetic, but that's just a guess. Nobody was screaming in agony or anything, though, so it couldn't be too torturous."

I wrinkled my nose. Torture. No, that was the humans' specialty.

"Those stories you were telling the kid were real interesting."

I stiffened and he laughed lightly. "Yeah, I was listening. Eavesdropping, I'll admit it. I'm not sorry-it was great stuff, and you won't talk to me the way you do with Jamie. I really got a kick out of those bats and the plants and spiders. Gives a man lots to think about. Always liked to read crazy, out-there stuff, science fiction and whatnot. Ate that stuff up. And the kid's like me-he's read all the books I've got, two, three times apiece. Must be a treat for him to get some new stories. Sure is for me. You're a good storyteller."

I kept my eyes down, but I felt myself softening, losing my guard a bit. Like anyone inside these emotional bodies. I was a sucker for flattery.

“Everyone here thinks you hunted us out to turn us over to the Seekers.”

The word sent a shock jolting through me. My jaw stiffened and my teeth cut my tongue. I tasted blood.

“What other reason could there be?” he went on, oblivious to my reaction or ignoring it. “But they’re just trapped in fixed notions, I think. I’m the only one with questions.... I mean, what kind of a plan was that, to wander off into the desert without any way to get back?” He chuckled. “Wandering-guess that’s your specialty, eh, Wanda?”

He leaned toward me and nudged me with one elbow. Wide with uncertainty, my eyes flickered to the floor, to his face, and back to the floor. He laughed again.

“That trek was just a few steps shy of a successful suicide, in my opinion. Definitely not a Seeker’s MO, if you know what I mean. I’ve tried to reason it out. Use logic, right? So, if you didn’t have backup, which I’ve seen no sign of, and you had no way to get back, then you must’ve had a different goal. You haven’t been real talkative since you got here, ‘cept with the kid just now, but I’ve listened to what you have said. Kind of seems to me like the reason you almost died out there was ‘cause you were hell-bent on finding that kid and Jared.”

I closed my eyes.

“Only why would you care?” Jeb asked, expecting no answer, just musing. “So, this is how I see it: either you’re a really good actress-like a super-Seeker, some new breed, sneakier than the first-with some kind of a plan I can’t figure out, or you’re not acting. The first seems like a pretty complicated explanation for your behavior, then and now, and I don’t buy it.

“But if you’re not acting...”

He paused for a moment.

“Spent a lot of time watching your kind. I was always waiting for them to change, you know, when they didn’t have to act like us anymore, because there was no one to act for. I kept on watching and waiting, but they just kept on actin’ like humans. Staying with their bodies’ families, going out for picnics in good weather, plantin’ flowers and paintin’ pictures and all the rest of it. I’ve been wondering if you all aren’t turning sort of human. If we don’t have some real influence, in the end.”

He waited, giving me a chance to respond. I didn’t.

“Saw something a few years ago that stuck with me. Old man and woman, well, the bodies of an old man and an old woman. Been together so long that the skin on their fingers grew in ridges around their wedding rings. They were holding hands, and he kissed her on her cheek, and she blushed under all those wrinkles. Occurred to me that you have all the same feelings we have, because you’re really us, not just hands in a puppet.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “We have all the same feelings. Human feelings. Hope, and pain, and love.”

“So, if you aren’t acting... well, then I’d swear to it that you loved them both. You do. Wanda, not just Mel’s body.”

I put my head down on my arms. The gesture was tantamount to an admission, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t hold it up anymore.

“So that’s you. But I wonder about my niece, too. What it was like for her, what it would be like for me. When they put somebody inside your head, are you just... gone? Erased? Like being dead? Or is it like being asleep? Are you aware of the outside control? Is it aware of you? Are you trapped there, screaming inside?”

I sat very still, trying to keep my face smooth.

“Plainly, your memories and behaviors, all that is left behind. But your consciousness... Seems like some people wouldn’t go down without a fight. Hell, I know I would try to stay-never been one to take no for an answer, anyone will tell you that. I’m a fighter. All of us who are left are fighters. And, you know, I woulda pegged Mel for a fighter, too.”

He didn’t move his eyes from the ceiling, but I looked at the floor-stared at it, memorizing the patterns in the purple gray dust.

“Yeah, I’ve wondered about that a lot.”

I could feel his eyes on me now, though my head was still down. I didn’t move, except to breathe slowly in and out. It took a great deal of effort to keep that slow rhythm smooth. I had to swallow; the blood was still flowing in my mouth.

Why did we ever think he was crazy? Mel wondered. He sees everything. He’s a genius.

He’s both.

Well, maybe this means we don’t have to keep quiet anymore. He knows. She was hopeful. She’d been very quiet lately, absent almost half the time. It wasn’t as easy for her to concentrate when she was relatively

happy. She'd won her big fight. She'd gotten us here. Her secrets were no longer in jeopardy; Jared and Jamie could never be betrayed by her memories.

With the fight taken out of her, it was harder for her to find the will to speak, even to me. I could see how the idea of discovery-of having the other humans recognize her existence-invigorated her.

Jeb knows, yes. Does that really change anything?

She thought about the way the other humans looked at Jeb. Right. She sighed. But I think Jamie... well, he doesn't know or guess, but I think he feels the truth.

You might be right. I guess we'll see if that does him or us any good, in the end.

Jeb could only manage to keep quiet for a few seconds, and then he was off again, interrupting us. "Pretty interesting stuff. Not as much bang! bang! as the movies I used to like. But still pretty interesting. I'd like to hear more about those spider thingies. I'm real curious... real curious, for sure."

I took a deep breath and raised my head. "What do you want to know?"

He smiled at me warmly, his eyes crinkling into half moons. "Three brains, right?"

I nodded.

"How many eyes?"

"Twelve-one at each juncture of the leg and the body. We didn't have lids, just a lot of fibers-like steel wool eyelashes-to protect them."

He nodded, his eyes bright. "Were they furry, like tarantulas?"

"No. Sort of... armored-scaled, like a reptile or a fish."

I slouched against the wall, settling myself in for a long conversation.

Jeb didn't disappoint on that count. I lost track of how many questions he asked me. He wanted details-the Spiders' looks, their behaviors, and how they'd handled Earth. He didn't flinch away from the invasion details; on the contrary, he almost seemed to enjoy that part more than the rest. His questions came fast on the heels of my answers, and his grins were frequent. When he was satisfied about the Spiders, hours later, he wanted to know more about the Flowers.

"You didn't half explain that one," he reminded me.

So I told him about that most beautiful and placid of planets. Almost every time I stopped to breathe, he interrupted me with a new question. He liked to guess the answers before I could speak and didn't seem to mind getting them wrong in the least.

"So did ya eat flies, like a Venus flytrap? I'll bet you did-or maybe something bigger, like a bird-like a pterodactyl!"

"No, we used sunlight for food, like most plants here."

"Well, that's not as much fun as my idea."

Sometimes I found myself laughing with him.

We were just moving on to the Dragons when Jamie showed up with dinner for three.

"Hi, Wanderer," he said, a little embarrassed.

"Hi, Jamie," I answered, a little shy, not sure if he would regret the closeness we'd shared. I was, after all, the bad guy.

But he sat down right next to me, between me and Jeb, crossing his legs and setting the food tray in the middle of our little conclave. I was starving, and parched from all the talking. I took a bowl of soup and downed it in a few gulps.

"Shoulda known you were just being polite in the mess hall today. Gotta speak up when you're hungry, Wanda. I'm no mind reader."

I didn't agree with that last part, but I was too busy chewing a mouthful of bread to answer.

"Wanda?" Jamie asked.

I nodded, letting him know that I didn't mind.

"Kinda suits her, doncha think?" Jeb was so proud of himself, I was surprised he didn't pat himself on the back, just for effect.

"Kinda, I guess," Jamie said. "Were you guys talking about dragons?"

"Yeah," Jeb told him enthusiastically, "but not the lizardy kind. They're all made up of jelly. They can fly, though... sort of. The air's thicker, sort of jelly, too. So it's almost like swimming. And they can breathe acid-that's about as good as fire, wouldn't you say?"

I let Jeb fill Jamie in on the details while I ate more than my share of food and drained a water bottle. When my mouth was free, Jeb started in with the questions again.

“Now, this acid...”

Jamie didn't ask questions the way Jeb did, and I was more careful about what I said with him there. However, this time Jeb never asked anything that might lead to a touchy subject, whether by coincidence or design, so my caution wasn't necessary.

The light slowly faded until the hallway was black. Then it was silver, a tiny, dim reflection from the moon that was just enough, as my eyes adjusted, to see the man and the boy beside me.

Jamie edged closer to me as the night wore on. I didn't realize that I was combing my fingers through his hair as I talked until I noticed Jeb staring at my hand.

I folded my arms across my body.

Finally, Jeb yawned a huge yawn that had me and Jamie doing the same.

“You tell a good story, Wanda,” Jeb said when we were all done stretching.

“It's what I did... before. I was a teacher, at the university in San Diego. I taught history.”

“A teacher!” Jeb repeated, excited. “Well, ain't that amazin'? There's something we could use around here. Mag's girl Sharon does the teaching for the three kids, but there's a lot she can't help with. She's most comfortable with math and the like. History, now -“

“I only taught our history,” I interrupted. Waiting for him to take a breath wasn't going to work, it seemed. “I wouldn't be much help as a teacher here. I don't have any training.”

“Your history is better than nothing. Things we human folks ought to know, seeing as we live in a more populated universe than we were aware of.”

“But I wasn't a real teacher,” I told him, desperate. Did he honestly think anyone wanted to hear my voice, let alone listen to my stories? “I was sort of an honorary professor, almost a guest lecturer. They only wanted me because... well, because of the story that goes along with my name.”

“That's the next one I was going to ask for,” Jeb said complacently. “We can talk about your teaching experience later. Now-why did they call you Wanderer? I've heard a bunch of odd ones, Dry Water, Fingers in the Sky, Falling Upward-all mixed in, of course, with the Pams and the Jims. I tell you, it's the kind of thing that can drive a man crazy with curiosity.”

I waited till I was sure he was done to begin. “Well, the way it usually works is that a soul will try out a planet or two-two's the average-and then they'll settle in their favorite place. They just move to new hosts in the same species on the same planet when their body gets close to death. It's very disorienting moving from one kind of body to the next. Most souls really hate that. Some never move from the planet they are born on. Occasionally, someone has a hard time finding a good fit. They may try three planets. I met a soul once who'd been to five before he'd settled with the Bats. I liked it there-I suppose that's the closest I've ever come to choosing a planet. If it hadn't been for the blindness...”

“How many planets have you lived on?” Jamie asked in a hushed voice. Somehow, while I'd been talking, his hand had found its way into mine.

“This is my ninth,” I told him, squeezing his fingers gently.

“Wow, nine!” he breathed.

“That's why they wanted me to teach. Anybody can tell them our statistics, but I have personal experience from most of the planets we've... taken.” I hesitated at that word, but it didn't seem to bother Jamie. “There are only three I've never been to-well, now four. They just opened a new world.”

I expected Jeb to jump in with questions about the new world, or the ones I'd skipped, but he just played absently with the ends of his beard.

“Why did you never stay anywhere?” Jamie asked.

“I never found a place I liked enough to stay.”

“What about Earth? Do you think you'll stay here?”

I wanted to smile at his child's confidence-as if I were going to get the chance to ever move on to another host. As if I were going to get the chance to live out even another month in the one I had.

“Earth is... very interesting,” I murmured. “It's harder than any place I've been before.”

“Harder than the place with the frozen air and the claw beasts?” he asked.

“In its own way, yes.” How could I explain that the Mists Planet only came at you from the outside-it was much more difficult to be attacked from within.

Attacked, Melanie scoffed.

I yawned. I wasn't actually thinking of you, I told her. I was thinking of these unstable emotions, always betraying me. But you did attack me. Pushing your memories on me that way.

I learned my lesson, she accused me drily. I could feel how intensely aware she was of the hand in mine.

I learned my lesson, she assured me dryly. I could feel how intensely aware she was of me and mine. There was an emotion slowly building in her that I didn't recognize. Something on the edge of anger, with a hint of desire and a portion of despair.

Jealousy, she enlightened me.

Jeb yawned again. "I'm being downright rude, I guess. You must be bushed-walking all over today and then me keepin' you up half the night talking. Ought to be a better host. C'mon, Jamie, let's go and let Wanda get some sleep."

I was exhausted. It felt as if it had been a very long day, and, from Jeb's words, perhaps that wasn't in my imagination.

"Okay, Uncle Jeb." Jamie jumped lightly to his feet and then offered his hand to the old man.

"Thanks, kid." Jeb groaned as he got up. "And thanks to you, too," he added in my direction. "Most interesting conversation I've had in... well, probably forever. Rest your voice up, Wanda, because my curiosity is a powerful thing. Ah, there he is! 'Bout time."

Only then did I hear the sound of approaching footsteps. Automatically, I shrank against the wall and scooted farther back into the cave-room, and then felt more exposed because the moonlight was brighter inside.

I was surprised that this was the first person to turn in for the night; the corridor appeared to house many.

"Sorry, Jeb. I got to talking with Sharon, and then I sort of dozed off."

It was impossible not to recognize this easy, gentle voice. My stomach rolled, unstable, and I wished it were empty.

"We didn't even notice, Doc," Jeb said. "We were having the time of our lives here. Someday you'll have to get her to tell you some of her stories-great stuff. Not tonight, though. She's got to be pretty worn out, I'd bet. We'll see you in the morning."

The doctor was spreading a mat out in front of the cave entrance, just as Jared had.

"Keep an eye on this," Jeb said, laying the gun beside the mat.

"Are you okay, Wanda?" Jamie asked. "You're shaking."

I hadn't realized it, but my whole body was quivering. I didn't answer him-my throat felt swollen shut.

"Now, now," Jeb said in a soothing voice. "I asked Doc if he minded taking a shift. You don't need to worry about anything. Doc's an honorable man."

The doctor smiled a sleepy smile. "I'm not going to hurt you... Wanda, is it? I promise. I'll just keep watch while you sleep."

I bit my lip, and the quivering didn't stop.

Jeb seemed to think everything was settled, though. "Night, Wanda. Night, Doc," he said as he started back down the hall.

Jamie hesitated, looking at me with a worried expression. "Doc's okay," he promised in a whisper.

"C'mon, boy, it's late!"

Jamie hurried off after Jeb.

I watched the doctor when they were gone, waiting for some change. Doc's relaxed expression didn't waver, though, and he didn't touch the gun. He stretched his long frame out on the mat, his calves and feet hanging off the end. Lying down, he looked much smaller, he was so rail thin.

"Good night," he murmured drowsily.

Of course I didn't answer. I watched him in the dull moonlight, timing the rise and fall of his chest by the sound of the pulse thudding in my ears. His breathing slowed and got deeper, and then he began to quietly snore.

It could have been an act, but even if it was, there wasn't much I could do about it. Silently, I crept deeper into the room, till I felt the edge of the mattress against my back. I'd promised myself that I would not disturb this place, but it probably wouldn't hurt anything if I just curled up on the foot of the bed. The floor was rough and so hard.

The sound of the doctor's soft snoring was comforting; even if it was put on to calm me, at least I knew exactly where he was in the darkness.

Live or die, I figured I might as well go ahead and sleep. I was dog tired, as Melanie would say. I let my eyes close. The mattress was softer than anything I'd touched since coming here. I relaxed, sinking in...

There was a low shuffling sound-it was inside the room with me. My eyes popped open, and I could see a shadow between the moonlit ceiling and me. Outside, the doctor's snores continued uninterrupted.

CHAPTER 23

Confessed

The shadow was huge and misshapen. It loomed over me, top-heavy, swinging closer to my face.

I think I meant to scream, but the sound got trapped in my throat, and all that came out was a breathless squeak.

“Shh, it’s just me,” Jamie whispered. Something bulky and roundish rolled from his shoulders and plopped softly to the floor. When it was gone I could see his true, lithe shadow against the moonlight.

I caught a few gasps of air, my hand clutching at my throat.

“Sorry,” he whispered, sitting down on the edge of the mattress. “I guess that was pretty stupid. I was trying not to wake Doc-I didn’t even think how I would scare you. You okay?” He patted my ankle, which was the part of me closest to him.

“Sure,” I huffed, still breathless.

“Sorry,” he muttered again.

“What are you doing here, Jamie? Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“That’s why I’m here. Uncle Jeb was snoring like you wouldn’t believe. I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

His answer didn’t make sense to me. “Don’t you usually sleep with Jeb?”

Jamie yawned and bent to untie the bulky bedroll he’d dropped to the floor. “No, I usually sleep with Jared. He doesn’t snore. But you know that.”

I did.

“Why don’t you sleep in Jared’s room, then? Are you afraid to sleep alone?” I wouldn’t have blamed him for that. It seemed like I was constantly terrified here.

“Afraid,” he grumbled, offended. “No. This is Jared’s room. And mine.”

“What?” I gasped. “Jeb put me in Jared’s room?”

I couldn’t believe it. Jared would kill me. No, he would kill Jeb first, and then he would kill me.

“It’s my room, too. And I told Jeb you could have it.”

“Jared will be furious,” I whispered.

“I can do what I want with my room,” Jamie muttered rebelliously, but then he bit his lip. “We won’t tell him. He doesn’t have to know.”

I nodded. “Good idea.”

“You don’t mind if I sleep in here, do you? Uncle Jeb’s really loud.”

“No, I don’t mind. But Jamie, I don’t think you should.”

He frowned, trying to be tough instead of hurt. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not safe. Sometimes people come looking for me at night.”

His eyes went wide. “They do?”

“Jared always had the gun-they went away.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know-Kyle sometimes. But there are surely others who are still here.”

He nodded. “All the more reason why I should stay. Doc might need help.”

“Jamie -“

“I’m not a kid, Wanda. I can take care of myself.”

Obviously, arguing was only going to make him more stubborn. “At least take the bed,” I said, surrendering. “I’ll sleep on the floor. It’s your room.”

“That’s not right. You’re the guest.”

I snorted quietly. “Ha. No, the bed is yours.”

“No way.” He lay down on the mat, folding his arms tightly across his chest.

Again, I saw that arguing was the wrong approach to take with Jamie. Well, this one I could rectify as soon as he was asleep. Jamie slept so deeply it was almost a coma. Melanie could carry him anywhere once he was out.

“You can use my pillow,” he told me, patting the one next to the side where he lay. “You don’t need to scrunch up at the bottom there.”

I sighed but crawled to the top of the bed.

"That's right," he said approvingly. "Now, could you throw me Jared's?"

I hesitated, about to reach for the pillow under my head; he jumped up, leaned over me, and snatched the other pillow. I sighed again.

We lay in silence for a while, listening to the low whistle of the doctor's breathing.

"Doc has a nice snore, doesn't he?" Jamie whispered.

"It won't keep you up," I agreed.

"You tired?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

I waited for him to say something more, but he was quiet.

"Was there something you wanted?" I asked.

He didn't answer right away, but I could feel him struggling, so I waited.

"If I asked you something, would you tell me the truth?"

It was my turn to hesitate. "I don't know everything," I hedged.

"You would know this. When we were walking... me and Jeb... he was telling me some things. Things he thought, but I don't know if he's right."

Melanie was suddenly very there in my head.

Jamie's whisper was hard to hear, quieter than my breathing. "Uncle Jeb thinks that Melanie might still be alive. Inside there with you, I mean."

My Jamie. Melanie sighed.

I said nothing to either of them.

"I didn't know that could happen. Does that happen?" His voice broke, and I could hear that he was fighting tears. He was not a boy to cry, and here I'd grieved him this deeply twice in one day. A pain pierced through the general region of my chest.

"Does it, Wanda?"

Tell him. Please tell him that I love him.

"Why won't you answer me?" Jamie was really crying now but trying to muffle the sound.

I crawled off the bed, squeezing into the hard space between the mattress and the mat, and threw my arm over his shaking chest. I leaned my head against his hair and felt his tears, warm on my neck.

"Is Melanie still alive, Wanda? Please?"

He was probably a tool. The old man could have sent him just for this; Jeb was smart enough to see how easily Jamie broke through my defenses. It was possible that Jeb was seeking confirmation for his theory, and he wasn't against using the boy to get it. What would Jeb do when he was certain of the dangerous truth? How would he use the information? I didn't think he meant me harm, but could I trust my own judgment? Humans were deceitful, treacherous creatures. I couldn't anticipate their darker agendas when such things were unthinkable to my species.

Jamie's body shook beside me.

He's suffering, Melanie cried. She battered ineffectually at my control.

But I couldn't blame this on Melanie if it turned out to be a huge mistake. I knew who was speaking now.

"She promised she would come back, didn't she?" I murmured. "Would Melanie break a promise to you?"

Jamie slid his arms around my waist and clung to me for a long time. After a few minutes, he whispered, "Love you, Mel."

"She loves you, too. She's so happy that you're here and safe."

He was silent long enough for the tears on my skin to dry, leaving a fine, salty dust behind.

"Is everybody like that?" Jamie whispered long after I thought he'd fallen asleep. "Does everybody stay?"

"No," I told him sadly. "No. Melanie is special."

"She's strong and brave."

"Very."

"Do you think..." He paused to sniff. "Do you think that maybe Dad is still there, too?"

I swallowed, trying to move the lump farther down my throat. It didn't work. "No, Jamie. No, I don't think so. Not like Melanie is."

"Why?"

"Because he brought the Seekers looking for you. Well, the soul inside him did. Your father wouldn't have let that happen if he were still there. Your sister never let me see where the cabin was-she didn't even let me

know that you existed for the longest time. She didn't bring me here until she was sure that I wouldn't hurt you."

It was too much information. Only as I finished speaking did I realize that the doctor wasn't snoring anymore. I could hear no noise from his breathing. Stupid. I cursed myself internally.

"Wow," Jamie said.

I whispered into his ear, so close that there was no way the doctor could possibly overhear. "Yes, she's very strong."

Jamie strained to hear me, frowning, and then glanced at the opening to the dark hall. He must have realized the same thing I had, because he turned his face to my ear and whispered back softer than before. "Why would you do that? Not hurt us? Isn't that what you want?"

"No. I don't want to hurt you."

"Why?"

"Your sister and I have... spent a lot of time together. She shared you with me. And... I started to... to love you, too."

"And Jared, too?"

I gritted my teeth for a second, chagrined that he had made the connection so easily. "Of course I don't want anything to hurt Jared, either."

"He hates you," Jamie told me, plainly grieved by the fact.

"Yes. Everyone does." I sighed. "I can't blame them."

"Jeb doesn't. And I don't."

"You might, after you think about it more."

"But you weren't even here when they took over. You didn't pick my dad or my mom or Melanie. You were in outer space then, right?"

"Yes, but I am what I am, Jamie. I did what souls do. I've had many hosts before Melanie, and nothing's stopped me from... taking lives. Again and again. It's how I live."

"Does Melanie hate you?"

I thought for a minute. "Not as much as she used to."

No. I don't hate you at all. Not anymore.

"She says she doesn't hate me at all anymore," I murmured almost silently.

"How... how is she?"

"She's happy to be here. She's so happy to see you. She doesn't even care that they're going to kill us."

Jamie stiffened under my arm. "They can't! Not if Mel's still alive!"

You've upset him, Melanie complained. You didn't have to say that.

It won't be any easier for him if he's unprepared.

"They won't believe that, Jamie," I whispered. "They'll think I'm lying to trick you. They'll just want to kill me more if you tell them that. Only Seekers lie."

The word made him shudder.

"But you're not lying. I know it," he said after a moment.

I shrugged.

"I won't let them kill her."

His voice, though quiet as a breath, was fierce with determination. I was paralyzed at the thought of him becoming more involved with this situation, with me. I thought of the barbarians he lived with. Would his age protect him from them if he tried to protect me? I doubted it. My thoughts scrambled, searching for some way to dissuade him without triggering his stubbornness.

Jamie spoke before I could say anything; he was suddenly calm, as if the answer was plain in front of him. "Jared will think of something. He always does."

"Jared won't believe you, either. He'll be the angriest of them all."

"Even if he doesn't believe it, he'll protect her. Just in case."

"We'll see," I muttered. I'd find the perfect words later-the argument that would not sound like an argument.

Jamie was quiet, thinking. Eventually, his breathing got slower, and his mouth fell open. I waited until I was sure he was deeply under, and then I crawled over him and very carefully shifted him from the floor to the bed. He was heavier than before, but I managed. He didn't wake.

I put Jared's pillow back where it belonged, and then stretched out on the mat.

Well, I thought, I just hurled myself out of the frying pan. But I was too tired to care what this would mean tomorrow. Within seconds, I was unconscious.

When I woke, the crevices in the ceiling were bright with echoed sunlight, and someone was whistling. The whistling stopped.

“Finally,” Jeb muttered when my eyes fluttered.

I rolled onto my side so that I could look at him; as I moved, Jamie’s hand slid from my arm. Sometime in the night he must have reached out to me—well, not to me, to his sister.

Jeb was leaning against the natural rock door frame, his arms folded across his chest. “Morning,” he said. “Get enough sleep?”

I stretched, decided that I felt acceptably rested, and then nodded.

“Oh, don’t give me the silent treatment again,” he complained, scowling.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “I slept well, thank you.”

Jamie stirred at the sound of my voice.

“Wanda?” he asked.

I was ridiculously touched that it was my silly nickname that he spoke on the edge of sleep.

“Yes?”

Jamie blinked and pulled his tangled hair out of his eyes. “Oh, hey, Uncle Jeb.”

“My room not good enough for you, kid?”

“You snore real loud,” Jamie said, and then yawned.

“Haven’t I taught you anything?” Jeb asked him. “Since when do you let a guest and a lady sleep on the floor?”

Jamie sat up suddenly, staring around, disoriented. He frowned.

“Don’t upset him,” I told Jeb. “He insisted on taking the mat. I moved him when he was asleep.”

Jamie snorted. “Mel always used to do that, too.”

I widened my eyes slightly at him, trying to convey a warning.

Jeb chuckled. I looked up at him, and he had that same pouncing-cat expression he’d had yesterday. The solved-puzzle expression. He walked over and kicked the edge of the mattress.

“You’ve already missed your morning class. Sharon’s bound to be testy about that, so get a move on.”

“Sharon is always testy,” Jamie complained, but he got to his feet quickly.

“On your way, boy.”

Jamie looked at me again, then he turned and disappeared into the hall.

“Now,” Jeb said as soon as we were alone. “I think all this baby-sitting nonsense has gone on long enough. I’m a busy man. Everyone is busy here—too busy to sit around playin’ guard. So today you’re going to have to come along with me while I get my chores done.”

I felt my mouth pop open.

He stared at me, no smile.

“Don’t look so terrified,” he grumbled. “You’ll be fine.” He patted his gun. “My house is no place for babies.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I took three quick, deep breaths, trying to steady my nerves. Blood pulsed so loudly in my ears that his voice seemed quiet in comparison when he spoke again.

“C’mon, Wanda. Day’s wasting.”

He turned and stomped out of the room.

I was frozen for a moment, and then I lurched out after him. He wasn’t bluffing—he was already invisible around the first corner. I raced after him, horrified by the thought that I might run into someone else in this obviously inhabited wing. I caught up to him before he reached the big intersection of the tunnels. He didn’t even look at me as I slowed beside him to match his pace.

“‘Bout time that northeast field was planted. We’ll have to work the soil first. Hope you don’t mind getting your hands dirty. After we’re done, I’ll see that you get a chance to clean yourself up. You need it.” He sniffed pointedly, then laughed.

I felt the back of my neck get hot, but I ignored the last part. “I don’t mind getting my hands dirty,” I murmured. As I recalled, the empty northeastern field was out of the way. Perhaps we would be able to work alone.

Once we got to the big plaza cave, we started passing humans. They all stared, infuriated, as usual. I was beginning to recognize most of them: the middle-aged woman with the long salt-and-pepper braid I had seen with the irrigation team yesterday. The short man with the round belly, thinning sandy hair, and ruddy cheeks

with the ingrown toenail yesterday. The short man with the round belly, unshining sandy hair, and ruddy cheeks had been with her. The athletic-looking woman with the caramel brown skin had been the one bent to tie her shoe the first time I'd come out here during the day. Another dark-skinned woman with thick lips and sleepy eyes had been in the kitchen, near the two black-haired children-perhaps she was their mother? Now we passed Maggie; she glowered at Jeb and turned her face away from me. We passed a pale, sick-looking man with white hair whom I was sure I'd never seen before. Then we passed Ian.

"Hey, Jeb," he said cheerfully. "Whatcha up to?"

"Turning the soil in the east field," Jeb grunted.

"Want some help?"

"Ought to make yourself useful," Jeb muttered.

Ian took this as an assent and fell into step behind me. It gave me goose bumps, feeling his eyes on my back.

We passed a young man who couldn't have been many years older than Jamie-his dark hair stood up from his olive-toned forehead like steel wool.

"Hey, Wes," Ian greeted him.

Wes watched in silence as we passed. Ian laughed at his expression.

We passed Doc.

"Hey, Doc," Ian said.

"Ian." Doc nodded. In his hands was a big wad of dough. His shirt was covered with dark, coarse flour. "Morning, Jeb. Morning, Wanda."

"Morning," Jeb answered.

I nodded uneasily.

"See you 'round," Doc said, hurrying off with his burden.

"Wanda, huh?" Ian asked.

"My idea," Jeb told him. "Suits her, I think."

"Interesting" was all Ian said.

We finally made it to the northeastern field, where my hopes were dashed.

There were more people here than there had been in the passageways-five women and nine men. They all stopped what they were doing and scowled, naturally.

"Pay 'em no mind," Jeb murmured to me.

Jeb proceeded to follow his own advice; he went to a jumbled pile of tools against the closest wall, shoved his gun through the strap at his waist, and grabbed a pick and two shovels.

I felt exposed, having him so far away. Ian was just a step behind me-I could hear him breathing. The others in the room continued to glower, their tools still in their hands. I didn't miss the fact that the picks and hoes that were breaking the earth could easily be used to break a body. It seemed to me, in reading a few of their expressions, that I wasn't the only one with that idea.

Jeb came back and handed me a shovel. I gripped the smooth, worn wooden handle, feeling its weight. After seeing the bloodlust in the humans' eyes, it was hard not to think of it as a weapon. I didn't like the idea. I doubted I could raise it as one, even to block a blow.

Jeb gave Ian the pick. The sharp, blackened metal looked deadly in his hands. It took all my willpower not to skip out of range.

"Let's take the back corner."

At least Jeb took me to the least crowded spot in the long, sunny cave. He had Ian pulverize the hard-baked dirt ahead of us, while I flipped the clods over and he followed behind, crushing the chunks into usable soil with the edge of his shovel.

Watching the sweat run down Ian's fair skin-he'd removed his shirt after a few seconds in the dry scorch of the mirror light-and hearing Jeb's grunted breaths behind me, I could see that I had the easiest job. I wished I had something more difficult to do, something that would keep me from being distracted by the movements of the other humans. Their every motion had me cringing and flinching.

I couldn't do Ian's job-I didn't have the thick arm and back muscles needed to really chew into the hard soil. But I decided to do what I could of Jeb's, prechopping the clods into smaller bits before I moved on. It helped a little bit-kept my eyes busy and tired me out so that I had to concentrate on making myself work.

Ian brought us water now and then. There was a woman-short and fair, I'd seen her in the kitchen yesterday-who seemed to have the job of bringing water to the others, but she ignored us. Ian brought enough for three every time. I found his about-face in regard to me unsettling. Was he really no longer intent on my

death? Or just looking for an opportunity? The water always tasted funny here-sulfurous and stale-but now that taste seemed suspicious. I tried to ignore the paranoia as much as possible.

I was working hard enough to keep my eyes busy and my mind numb; I didn't notice when we hit the end of the last row. I stopped only when Ian did. He stretched, pulling the pick overhead with two hands and popping his joints. I shied away from the raised pick, but he didn't see. I realized that everyone else had stopped, too. I looked at the fresh-turned dirt, even across the entire floor, and realized that the field was complete.

"Good work," Jeb announced in a loud voice to the group. "We'll seed and water tomorrow."

The room was filled with soft chatter and clanks as the tools were piled against the wall once more. Some of the talk was casual; some was still tense because of me. Ian held his hand out for my shovel, and I handed it to him, feeling my already low mood sink right to the floor. I had no doubt that I would be included in Jeb's "we." Tomorrow would be just as hard as today.

I looked at Jeb mournfully, and he was smiling in my direction. There was a smugness to his grin that made me believe he knew what I was thinking-not only did he guess my discomfort, but he was enjoying it.

He winked at me, my crazy friend. I realized again that this was the best to be expected from human friendship.

"See you tomorrow, Wanda," Ian called from across the room, and laughed to himself.

Everyone stared.

The Host

CHAPTER 24

Tolerated

It was true that I did not smell good.

I'd lost count of how many days I'd spent here-was it more than a week now? more than two?-and all of them sweating into the same clothes I'd worn on my disastrous desert trek. So much salt had dried into my cotton shirt that it was creased into rigid accordion wrinkles. It used to be pale yellow; now it was a splotchy, diseased-looking print in the same dark purple color as the cave floor. My short hair was crunchy and gritty; I could feel it standing out in wild tangles around my head, with a stiff crest on top, like a cockatoo's. I hadn't seen my face recently, but I imagined it in two shades of purple: cave-dirt purple and healing-bruise purple.

So I could understand Jeb's point-yes, I needed a bath. And a change of clothes as well, to make the bath worth the effort. Jeb offered me some of Jamie's clothes to wear while mine dried, but I didn't want to ruin Jamie's few things by stretching them. Thankfully, he didn't try to offer me anything of Jared's. I ended up with an old but clean flannel shirt of Jeb's that had the sleeves ripped off, and a pair of faded, holey cutoff sweatpants that had gone unclaimed for months. These were draped over my arm-and a bumpy mound of vile-smelling, loosely molded chunks that Jeb claimed was homemade cactus soap was in my hand-as I followed Jeb to the room with the two rivers.

Again we were not alone, and again I was miserably disappointed that this was the case. Three men and one woman-the salt-and-pepper braid-were filling buckets with water from the smaller stream. A loud splashing and laughing echoed from the bathing room.

"We'll just wait our turn," Jeb told me.

He leaned against the wall. I stood stiffly beside him, uncomfortably conscious of the four pairs of eyes on me, though I kept my own on the dark hot spring rushing by underneath the porous floor.

After a short wait, three women exited the bathing room, their wet hair dripping down the backs of their shirts-the athletic caramel-skinned woman, a young blonde I didn't remember seeing before, and Melanie's cousin Sharon. Their laughter stopped abruptly as soon as they caught sight of us.

"Afternoon, ladies," Jeb said, touching his forehead as if it were the brim of a hat.

"Jeb," the caramel woman acknowledged dryly.

Sharon and the other girl ignored us.

"Okay, Wanda," he said when they'd passed. "It's all yours."

I gave him a glum look, then made my way carefully into the black room.

I tried to remember how the floor went-I was sure I had a few feet before the edge of the water. I took off my shoes first, so that I could feel for the water with my toes.

It was just so dark. I remembered the inky appearance of the pool-ripe with suggestions of what might lurk beneath its opaque surface-and shuddered. But the longer I waited, the longer I would have to be here, so I put the clean clothes next to my shoes, kept the smelly soap, and shuffled forward carefully until I found the lip of the pool.

The water was cool compared to the steamy air of the outer cavern. It felt nice. That didn't keep me from being terrified, but I could still appreciate the sensation. It had been a long time since anything had been cool. Still fully dressed in my dirty clothes, I waded in waist deep. I could feel the stream's current swirl around my ankles, hugging the rock. I was glad the water was not stagnant-it would be upsetting to sully it, filthy as I was, if that were the case.

I crouched down into the ink until I was immersed to my shoulders. I ran the coarse soap over my clothes, thinking this would be the easiest way to make sure they were clean. Where the soap touched my skin, it burned mildly.

I took off the soapy clothes and scrubbed them under the water. Then I rinsed them again and again until there was no way any of my sweat or tears could have survived, wrung them out, and laid them on the floor beside where I thought my shoes were.

The soap burned more strongly against my bare skin, but the sting was bearable because it meant I could be clean again. When I was done lathering, my skin prickled everywhere and my scalp felt scalded. It seemed as if the places where the bruises had formed were more sensitive than the rest of me-they must still have been there. I was happy to put the acidic soap on the rock floor and rinse my body again and again, the way I had my clothes.

It was with a strange mingling of relief and regret that I sloshed my way out of the pool. The water was very pleasant, as was the feeling of clean, if prickling, skin. But I'd had quite enough of the blindness and the things I could imagine into the darkness. I felt around until I found the dry clothes, then I pulled them quickly on and shoved my water-wrinkled feet into my shoes. I carried my wet clothes in one hand and the soap gingerly between two fingers of the other.

Jeb laughed when I emerged; his eyes were on the soap in my cautious grasp.

"Smarts a bit, don't it? We're trying to fix that." He held out his hand, protected by the tail of his shirt, and I placed the soap in it.

I didn't answer his question because we weren't alone; there was a line waiting silently behind him-five people, all of them from the field turning.

Ian was first in line.

"You look better," he told me, but I couldn't tell from his tone if he was surprised or annoyed that I did.

He raised one arm, extending his long, pale fingers toward my neck. I flinched away, and he dropped his hand quickly.

"Sorry about that," he muttered.

Did he mean for scaring me now or for marking up my neck in the first place? I couldn't imagine that he was apologizing for trying to kill me. Surely he still wanted me dead. But I wasn't going to ask. I started walking, and Jeb fell into step behind me.

"So, today wasn't that bad," Jeb said as we walked through the dark corridor.

"Not that bad," I murmured. After all, I hadn't been murdered. That was always a plus.

"Tomorrow will be even better," he promised. "I always enjoy planting-seeing the miracle of the little dead-looking seeds having so much life in them. Makes me feel like a withered old guy might have some potential left in him. Even if it's only to be fertilizer." Jeb laughed at his joke.

When we got to the big garden cavern, Jeb took my elbow and steered me east rather than west.

"Don't try to tell me you're not hungry after all that digging," he said. "It's not my job to provide room service. You're just going to have to eat where everyone else eats."

I grimaced at the floor but let him lead me to the kitchen.

It was a good thing the food was exactly the same thing as always, because if, miraculously, a filet mignon or a bag of Cheetos had materialized, I wouldn't have been able to taste a thing. It took all my concentration just to make myself swallow-I hated to make even that small sound in the dead silence that followed my appearance. The kitchen wasn't crowded, just ten people lounging against the counters, eating their tough rolls and drinking their watery soup. But I killed all conversation again. I wondered how long things could last like this.

The answer was exactly four days.

It also took me that long to understand what Jeb was up to, what the motivation was behind his switch from

the courteous host to the curmudgeonly taskmaster.

The day after turning the soil I spent seeding and irrigating the same field. It was a different group of people than the day before; I imagined there was some kind of rotation of the chores here. Maggie was in this group, and the caramel-skinned woman, but I didn't learn her name. Mostly everyone worked in silence. The silence felt unnatural-a protest against my presence.

Ian worked with us, when it was clearly not his turn, and this bothered me.

I had to eat in the kitchen again. Jamie was there, and he kept the room from total silence. I knew he was too sensitive not to notice the awkward hush, but he deliberately ignored it, seeming to pretend that he and Jeb and I were the only people in the room. He chattered about his day in Sharon's class, bragging a little about some trouble he'd gotten into for speaking out of turn, and complaining about the chores she'd given him as punishment. Jeb chastised him halfheartedly. They both did a very good job of acting normal. I had no acting ability. When Jamie asked me about my day, the best I could do was stare intently at my food and mumble one-word answers. This seemed to make him sad, but he didn't push me.

At night it was a different story-he wouldn't let me stop talking until I begged to be allowed to sleep. Jamie had reclaimed his room, taking Jared's side of the bed and insisting that I take his. This was very much as Melanie remembered things, and she approved of the arrangement.

Jeb did, too. "Saves me the trouble of finding someone to play guard. Keep the gun close and don't forget it's there," he told Jamie.

I protested again, but both the man and the boy refused to listen to me. So Jamie slept with the gun on the other side of his body from me, and I fretted and had nightmares about it.

The third day of chores, I worked in the kitchen. Jeb taught me how to knead the coarse bread dough, how to lay it out in round lumps and let it rise, and, later on, how to feed the fire in the bottom of the big stone oven when it was dark enough to let the smoke out.

In the middle of the afternoon, Jeb left.

"I'm gonna get some more flour," he muttered, playing with the strap that held the gun to his waist.

The three silent women who kneaded alongside us didn't look up. I was up to my elbows in the sticky dough, but I started to scrape it off so I could follow him.

Jeb grinned, flashed a look at the unobserving women, and shook his head at me. Then he spun around and dashed out of the room before I could free myself.

I froze there, no longer breathing. I stared at the three women-the young blonde from the bathing room, the salt-and-pepper braid, and the heavy-lidded mother-waiting for them to realize that they could kill me now. No Jeb, no gun, my hands trapped in the gluey dough-nothing to stop them.

But the women kept on kneading and shaping, not seeming to realize this glaring truth. After a long, breathless moment, I started kneading again, too. My stillness would probably alert them to the situation sooner than if I kept working.

Jeb was gone for an eternity. Perhaps he had meant that he needed to grind more flour. That seemed like the only explanation for his endless absence.

"Took you long enough," the salt-and-pepper-braid woman said when he got back, so I knew it wasn't just my imagination.

Jeb dropped a heavy burlap sack to the floor with a deep thud. "That's a lot of flour there. You try carryin' it, Trudy."

Trudy snorted. "I imagine it took a lot of rest stops to get it this far."

Jeb grinned at her. "It sure did."

My heart, which had been thrumming like a bird's for the entire episode, settled into a less frantic rhythm.

The next day we were cleaning mirrors in the room that housed the cornfield. Jeb told me this was something they had to do routinely, as the combination of humidity and dust caked the mirrors until the light was too dim to feed the plants. It was Ian, working with us again, who scaled the rickety wooden ladder while Jeb and I tried to keep the base steady. It was a difficult task, given Ian's weight and the homemade ladder's poor balance. By the end of the day, my arms were limp and aching.

I didn't even notice until we were done and heading for the kitchen that the improvised holster Jeb always wore was empty.

I gasped out loud, my knees locking like a startled colt's. My body tottered to a halt.

"What's wrong, Wanda?" Jeb asked, too innocent.

I would have answered if Ian hadn't been right beside him, watching my strange behavior with fascination

in his vivid blue eyes.

So I just gave Jeb a wide-eyed look of mingled disbelief and reproach, and then slowly began walking beside him again, shaking my head. Jeb chuckled.

“What’s that about?” Ian muttered to Jeb, as if I were deaf.

“Beats me,” Jeb said; he lied as only a human could, smooth and guileless.

He was a good liar, and I began to wonder if leaving the gun behind today, and leaving me alone yesterday, and all this effort forcing me into human company was his way of getting me killed without doing the job himself. Was the friendship all in my head? Another lie?

This was my fourth day eating in the kitchen.

Jeb, Ian, and I walked into the long, hot room-into a crowd of humans chatting in low voices about the day’s events-and nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

There was no sudden silence. No one paused to stare daggers at me. No one seemed to notice us at all.

Jeb steered me to an empty counter and then went to get enough bread for three. Ian lounged next to me, casually turning to the girl on his other side. It was the young blonde-he called her Paige.

“How are things going? How are you holding up with Andy gone?” he asked her.

“I’d be fine if I weren’t so worried,” she told him, biting her lip.

“He’ll be home soon,” Ian assured her. “Jared always brings everyone home. He’s got a real talent. We’ve had no accidents, no problems since he showed up. Andy will be fine.”

My interest sparked when he mentioned Jared-and Melanie, so somnolent these days, stirred-but Ian didn’t say anything else. He just patted Paige’s shoulder and turned to take his food from Jeb.

Jeb sat next to me and surveyed the room with a deep sense of satisfaction plain on his face. I looked around the room, too, trying to see what he saw. This must have been what it was usually like here, when I wasn’t around. Only today I didn’t seem to bother them. They must have been tired of letting me interrupt their lives.

“Things are settling down,” Ian commented to Jeb.

“Knew they would. We’re all reasonable folks here.”

I frowned to myself.

“That’s true, at the moment,” Ian said, laughing. “My brother’s not around.”

“Exactly,” Jeb agreed.

It was interesting to me that Ian counted himself among the reasonable folks. Had he noticed that Jeb was unarmed? I was burning with curiosity, but I couldn’t risk pointing it out in case he hadn’t.

The meal continued as it had begun. My novelty had apparently worn off.

When the meal was over, Jeb said I deserved a rest. He walked me all the way to my door, playing the gentleman again.

“Afternoon, Wanda,” he said, tipping his imaginary hat.

I took a deep breath for bravery. “Jeb, wait.”

“Yes?”

“Jeb...” I hesitated, trying to find a polite way to put it. “I... well, maybe it’s stupid of me, but I sort of thought we were friends.”

I scrutinized his face, looking for any change that might indicate that he was about to lie to me. He only looked kind, but what did I know of a liar’s tells?

“Of course we are, Wanda.”

“Then why are you trying to get me killed?”

His furry brows pulled together in surprise. “Now, why would you think that, honey?”

I listed my evidence. “You didn’t take the gun today. And yesterday you left me alone.”

Jeb grinned. “I thought you hated that gun.”

I waited for an answer.

“Wanda, if I wanted you dead, you wouldn’t have lasted that first day.”

“I know,” I muttered, starting to feel embarrassed without understanding why. “That’s why it’s all so confusing.”

Jeb laughed cheerfully. “No, I don’t want you dead! That’s the whole point, kid. I’ve been getting them all used to seeing you around, getting them to accept the situation without realizing it. It’s like boiling a frog.”

My forehead creased at the eccentric comparison.

Jeb explained, “If you throw a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will hop right out. But if you put that frog in

Jeb explained. "If you throw a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will hop right out. But if you put that frog in a pot of tepid water and slowly warm it, the frog doesn't figure out what's going on until it's too late. Boiled frog. It's just a matter of working by slow degrees."

I thought about that for a second-remembered how the humans had ignored me at lunch today. Jeb had gotten them used to me. The realization made me feel strangely hopeful. Hope was a silly thing in my situation, but it seeped into me anyway, coloring my perceptions more brightly than before.

"Jeb?"

"Yeah?"

"Am I the frog or the water?"

He laughed. "I'll leave that one for you to puzzle over. Self-examination is good for the soul." He laughed again, louder this time, as he turned to leave. "No pun intended."

"Wait-can I ask one more?"

"Sure. I'd say it's your turn anyway, after all I've asked you."

"Why are you my friend, Jeb?"

He pursed his lips for a second, considering his answer.

"You know I'm a curious man," he began, and I nodded. "Well, I get to watch your souls a lot, but I never get to talk with 'em. I've had so many questions just piling up higher and higher.... Plus, I've always thought that if a person wants to, he can get along with just about anybody. I like putting my theories to the test. And see, here you are, one of the nicest gals I ever met. It's real interesting to have a soul as a friend, and it makes me feel super special that I've managed it."

He winked at me, bowed from the waist, and walked away.

Just because I now understood Jeb's plan, it didn't make things easier when he escalated it.

He never took the gun anywhere anymore. I didn't know where it was, but I was grateful that Jamie wasn't sleeping with it, at least. It made me a little nervous to have Jamie with me unprotected, but I decided he was actually in less danger without the gun. No one would feel the need to hurt him when he wasn't a threat. Besides, no one came looking for me anymore.

Jeb started sending me on little errands. Run back to the kitchen for another roll, he was still hungry. Go fetch a bucket of water, this corner of the field was dry. Pull Jamie out of his class, Jeb needed to speak with him. Were the spinach sprouts up yet? Go and check. Did I remember my way through the south caves? Jeb had a message for Doc.

Every time I had to carry out one of these simple directives, I was in a sweaty haze of fear. I concentrated on being invisible and walked as quickly as I could without running through the big rooms and the dark corridors. I tended to hug the walls and keep my eyes down. Occasionally, I would stop conversation the way I used to, but mostly I was ignored. The only time I felt in immediate danger of death was when I interrupted Sharon's class to get Jamie. The look Sharon gave me seemed designed to be followed by hostile action. But she let Jamie go with a nod after I choked out my whispered request, and when we were alone, he held my shaking hand and told me Sharon looked the same way at anyone who interrupted her class.

The very worst was the time I had to find Doc, because Ian insisted on showing me the way. I could have refused, I suppose, but Jeb didn't have a problem with the arrangement, and that meant Jeb trusted Ian not to kill me. I was far from comfortable with testing that theory, but it seemed the test was inevitable. If Jeb was wrong to trust Ian, then Ian would find his opportunity soon enough. So I went with Ian through the long black southern tunnel as if it were a trial by fire.

I lived through the first half. Doc got his message. He seemed unsurprised to see Ian tagging along beside me. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought they exchanged a significant glance. I half expected them to strap me to one of Doc's gurneys at that point. These rooms continued to make me feel nauseated.

But Doc just thanked me and sent me on my way as if he were busy. I couldn't really tell what he was doing-he had several books open and stacks and stacks of papers that seemed to contain nothing but sketches.

On the way back, curiosity overcame my fear.

"Ian?" I asked, having a bit of difficulty saying the name for the first time.

"Yes?" He sounded surprised that I'd addressed him.

"Why haven't you killed me yet?"

He snorted. "That's direct."

"You could, you know. Jeb might be annoyed, but I don't think he'd shoot you." What was I saying? It sounded like I was trying to convince him. I bit my tongue.

"I know." he said. his tone complacent.

It was quiet for a moment, just the sounds of our footsteps echoing, low and muffled, from the tunnel walls. "It doesn't seem fair," Ian finally said. "I've been thinking about it a lot, and I can't see how killing you would make anything right. It would be like executing a private for a general's war crimes. Now, I don't buy all of Jeb's crazy theories-it would be nice to believe, sure, but just because you want something to be true doesn't make it that way. Whether he's right or wrong, though, you don't appear to mean us any harm. I have to admit, you seem honestly fond of that boy. It's very strange to watch. Anyway, as long as you don't put us in danger, it seems... cruel to kill you. What's one more misfit in this place?"

I thought about the word misfit for a moment. It might have been the truest description of me I'd ever heard. Where had I ever fit in?

How strange that Ian, of all the humans, should have such a surprisingly gentle interior. I didn't realize that cruelty would seem a negative to him.

He waited in silence while I considered all this.

"If you don't want to kill me, then why did you come with me today?" I asked.

He paused again before answering.

"I'm not sure that..." He hesitated. "Jeb thinks things have calmed down, but I'm not completely sure about that. There're still a few people... Anyway, Doc and I have been trying to keep an eye on you when we can. Just in case. Sending you down the south tunnel seemed like pushing your luck, to me. But that's what Jeb does best-he pushes luck as far as it will go."

"You... you and Doc are trying to protect me?"

"Strange world, isn't it?"

It was a few seconds before I could answer.

"The strangest," I finally agreed.

The Host

CHAPTER 25

Compelled

Another week passed, maybe two-there seemed little point in keeping track of time here, where it was so irrelevant-and things only got stranger for me.

I worked with the humans every day, but not always with Jeb. Some days Ian was with me, some days Doc, and some days only Jamie. I weeded fields, kneaded bread, and scrubbed counters. I carried water, boiled onion soup, washed clothes in the far end of the black pool, and burned my hands making that acidic soap. Everyone did their part, and since I had no right to be here, I tried to work twice as hard as the others. I could not earn a place, I knew that, but I tried to make my presence as light a burden as possible.

I got to know a little about the humans around me, mostly just by listening to them. I learned their names, at least. The caramel-skinned woman was named Lily, and she was from Philadelphia. She had a dry sense of humor and got along well with everyone because she never got ruffled. The young man with the bristly black hair, Wes, stared at her a lot, but she never seemed to notice that. He was only nineteen, and he'd escaped from Eureka, Montana. The sleepy-eyed mother was named Lucina, and her two boys were Isaiah and Freedom-Freedom had been born right here in the caves, delivered by Doc. I didn't see much of these three; it seemed that the mother kept her children as separate from me as was possible in this limited space. The balding, red-cheeked man was Trudy's husband; his name was Geoffrey. They were often with another older man, Heath, who had been Geoffrey's best friend since early childhood; the three had escaped the invasion together. The pallid man with the white hair was Walter. He was sick, but Doc didn't know what was wrong with him-there was no way to find out, not without labs and tests, and even if Doc could diagnose the problem, he had no medicine to treat it. As the symptoms progressed, Doc was starting to think it was a form of cancer. This pained me-to watch someone actually dying from something so easily fixed. Walter tired easily but was always cheerful. The white-blond woman-her eyes contrastingly dark-who'd brought water to the others that first day in the field was Heidi. Travis, John, Stanley, Reid, Carol, Violetta, Ruth Ann... I knew all the names, at least. There were thirty-five humans in the colony, with six of them gone on the raid, Jared included. Twenty-nine humans in the caves now, and one mostly unwelcome alien.

I also learned more about my neighbors.

Ian and Kyle shared the cave on my hallway with the two real doors propped over the entrance. Ian had begun bunking with Wes in another corridor in protest of my presence here, but he'd moved back after just two nights. The other nearby caves had also gone vacant for a while. Jeb told me the occupants were afraid of me, which made me laugh. Were twenty-nine rattlesnakes afraid of a lone field mouse?

Now Paige was back, next door, in the cave she shared with her partner, Andy, whose absence she mourned. Lily was with Heidi in the first cave, with the flowered sheets; Heath was in the second, with the duct-taped cardboard; and Trudy and Geoffrey were in the third, with a striped quilt. Reid and Violetta were one cave farther down the hall than mine, their privacy protected by a stained and threadbare oriental carpet.

The fourth cave in this corridor belonged to Doc and Sharon, and the fifth to Maggie, but none of these three had returned.

Doc and Sharon were partnered, and Maggie, in her rare moments of sarcastic humor, teased Sharon that it had taken the end of humanity for Sharon to find the perfect man: every mother wanted a doctor for her daughter.

Sharon was not the girl I'd seen in Melanie's memories. Was it the years of living alone with the dour Maggie that had changed her into a more brightly colored version of her mother? Though her relationship with Doc was newer to this world than I was, she showed none of the softening effects of new love.

I knew the duration of that relationship from Jamie-Sharon and Maggie rarely forgot when I was in a room with them, and their conversation was guarded. They were still the strongest opposition, the only people here whose ignoring me continued to feel aggressively hostile.

I'd asked Jamie how Sharon and Maggie had gotten here. Had they found Jeb on their own, beaten Jared and Jamie here? He seemed to understand the real question: had Melanie's last effort to find them been entirely a waste?

Jamie told me no. When Jared had showed him Melanie's last note, explained that she was gone-it took him a moment to be able to speak again after that word, and I could see in his face what this moment had done to them both-they'd gone to look for Sharon themselves. Maggie had held Jared at the point of an antique sword while he tried to explain; it had been a close thing.

It had not taken long with Maggie and Jared working together for them to decipher Jeb's riddle. The four of them had gotten to the caves before I'd moved from Chicago to San Diego.

When Jamie and I spoke of Melanie, it was not as difficult as it should have been. She was always a part of these conversations-soothing his pain, smoothing my awkwardness-though she had little to say. She rarely spoke to me anymore, and when she did it was muted; now and then I wasn't sure if I really heard her or just my own idea of what she might think. But she made an effort for Jamie. When I heard her, it was always with him. When she didn't speak, we both felt her there.

"Why is Melanie so quiet now?" Jamie asked me late one night. For once, he wasn't grilling me about Spiders and Fire-Tasters. We were both tired-it had been a long day pulling carrots. The small of my back was in knots.

"It's hard for her to talk. It takes so much more effort than it takes you and me. She doesn't have anything she wants to say that badly."

"What does she do all the time?"

"She listens, I think. I guess I don't know."

"Can you hear her now?"

"No."

I yawned, and he was quiet. I thought he was asleep. I drifted in that direction, too.

"Do you think she'll go away? Really gone?" Jamie suddenly whispered. His voice caught on the last word.

I was not a liar, and I don't think I could have lied to Jamie if I were. I tried not to think about the implications of my feelings for him. Because what did it mean if the greatest love I'd ever felt in my nine lives, the first true sense of family, of maternal instinct, was for an alien life-form? I shoved the thought away.

"I don't know," I told him. And then, because it was true, I added, "I hope not."

"Do you like her like you like me? Did you used to hate her, like she hated you?"

"It's different than how I like you. And I never really hated her, not even in the beginning. I was very afraid of her, and I was angry that because of her I couldn't be like everyone else. But I've always, always admired strength, and Melanie is the strongest person I've ever known."

Jamie laughed. "You were afraid of her?"

“You don’t think your sister can be scary? Remember the time you went too far up the canyon, and when you came home late she ‘threw a raging hissy fit,’ according to Jared?”

He chuckled at the memory. I was pleased, having distracted him from his painful question.

I was eager to keep the peace with all my new companions in any way I could. I thought I was willing to do anything, no matter how backbreaking or smelly, but it turned out I was wrong.

“So I was thinking,” Jeb said to me one day, maybe two weeks after everyone had “calmed down.”

I was beginning to hate those words from Jeb.

“Do you remember what I was saying about you maybe teaching a little here?”

My answer was curt. “Yes.”

“Well, how ’bout it?”

I didn’t have to think it through. “No.”

My refusal sent an unexpected pang of guilt through me. I’d never refused a Calling before. It felt like a selfish thing to do. Obviously, though, this was not the same. The souls would have never asked me to do something so suicidal.

He frowned at me, scrunching his caterpillar eyebrows together. “Why not?”

“How do you think Sharon would like that?” I asked him in an even voice. It was just one example, but perhaps the most forceful.

He nodded, still frowning, acknowledging my point.

“It’s for the greater good,” he grumbled.

I snorted. “The greater good? Wouldn’t that be shooting me?”

“Wanda, that’s shortsighted,” he said, arguing with me as if my answer had been a serious attempt at persuasion. “What we have here is a very unusual opportunity for learning. It would be wasteful to squander that.”

“I really don’t think anyone wants to learn from me. I don’t mind talking to you or Jamie -“

“Doesn’t matter what they want,” Jeb insisted. “It’s what’s good for them. Like chocolate versus broccoli. Ought to know more about the universe-not to mention the new tenants of our planet.”

“How does it help them, Jeb? Do you think I know something that could destroy the souls? Turn the tide? Jeb, it’s over.”

“It’s not over while we’re still here,” he told me, grinning so I knew he was teasing me again. “I don’t expect you to turn traitor and give us some super-weapon. I just think we should know more about the world we live in.”

I flinched at the word traitor. “I couldn’t give you a weapon if I wanted to, Jeb. We don’t have some great weakness, an Achilles’ heel. No archenemies out there in space who could come to your aid, no viruses that will wipe us out and leave you standing. Sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it.” He made a fist and tapped it playfully against my arm. “You might be surprised, though. I told you it gets boring in here. People might want your stories more than you think.”

I knew Jeb would not leave it alone. Was Jeb capable of conceding defeat? I doubted it.

At mealtimes I usually sat with Jeb and Jamie, if he was not in school or busy elsewhere. Ian always sat near, though not really with us. I could not fully accept the idea of his self-appointed role as my bodyguard. It seemed too good to be true and thus, by human philosophy, clearly false.

A few days after I’d refused Jeb’s request to teach the humans “for their own good,” Doc came to sit by me during the evening meal.

Sharon remained where she was, in the corner farthest from my usual place. She was alone today, without her mother. She didn’t turn to watch Doc walking toward me. Her vivid hair was wound into a high bun, so I could see that her neck was stiff, and her shoulders were hunched, tense and unhappy. It made me want to leave at once, before Doc could say whatever he meant to say to me, so that I could not be considered in collusion with him.

But Jamie was with me, and he took my hand when he saw the familiar panicked look come into my eyes. He was developing an uncanny ability to sense when I was turning skittish. I sighed and stayed where I was. It should probably have bothered me more that I was such a slave to this child’s wishes.

“How are things?” Doc asked in a casual voice, sliding onto the counter next to me.

Ian, a few feet down from us, turned his body so it looked like he was part of the group.

I shrugged.

“We boiled soup today,” Jamie announced. “My eyes are still stinging.”

Doc looked at me and said, “Good.”

Doc held up a pair of bright red nands. Soap.

Jamie laughed. "You win."

Doc gave a mocking bow from the waist, then turned to me. "Wanda, I had a question for you...." He let the words trail off.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Well, I was wondering.... Of all the different planets you're familiar with, which species is physically the closest to humankind?"

I blinked. "Why?"

"Just good old-fashioned biological curiosity. I guess I've been thinking about your Healers.... Where do they get the knowledge to cure, rather than just treat symptoms, as you said?" Doc was speaking louder than necessary, his mild voice carrying farther than usual. Several people looked up-Trudy and Geoffrey, Lily, Walter...

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, trying to take up less space. "Those are two different questions," I murmured.

Doc smiled and gestured with one hand for me to proceed.

Jamie squeezed my hand.

I sighed. "The Bears on the Mists Planet, probably."

"With the claw beasts?" Jamie whispered.

I nodded.

"How are they similar?" Doc prodded.

I rolled my eyes, feeling Jeb's direction in this, but continued. "They're close to mammals in many ways. Fur, warm-blooded. Their blood isn't exactly the same as yours, but it does essentially the same job. They have similar emotions, the same need for societal interaction and creative outlets -"

"Creative?" Doc leaned forward, fascinated-or feigning fascination. "How so?"

I looked at Jamie. "You know. Why don't you tell Doc?"

"I might get it wrong."

"You won't."

He looked at Doc, who nodded.

"Well, see, they have these awesome hands." Jamie was enthusiastic almost immediately. "Sort of double-jointed-they can curl both ways." He flexed his own fingers, as if trying to bend them backward. "One side is soft, like my palm, but the other side is like razors! They cut the ice-ice sculpting. They make cities that are all crystal castles that never melt! It's beautiful, isn't it, Wanda?" He turned to me for backup.

I nodded. "They see a different range of colors-the ice is full of rainbows. Their cities are a point of pride for them. They're always trying to make them more beautiful. I knew of one Bear who we called... well, something like Glitter Weaver, but it sounds better in that language, because of the way the ice seemed to know what he wanted and shaped itself into his dreams. I met him once and saw his creations. That's one of my most beautiful memories."

"They dream?" Ian asked quietly.

I smiled wryly. "Not as vividly as humans."

"How do your Healers get their knowledge about the physiology of a new species? They came to this planet prepared. I watched it start-watched the terminal patients walk out of the hospital whole...." A frown etched a V-shaped crease into Doc's narrow forehead. He hated the invaders, like everyone, but unlike the others, he also envied them.

I didn't want to answer. Everyone was listening to us by this point, and this was no pretty fairytale about ice-sculpting Bears. This was the story of their defeat.

Doc waited, frowning.

"They... they take samples," I muttered.

Ian grinned in understanding. "Alien abductions."

I ignored him.

Doc pursed his lips. "Makes sense."

The silence in the room reminded me of my first time here.

"Where did your kind begin?" Doc asked. "Do you remember? I mean, as a species, do you know how you evolved?"

"The Origin," I answered, nodding. "We still live there. It's where I was... born."

"That's kind of special," Jamie added. "It's rare to meet someone from the Origin, isn't it? Most souls try to

That's kind of special," Jamie added. "It's rare to meet someone from the Origin, isn't it? Most souls try to stay there, right, Wanda?" He didn't wait for my response. I was beginning to regret answering his questions so thoroughly each night. "So when someone moves on, it makes them almost... like a celebrity? Or like a member of a royal family?"

I could feel my cheeks getting warm.

"It's a cool place," Jamie went on. "Lots of clouds, with a bunch of different-colored layers. It's the only planet where the souls can live outside of a host for very long. The hosts on the Origin planet are really pretty, too, with sort of wings and lots of tentacles and big silver eyes."

Doc was leaning forward with his face in his hands. "Do they remember how the host-parasite relationship was formed? How did the colonization begin?"

Jamie looked at me, shrugging.

"We were always that way," I answered slowly, still unwilling. "As far back as we were intelligent enough to know ourselves, at least. We were discovered by another species—the Vultures, we call them here, though more for their personalities than for their looks. They were... not kind. Then we discovered that we could bond with them just as we had with our original hosts. Once we controlled them, we made use of their technology. We took their planet first, and then followed them to the Dragon Planet and the Summer World—lovely places where the Vultures had also not been kind. We started colonizing; our hosts reproduced so much slower than we did, and their life spans were short. We began exploring farther into the universe...."

I trailed off, conscious of the many eyes on my face. Only Sharon continued to look away.

"You speak of it almost as if you were there," Ian noted quietly. "How long ago did this happen?"

"After dinosaurs lived here but before you did. I was not there, but I remember some of what my mother's mother's mother remembered of it."

"How old are you?" Ian asked, leaning toward me, his brilliant blue eyes penetrating.

"I don't know in Earth years."

"An estimate?" he pressed.

"Thousands of years, maybe." I shrugged. "I lose track of the years spent in hibernation."

Ian leaned back, stunned.

"Wow, that's old," Jamie breathed.

"But in a very real sense, I'm younger than you," I murmured to him. "Not even a year old. I feel like a child all the time."

Jamie's lips pulled up slightly at the corners. He liked the idea of being more mature than I was.

"What's the aging process for your kind?" Doc asked. "The natural life span?"

"We don't have one," I told him. "As long as we have a healthy host, we can live forever."

A low murmur—angry? frightened? disgusted? I couldn't tell—swirled around the edges of the cave. I saw that my answer had been unwise; I understood what these words would mean to them.

"Beautiful." The low, furious word came from Sharon's direction, but she hadn't turned.

Jamie squeezed my hand, seeing again in my eyes the desire to bolt. This time I gently pulled my hand free.

"I'm not hungry anymore," I whispered, though my bread sat barely touched on the counter beside me. I hopped down and, hugging the wall, made my escape.

Jamie followed right behind me. He caught up to me in the big garden plaza and handed me the remains of my bread.

"It was real interesting, honest," he told me. "I don't think anyone's too upset."

"Jeb put Doc up to this, didn't he?"

"You tell good stories. Once everyone knows that, they'll want to hear them. Just like me and Jeb."

"What if I don't want to tell them?"

Jamie frowned. "Well, I guess then... you shouldn't. But it seems like you don't mind telling me stories."

"That's different. You like me." I could have said, You don't want to kill me, but the implications would have upset him.

"Once people get to know you, they'll all like you. Ian and Doc do."

"Ian and Doc do not like me, Jamie. They're just morbidly curious."

"Do so."

"Ugh," I groaned. We were to our room by now. I shoved the screen aside and threw myself onto the mattress. Jamie sat down less forcefully beside me and looped his arms around his knees.

"Don't be mad," he pleaded. "Jeb means well."

I groaned again.

"It won't be so bad."

"Doc's going to do this every time I go in the kitchen, isn't he?"

Jamie nodded sheepishly. "Or Ian. Or Jeb."

"Or you."

"We all want to know."

I sighed and rolled onto my stomach. "Does Jeb have to get his way every single time?"

Jamie thought for a moment, then nodded. "Pretty much, yeah."

I took a big bite of bread. When I was done chewing, I said, "I think I'll eat in here from now on."

"Ian's going to ask you questions tomorrow when you're weeding the spinach. Jeb's not making him-he wants to."

"Well, that's wonderful."

"You're pretty good with sarcasm. I thought the parasites-I mean the souls-didn't like negative humor. Just the happy stuff."

"They'd learn pretty quick in here, kid."

Jamie laughed and then took my hand. "You don't hate it here, do you? You're not miserable, are you?"

His big chocolate-colored eyes were troubled.

I pressed his hand to my face. "I'm fine," I told him, and at that moment, it was entirely the truth.

The Host

CHAPTER 26

Returned

Without ever actually agreeing to do it, I became the teacher Jeb wanted.

My "class" was informal. I answered questions every night after dinner. I found that as long as I was willing to do this, Ian and Doc and Jeb would leave me alone during the day so that I could concentrate on my chores. We always convened in the kitchen; I liked to help with the baking while I spoke. It gave me an excuse to pause before answering a difficult question, and somewhere to look when I didn't want to meet anyone's eyes. In my head, it seemed fitting; my words were sometimes upsetting, but my actions were always for their good.

I didn't want to admit that Jamie was right. Obviously, people didn't like me. They couldn't; I wasn't one of them. Jamie liked me, but that was just some strange chemical reaction that was far from rational. Jeb liked me, but Jeb was crazy. The rest of them didn't have either excuse.

No, they didn't like me. But things changed when I started talking.

The first time I noticed it was the morning after I answered Doc's questions at dinner; I was in the black bathing room, washing clothes with Trudy, Lily, and Jamie.

"Could you hand me the soap, please, Wanda?" Trudy asked from my left.

An electric current ran through my body at the sound of my name spoken by a female voice. Numbly, I passed her the soap and then rinsed the sting off my hand.

"Thank you," she added.

"You're welcome," I murmured. My voice cracked on the last syllable.

I passed Lily in the hall a day later on my way to find Jamie before dinner.

"Wanda," she said, nodding.

"Lily," I answered, my throat dry.

Soon it wasn't just Doc and Ian who asked questions at night. It surprised me who the most vocal were: exhausted Walter, his face a worrisome shade of gray, was endlessly interested in the Bats of the Singing World. Heath, usually silent, letting Trudy and Geoffrey talk for him, was outspoken during these evenings. He had some fascination with Fire World, and though it was one of my least favorite stories to tell, he peppered me with questions until he'd heard every detail I knew. Lily was concerned with the mechanics of things-she wanted to know about the ships that carried us from planet to planet, their pilots, their fuel. It was to Lily that I explained the cryotanks-something they had all seen but few understood the purpose of. Shy Wes, usually sitting close to Lily, asked not about other planets but about this one. How did it work? No money, no recompense for work-why did our souls' society not fall apart? I tried to explain that it was not so different from life in the caves. Did

we not all work without money and share in the products of our labor equally?

“Yes,” he interrupted me, shaking his head. “But it’s different here-Jeb has a gun for the slackers.”

Everyone looked at Jeb, who winked, and then they all laughed.

Jeb was in attendance about every other night. He didn’t participate; he just sat thoughtfully in the back of the room, occasionally grinning.

He was right about the entertainment factor; oddly, for we all had legs, the situation reminded me of the See Weeds. There had been a special title for entertainers there, like Comforter or Healer or Seeker. I was one of the Storytellers, so the transition to a teacher here on Earth had not been such a change, profession-wise, at least. It was much the same in the kitchen after dark, with the smell of smoke and baking bread filling the room. Everyone was stuck here, as good as planted. My stories were something new, something to think about besides the usual-the same endlessly repeated sweaty chores, the same thirty-five faces, the same memories of other faces that brought the same grief with them, the same fear and the same despair that had long been familiar companions. And so the kitchen was always full for my casual lessons. Only Sharon and Maggie were conspicuously and consistently absent.

I was in about my fourth week as an informal teacher when life in the caves changed again.

The kitchen was crowded, as was usual. Jeb and Doc were the only ones missing besides the normal two. On the counter next to me was a metal tray of dark, doughy rolls, swollen to twice the size they’d started at. They were ready for the oven, as soon as the current tray was done. Trudy checked every few minutes to make sure nothing was burning.

Often, I tried to get Jamie to talk for me when he knew the story well. I liked to watch the enthusiasm light up his face, and the way he used his hands to draw pictures in the air. Tonight, Heidi wanted to know more about the Dolphins, so I asked Jamie to answer her questions as well as he could.

The humans always spoke with sadness when they asked about our newest acquisition. They saw the Dolphins as mirrors of themselves in the first years of the occupation. Heidi’s dark eyes, disconcerting underneath her fringe of white-blond hair, were tight with sympathy as she asked her questions.

“They look more like huge dragonflies than fish, right, Wanda?” Jamie almost always asked for corroboration, though he never waited for my answer. “They’re all leathery, though, with three, four, or five sets of wings, depending on how old they are, right? So they kind of fly through the water-it’s lighter than water here, less dense. They have five, seven, or nine legs, depending on which gender they are, right, Wanda? They have three different genders. They have really long hands with tough, strong fingers that can build all kinds of things. They make cities under the water out of hard plants that grow there, kind of like trees but not really. They aren’t as far along as we are, right, Wanda? Because they’ve never made a spaceship or, like, telephones for communication. Humans were more advanced.”

Trudy pulled out the tray of baked rolls, and I bent to shove the next tray of risen dough into the hot, smoking hole. It took a little jostling and balancing to get it in just right.

As I sweated in front of the fire, I heard some kind of commotion outside the kitchen, echoing down the hall from somewhere else in the caves. It was hard, with all the random sound reverberations and strange acoustics, to judge distances here.

“Hey!” Jamie shouted behind me, and I turned just in time to see the back of his head as he sprinted out the door.

I straightened out of my crouch and took a step after him, my instinct to follow.

“Wait,” Ian said. “He’ll be back. Tell us more about the Dolphins.”

Ian was sitting on the counter beside the oven-a hot seat that I wouldn’t have chosen-which made him close enough to reach out and touch my wrist. My arm flinched away from the unexpected contact, but I stayed where I was.

“What’s going on out there?” I asked. I could still hear some kind of jabbering-I thought I could hear Jamie’s excited voice in the mix.

Ian shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe Jeb...” He shrugged again, as if he wasn’t interested enough to bother with figuring it out. Nonchalant, but there was a tension in his eyes I didn’t understand.

I was sure I would find out soon enough, so I shrugged, too, and started explaining the incredibly complex familial relationships of the Dolphins while I helped Trudy stack the warm bread in plastic containers.

“Six of the nine... grandparents, so to speak, traditionally stay with the larvae through their first stage of development while the three parents work with their six grandparents on a new wing of the family dwelling for the young to inhabit when they are mobile,” I was explaining, my eyes on the rolls in my hands rather than my

audience, as usual, when I heard the gasp from the back of the room. I continued with my next sentence automatically as I scanned the crowd to see who I'd upset. "The remaining three grandparents are customarily involved..."

No one was upset with me. Every head was turned in the same direction I was looking. My eyes skipped across the backs of their heads to the dark exit.

The first thing I saw was Jamie's slight figure, clinging to someone's arm. Someone so dirty, head to toe, that he almost blended right in with the cave wall. Someone too tall to be Jeb, and anyway, there was Jeb just behind Jamie's shoulder. Even from this distance, I could see that Jeb's eyes were narrowed and his nose wrinkled, as if he were anxious—a rare emotion for Jeb. Just as I could see that Jamie's face was bright with sheer joy.

"Here we go," Ian muttered beside me, his voice barely audible above the crackle of the flames.

The dirty man Jamie was still clinging to took a step forward. One of his hands rose slowly, like an involuntary reflex, and curled into a fist.

From the dirty figure came Jared's voice—flat, perfectly devoid of any inflection. "What is the meaning of this, Jeb?"

My throat closed. I tried to swallow and found the way blocked. I tried to breathe and was not successful. My heart drummed unevenly.

Jared! Melanie's exultant voice was loud, a silent shriek of elation. She burst into radiant life inside my head. Jared is home!

"Wanda is teaching us all about the universe," Jamie babbled eagerly, somehow not catching on to Jared's fury—he was too excited to pay attention, maybe.

"Wanda?" Jared repeated in a low voice that was almost a snarl.

There were more dirty figures in the hall behind him. I only noticed them when they echoed his snarl with an outraged muttering.

A blond head rose from the frozen audience. Paige lurched to her feet. "Andy!" she cried, and stumbled through the figures seated around her. One of the dirty men stepped around Jared and caught her as she nearly fell over Wes. "Oh, Andy!" she sobbed, the tone of her voice reminding me of Melanie's.

Paige's outburst changed the atmosphere momentarily. The silent crowd began to murmur, most of them rising to their feet. The sound was one of welcome now, as the majority went to greet the returned travelers. I tried to read the strange expressions on their faces as they forced grins onto their lips and peeked furtively back at me. I realized after a long, slow second—time seemed to be congealing around me, freezing me into place—that the expression I wondered at was guilt.

"It's going to be okay, Wanda," Ian murmured under his breath.

I glanced at him wildly, searching for that same guilt on his face. I didn't find it, only a defensive tightening around his vivid eyes as he stared at the newcomers.

"What the hell, people?" a new voice boomed.

Kyle—easily identifiable by his size despite the grime—was shoving his way around Jared and heading toward... me.

"You're letting it tell you its lies? Have you all gone crazy? Or did it lead the Seekers here? Are you all parasites now?"

Many heads fell forward, ashamed. Only a few kept their chins stiffly in the air, their shoulders squared: Lily, Trudy, Heath, Wes... and frail Walter, of all people.

"Easy, Kyle," Walter said in his feeble voice.

Kyle ignored him. He walked with deliberate steps toward me, his eyes, the same vibrant cobalt as his brother's, glowing with rage. I couldn't keep my eyes on him, though—they kept returning to Jared's dark shape, trying to read his camouflaged face.

Melanie's love flowed through me like a lake bursting through a dam, distracting me even more from the enraged barbarian closing the distance quickly.

Ian slid into my view, moving to place himself in front of me. I strained my neck to the side to keep my view of Jared clear.

"Things changed while you were gone, brother."

Kyle halted, face slack with disbelief. "Did the Seekers come, then, Ian?"

"She's not a danger to us."

Kyle ground his teeth together, and from the corner of my eye, I saw him reach for something in his pocket.

pocket.

This captured my attention at last. I cringed, expecting a weapon. The words stumbled off my tongue in a choked whisper. "Don't get in his way, Ian."

Ian didn't respond to my plea. I was surprised at the amount of anxiety this caused me, at how much I didn't want him hurt. It wasn't the instinctive protection, the bone-deep need to protect, that I felt for Jamie or even Jared. I just knew that Ian should not be harmed trying to protect me.

Kyle's hand came back up, and a light shone out of it. He pointed it at Ian's face, held it there for a moment. Ian didn't flinch from the light.

"So, what, then?" Kyle demanded, putting the flashlight back in his pocket. "You're not a parasite. How did it get to you?"

"Calm down, and we'll tell you all about it."

"No."

The contradiction did not come from Kyle but from behind him. I watched Jared walk slowly toward us through the silent spectators. As he got closer, Jamie still clinging to his hand with a bewildered expression, I could read his face better under the mask of dirt. Even Melanie, all but delirious with happiness at his safe return, could not misunderstand the expression of loathing there.

Jeb had wasted his efforts on the wrong people. It didn't matter that Trudy or Lily was speaking to me, that Ian would put himself between his brother and me, that Sharon and Maggie made no hostile move toward me. The only one who had to be convinced had now, finally, decided.

"I don't think anyone needs to calm down," Jared said through his teeth. "Jeb," he continued, not looking to see if the old man had followed him forward, "give me the gun."

The silence that followed his words was so tense I could feel the pressure inside my ears.

From the instant I could clearly see his face, I'd known it was over. I knew what I had to do now; Melanie was in agreement. As quietly as I could, I took a step to the side and slightly back, so that I would be clear of Ian. Then I closed my eyes.

"Don't happen to have it on me," Jeb drawled.

I peeked through narrowed eyes as Jared whirled to assess the truth of Jeb's claim.

Jared's breath whistled angrily through his nostrils. "Fine," he muttered. He took another step toward me. "It will be slower this way, though. It would be more humane if you were to find that gun fast."

"Please, Jared, let's talk," Ian said, planting his feet firmly as he spoke, already knowing the answer.

"I think there's been too much talk," Jared growled. "Jeb left this up to me, and I've made my decision."

Jeb cleared his throat noisily. Jared spun halfway around to look at him again.

"What?" he demanded. "You made the rule, Jeb."

"Well, now, that's true."

Jared turned back toward me. "Ian, get out of my way."

"Well, well, hold on a sec," Jeb went on. "If you recall, the rule was that whoever the body belonged to got to make the decision."

A vein in Jared's forehead pulsed visibly. "And?"

"Seems to me like there's someone here with a claim just as strong as yours. Mebbe stronger."

Jared stared straight ahead, processing this. After a slow moment, understanding furrowed his brow. He looked down at the boy still hanging on his arm.

All the joy had drained from Jamie's face, leaving it pale and horrorstruck.

"You can't, Jared," he choked. "You wouldn't. Wanda's good. She's my friend! And Mel! What about Mel? You can't kill Mel! Please! You have to -" He broke off, his expression agonized.

I closed my eyes again, trying to block the picture of the suffering boy from my mind. It was already almost impossible not to go to him. I locked my muscles in place, promising myself that it wouldn't help him if I moved now.

"So," Jeb said, his tone far too conversational for the moment, "you can see that Jamie's not in agreement. I figure he's got as much say as you do."

There was no answer for so long that I had to open my eyes again.

Jared was staring at Jamie's anguished, fearful face with his own kind of horror.

"How could you let this happen, Jeb?" he whispered.

"There is a need for some talk," Jeb answered. "Why don't you take a breather first, though? Maybe you'll feel more up to conversation after a bath."

Jared glared balefully at the old man, his eyes full of the shock and pain of the betrayed. I had only human

comparisons for such a look. Caesar and Brutus, Jesus and Judas.

The unbearable tension lasted through another long minute, and then Jared shook Jamie's fingers off his arm.

"Kyle," Jared barked, turning and stalking out of the room.

Kyle gave his brother a parting grimace and followed.

The other dirty members of the expedition went after them silently, Paige tucked securely under Andy's arm.

Most of the other humans, all those who had hung their heads in shame for admitting me into their society, shuffled out behind them. Only Jamie, Jeb, and Ian beside me, and Trudy, Geoffrey, Heath, Lily, Wes, and Walter stayed.

No one spoke until the echoes of their footsteps faded away into silence.

"Whew!" Ian breathed. "That was close. Nice thinking, Jeb."

"Inspiration in desperation. But we're not out of the woods yet," Jeb answered.

"Don't I know it! You didn't leave the gun anywhere obvious, did you?"

"Nope. I figured this might be comin' on soon."

"That's something, at least."

Jamie was trembling, alone in the space left by the exodus. Surrounded by those I had to count as friends, I felt able to walk to his side. He threw his arms around my waist, and I patted his back with shaky hands.

"It's okay," I lied in a whisper. "It's okay." I knew even a fool would hear the false note in my voice, and Jamie was not a fool.

"He won't hurt you," Jamie said thickly, struggling against the tears I could see in his eyes. "I won't let him."

"Shh," I murmured.

I was appalled-I could feel that my face was fixed in lines of horror. Jared was right-how could Jeb have let this happen? If they'd killed me the first day here, before Jamie had ever seen me... Or that first week, while Jared kept me isolated from everyone, before Jamie and I had become friends... Or if I had just kept my mouth shut about Melanie... It was too late for all that. My arms tightened around the child.

Melanie was just as aghast. My poor baby.

I told you it was a bad idea to tell him everything, I reminded her.

What will it do to him now, when we die?

It's going to be terrible. He'll be traumatized and scarred and devastated -

Melanie interrupted me. Enough. I know, I know. But what can we do?

Not die, I suppose.

Melanie and I thought about the likelihood of our survival and felt despair.

Ian thumped Jamie on the back-I could feel the motion reverberate through both our bodies.

"Don't agonize over it, kid," he said. "You're not in this alone."

"They're just shocked, that's all." I recognized Trudy's alto voice behind me. "Once we get a chance to explain, they'll see reason."

"See reason? Kyle?" someone hissed almost unintelligibly.

"We knew this was coming," Jeb muttered. "Just got to weather it. Storms pass."

"Maybe you ought to find that gun," Lily suggested calmly. "Tonight might be a long one. Wanda can stay with Heidi and me -"

"I think it might be better to keep her somewhere else," Ian disagreed. "Maybe in the southern tunnels? I'll keep an eye on her. Jeb, wanna lend me a hand?"

"They wouldn't look for her with me." Walter's offer was just a whisper.

Wes spoke over the last of Walter's words. "I'll tag along with you, Ian. There're six of them."

"No," I finally managed to choke out. "No. That's not right. You shouldn't fight with each other. You all belong here. You belong together. Not fighting, not because of me."

I pulled Jamie's arms from around my waist, holding his wrists when he tried to stop me.

"I just need a minute to myself," I told him, ignoring all the stares I could feel on my face. "I need to be alone." I turned my head to find Jeb. "And you should have a chance to discuss this without me listening. It's not fair-having to discuss strategy in front of the enemy."

"Now, don't be like that," Jeb said.

"Let me have some time to think, Jeb."

I stepped away from Jamie, dropping his hands. A hand fell on my shoulder, and I cringed.

It was just Ian. "It's not a good idea for you to be wandering around by yourself."

I leaned toward him and tried to pitch my voice so low that Jamie wouldn't hear me clearly. "Why prolong the inevitable? Will it get easier or harder for him?"

I thought I knew the answer to my last question. I ducked under Ian's hand and broke into a run, sprinting for the exit.

"Wanda!" Jamie called after me.

Someone quickly shushed him. There were no footsteps behind me. They must have seen the wisdom of letting me go.

The hall was dark and deserted. If I was lucky, I'd be able to cut around the edge of the big garden plaza in the dark with no one the wiser.

In all my time here, the one thing I'd never found was the way out. It seemed as if I'd been down every tunnel time and again, and I'd never seen an opening I hadn't eventually explored in search of one thing or another. I thought about it now as I crept through the deepest shadowed corners of the big cave. Where could the exit be? And I thought about this: if I could figure that puzzle out, would I be able to leave?

I couldn't think of anything worth leaving for—certainly not the desert waiting outside, but also not the Seeker, not the Healer, not my Comforter, not my life before, which had left such a shallow impression on me. Everything that really mattered was with me here. Jamie. Though he would kill me, Jared. I couldn't imagine walking away from either of them.

And Jeb. Ian. I had friends now. Doc, Trudy, Lily, Wes, Walter, Heath. Strange humans who could overlook what I was and see something they didn't have to kill. Maybe it was just curiosity, but regardless of that, they were willing to side with me against the rest of their tight-knit family of survivors. I shook my head in wonder as I traced the rough rock with my hands.

I could hear others in the cavern, on the far side from me. I didn't pause; they could not see me here, and I'd just found the crevice I was looking for.

After all, there was really only one place for me to go. Even if I could somehow have guessed the way to escape, I would still have gone this way. I crept into the blackest darkness imaginable and hurried along my way.

The Host

CHAPTER 27

Undecided

I felt my way back to my prison hole.

It had been weeks and weeks since I'd been down this particular corridor; I hadn't been back since the morning after Jared had left and Jeb had set me free. It seemed to me that while I lived and Jared was in the caves, this must be where I belonged.

There was no dim light to greet me now. I was fairly sure I was in the last leg—the turns and twists were still vaguely familiar. I let my left hand drag against the wall as low as I could reach, feeling for the opening as I crept forward. I wasn't decided on crawling back inside the cramped hole, but at least it would give me a reference point, letting me know that I was where I meant to be.

As it happened, I didn't have the option of inhabiting my cell again.

In the same moment that my fingers brushed the rough edge at the top of the hole, my foot hit an obstacle and I stumbled, falling to my knees. I threw my hands out to catch myself, and they landed with a crunch and a crackle, breaking through something that wasn't rock and didn't belong here.

The sound startled me; the unexpected object frightened me. Perhaps I'd made a wrong turn and wasn't anywhere near my hole. Perhaps I was in someone's living space. I ran through the memory of my recent journey in my head, wondering how I could have gotten so turned about. Meanwhile, I listened for some reaction to my crashing fall, holding absolutely still in the darkness.

There was nothing—no reaction, no sound. It was only dark and stuffy and humid, as it always was, and so silent that I knew I must be alone.

Carefully, trying to make as little noise as possible, I took stock of my surroundings.

My hands were stuck in something. I pulled them free, tracing the contours of what felt like a cardboard box—a cardboard box with a sheet of thin, crackly plastic on top that my hands had fallen through. I felt around inside the box and found a layer of more crackly plastic—small rectangles that made a lot of noise when I handled them. I retreated quickly, afraid of drawing attention to myself.

I remembered that I'd thought I'd found the top of the hole. I searched to my left and found more stacks of cardboard squares on that side. I tried to find the top of the stack and had to stand in order to do so—it was as high as my head. I searched until I found the wall, and then the hole, exactly where I'd thought it was. I tried to climb in to ascertain if it really was the same place—one second on that bowed floor and I would know it for certain—but I could not get any farther than the opening. It, too, was crammed full of boxes.

Stymied, I explored with my hands, moving back out into the hall. I found I could go no deeper down the passageway; it was entirely filled with the mysterious cardboard squares.

As I hunted along the floor, trying to understand, I found something different from the crowd of boxes. It was rough fabric, like burlap, a sack full of something heavy that shifted with a quiet hissing sound when I nudged it. I kneaded the sack with my hands, less alarmed by the low hiss than by the plastic crackle—it seemed unlikely that this sound would alert anyone to my presence.

Suddenly, it all came clear. It was the smell that did it. As I played with the sand-like material inside the bag, I got an unexpected whiff of a familiar scent. It took me back to my bare kitchen in San Diego, to the low cupboard on the left side of the sink. In my head I could see so clearly the bag of uncooked rice, the plastic measuring cup I used to dole it out, the rows of canned food behind it...

Once I realized that I was touching a bag of rice, I understood. I was in the right place after all. Hadn't Jeb said they used this place for storage? And hadn't Jared just returned from a long raid? Now everything the raiders had stolen in the weeks they'd been gone was dumped in this out-of-the-way place until it could be used.

Many thoughts ran through my head at once.

First, I realized that I was surrounded by food. Not just rough bread and weak onion soup, but food. Somewhere in this stack, there could be peanut butter. Chocolate chip cookies. Potato chips. Cheetos.

Even as I imagined finding these things, tasting them again, being full for the first time since I'd left civilization, I felt guilty for thinking of it. Jared hadn't risked his life and spent weeks hiding and stealing to feed me. This food was for others.

I also worried that perhaps this wasn't the entire haul. What if they had more boxes to stow? Would Jared and Kyle be the ones to bring them? It didn't take any imagination at all to picture the scene that would result if they found me here.

But wasn't that why I was here? Wasn't that exactly what I'd needed to be alone to think about?

I slouched against the wall. The rice bag made a decent pillow. I closed my eyes—unnecessary in the inky darkness—and settled in for a consultation.

Okay, Mel. What now?

I was glad to find that she was still awake and alert. Opposition brought out her strength. It was only when things were going well that she drifted away.

Priorities, she decided. What's most important to us? Staying alive? Or Jamie?

She knew the answer. Jamie, I affirmed, sighing out loud. The sound of my breath whispered back from the black walls.

Agreed. We could probably last awhile if we let Jeb and Ian protect us. Will that help him?

Maybe. Would he be more hurt if we just gave up? Or if we let this drag on, only to have it end badly, which seems inevitable?

She didn't like that. I could feel her scrambling around, searching for alternatives.

Try to escape? I suggested.

Unlikely, she decided. Besides, what would we do out there? What would we tell them?

We imagined it together—how would I explain my months of absence? I could lie, make up some alternative story, or say I didn't remember. But I thought of the Seeker's skeptical face, her bulging eyes bright with suspicion, and knew my inept attempts at subterfuge would fail.

They'd think I took over, Melanie agreed. Then they'd take you out and put her in.

I squirmed, as if a new position on the rock floor would take me further away from the idea, and shuddered. Then I followed the thought to its conclusion. She'd tell them about this place, and the Seekers would come.

The horror washed through us.

Right, I continued. So escape is out.

Right, she whispered, emotion making her thought unstable.

So the decision is... quick or slow. Which hurts him less?

It seemed that as long as I focused on practicalities I could keep at least my side of the discussion numbly businesslike. Melanie tried to mimic my effort.

I'm not sure. On the one hand, logically, the longer the three of us are together, the harder our... separation would be for him. Then again, if we didn't fight, if we just gave up... he wouldn't like that. He'd feel betrayed by us.

I looked at both sides she'd presented, trying to be rational about it.

So... quick, but we have to do our best not to die?

Go down fighting, she affirmed grimly.

Fighting. Fabulous. I tried to imagine that-meeting violence with violence. Raising my hand to strike someone. I could form the words but not the mental picture.

You can do it, she encouraged. I'll help you.

Thanks, but no thanks. There has to be some other way.

I don't get you, Wanda. You've given up on your species entirely, you're ready to die for my brother, you're in love with the man I love who is going to kill us, and yet you won't let go of customs that are entirely impractical here.

I am who I am, Mel. I can't change that, though everything else may change. You hold on to yourself; allow me to do the same.

But if we're going to -

She would have continued to argue with me, but we were interrupted. A scuffing sound, shoe against rock, echoed from somewhere back down the corridor.

I froze-every function of my body arrested but my heart, and even that faltered jaggedly-and listened. I didn't have long to hope that I'd just imagined the sound. Within seconds, I could hear more quiet footsteps coming this way.

Melanie kept her cool, whereas I was lost to panic.

Get on your feet, she ordered.

Why?

You won't fight, but you can run. You have to try something-for Jamie.

I started breathing again, keeping it quiet and shallow. Slowly, I rolled forward till I was on the balls of my feet. Adrenaline coursed through my muscles, making them tingle and flex. I would be faster than most who would try to catch me, but where would I run to?

"Wanda?" someone whispered quietly. "Wanda? Are you here? It's me."

His voice broke, and I knew him.

"Jamie!" I rasped. "What are you doing? I told you I needed to be alone."

Relief was plain in his voice, which he now raised from the whisper. "Everybody is looking for you. Well, you know, Trudy and Lily and Wes-that everybody. Only we're not supposed to let anyone know that's what we're doing. No one is supposed to guess that you're missing. Jeb's got his gun again. Ian's with Doc. When Doc's free, he'll talk to Jared and Kyle. Everybody listens to Doc. So you don't have to hide. Everybody's busy, and you're probably tired...."

As Jamie explained, he continued forward until his fingers found my arm, and then my hand.

"I'm not really hiding, Jamie. I told you I had to think."

"You could think with Jeb there, right?"

"Where do you want me to go? Back to Jared's room? This is where I'm supposed to be."

"Not anymore." The familiar stubborn edge entered his voice.

"Why is everyone so busy?" I asked to distract him. "What's Doc doing?"

My attempt was unsuccessful; he didn't answer.

After a minute of silence, I touched his cheek. "Look, you should be with Jeb. Tell the others to stop looking for me. I'll just hang out here for a while."

"You can't sleep here."

"I have before."

I felt his head shake in my hand.

"I'll go get mats and pillows, at least."

"I don't need more than one."

I don't need more than one.

"I'm not staying with Jared while he's being such a jerk."

I groaned internally. "Then you stay with Jeb and his snores. You belong with them, not with me."

"I belong wherever I want to be."

The threat of Kyle finding me here was heavy on my mind. But that argument would only make Jamie feel responsible for protecting me.

"Fine, but you have to get Jeb's permission."

"Later. I'm not going to bug Jeb tonight."

"What is Jeb doing?"

Jamie didn't answer. It was only at that point I realized he had deliberately not answered my question the first time. There was something he didn't want to tell me. Maybe the others were busy trying to find me, too. Maybe Jared's homecoming had returned them to their original opinion about me. It had seemed that way in the kitchen, when they'd hung their heads and eyed me with furtive guilt.

"What's going on, Jamie?" I pressed.

"I'm not supposed to tell you," he muttered. "And I'm not going to." His arms wrapped tightly around my waist, and his face pressed against my shoulder. "Everything is going to be all right," he promised me, his voice thick.

I patted his back and ran my fingers through his tangled mane. "Okay," I said, agreeing to accept his silence. After all, I had my secrets, too, didn't I? "Don't be upset, Jamie. Whatever it is, it will all work out for the best. You're going to be fine." As I said the words, I willed them to be true.

"I don't know what to hope for," he whispered.

As I stared into the dark at nothing in particular, trying to understand what he wouldn't say, a faint glow caught my eye at the far end of the hallway-dim but conspicuous in the black cave.

"Shhh," I breathed. "Someone is coming. Quick, hide behind the boxes."

Jamie's head snapped up, toward the yellow light that was getting brighter by the second. I listened for the accompanying footsteps but heard nothing.

"I'm not going to hide," he breathed. "Get behind me, Wanda."

"No!"

"Jamie!" Jared shouted. "I know you're back here!"

My legs felt hollow, numb. Did it have to be Jared? It would be so much easier for Jamie if Kyle were the one to kill me.

"Go away!" Jamie shouted back.

The yellow light sped up and turned into a circle on the far wall.

Jared stalked around the corner, the flashlight in his hand sweeping back and forth across the rock floor. He was clean again, wearing a faded red shirt I recognized-it had hung in the room where I'd lived for weeks and so was a familiar sight. His face was also familiar-it wore exactly the same expression it had since the first moment I'd shown up here.

The beam of the flashlight hit my face and blinded me; I knew the light reflected brilliantly off the silver behind my eyes, because I felt Jamie jump-just a little start, and then he set himself more firmly than before.

"Get away from it!" Jared roared.

"Shut up!" Jamie yelled back. "You don't know her! Leave her alone!"

He clung to me while I tried to unlock his hands.

Jared came on like a charging bull. He grabbed the back of Jamie's shirt with one hand and yanked him away from me. He held on to his handful of fabric, shaking the boy while he yelled.

"You're being an idiot! Can't you see how it's using you?"

Instinctively, I shoved myself into the tight space between them. As I'd intended, my advance made him drop Jamie. I didn't want or need what else happened-the way his familiar smell assaulted my senses, the way the contours of his chest felt under my hands.

"Leave Jamie alone," I said, wishing for once that I could be more like Melanie wanted me to be-that my hands could be hard now, that my voice could be strong.

He snatched my wrists in one hand and used this leverage to hurl me away from him, into the wall. The impact caught me by surprise, knocked the breath out of me. I rebounded off the stone wall to the floor, landing in the boxes again, making another crinkly crash as I shredded through more cellophane.

The pulse thudded in my head as I lay awkwardly bent over the boxes, and for a moment, I saw strange lights pass in front of my eyes.

“Coward!” Jamie screamed at Jared. “She wouldn’t hurt you to save her own life! Why can’t you leave her alone?”

I heard the boxes shifting and felt Jamie’s hands on my arm. “Wanda? Are you okay, Wanda?”

“Fine,” I huffed, ignoring the throbbing in my head. I could see his anxious face hovering over me in the glow of the flashlight, which Jared must have dropped. “You should go now, Jamie,” I whispered. “Run.”

Jamie shook his head fiercely.

“Stay away from it!” Jared bellowed.

I watched as Jared grabbed Jamie’s shoulders and yanked the boy up from his crouch. The boxes this displaced fell on me like a small avalanche. I rolled away, covering my head with my arms. A heavy one caught me right between the shoulder blades, and I cried out in pain.

“Stop hurting her!” Jamie howled.

There was a sharp crack, and someone gasped.

I struggled to pull myself out from under the heavy carton, rising up on my elbows dizzily.

Jared had one hand over his nose, and something dark was oozing down over his lips. His eyes were wide with surprise. Jamie stood in front of him with both hands clenched into fists, a furious scowl on his face.

Jamie’s scowl melted slowly while Jared stared at him in shock. Hurt took its place—hurt and a betrayal so deep that it rivaled Jared’s expression in the kitchen.

“You aren’t the man I thought you were,” Jamie whispered. He looked at Jared as though Jared were very far away, as if there were a wall between them and Jamie was utterly isolated on his side.

Jamie’s eyes started to swim, and he turned his head, ashamed of showing weakness in front of Jared. He walked away with quick, jerky movements.

We tried, Melanie thought sadly. Her heart ached after the child, even as she longed for me to return my eyes to the man. I gave her what she wanted.

Jared wasn’t looking at me. He was staring at the blackness into which Jamie had disappeared, his hand still covering his nose.

“Aw, damn it!” he suddenly shouted. “Jamie! Get back here!”

There was no answer.

Jared threw one bleak glance in my direction—I cringed away, though his fury seemed to have faded—then scooped up the flashlight and stomped after Jamie, kicking a box out of his way.

“I’m sorry, okay? Don’t cry, kid!” He called out more angry apologies as he turned the corner and left me lying in the darkness.

For a long moment, it was all I could do to breathe. I concentrated on the air flowing in, then out, then in. After I felt I had that part mastered, I worked on getting up off the floor. It took a few seconds to remember how to move my legs, and even then they were shaky and threatened to collapse under me, so I sat against the wall again, sliding over till I found my rice-filled pillow. I slumped there and took stock of my condition.

Nothing was broken—except maybe Jared’s nose. I shook my head slowly. Jamie and Jared should not be fighting. I was causing them so much turmoil and unhappiness. I sighed and went back to my assessment. There was a vast sore spot in the center of my back, and the side of my face felt raw and moist where it had hit the wall. It stung when I touched it and left warm fluid on my fingers. That was the worst of it, though. The other bruises and scrapes were mild.

As I realized that, I was unexpectedly overwhelmed by relief.

I was alive. Jared had had his chance to kill me and he had not used it. He’d gone after Jamie instead, to make things right between them. So whatever damage I was doing to their relationship, it was probably not irreparable.

It had been a long day—the day had already been long even before Jared and the others had shown up, and that seemed like eons ago. I closed my eyes where I was and fell asleep on the rice.

The Host

CHAPTER 28

Unenlightened

It was disorienting to wake in the absolute dark. In the past months, I’d gotten used to having the sun tell

me it was morning. At first I thought it must still be night, but then, feeling the sting of my face and the ache of my back, I remembered where I was.

Beside me, I could hear the sound of quiet, even breathing; it did not frighten me, because it was the most familiar of sounds here. I was not surprised that Jamie had crept back and slept beside me last night.

Maybe it was the change in my breathing that woke him; maybe it was just that our schedules had become synchronized. But seconds after I was conscious, he gave a little gasp.

“Wanda?” he whispered.

“I’m right here.”

He sighed in relief.

“It’s really dark here,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You think it’s breakfast time yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m hungry. Let’s go see.”

I didn’t answer him.

He interpreted my silence correctly, as the balk it was. “You don’t have to hide out here, Wanda,” he said earnestly, after waiting a moment for me to speak. “I talked to Jared last night. He’s going to stop picking on you-he promised.”

I almost smiled. Picking on me.

“Will you come with me?” Jamie pressed. His hand found mine.

“Is that what you really want me to do?” I asked in a low voice.

“Yes. Everything will be the same as it was before.”

Mel? Is this best?

I don’t know. She was torn. She knew she couldn’t be objective; she wanted to see Jared.

That’s crazy, you know.

Not as crazy as the fact that you want to see him, too.

“Fine, Jamie,” I agreed. “But don’t get upset when it’s not the same as before, okay? If things get ugly... Well, just don’t be surprised.”

“It’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

I let him lead the way out of the dark, towing me by the hand he still held. I braced myself as we entered the big garden cavern; I couldn’t be sure of anyone’s reaction to me today. Who knew what had been said as I slept?

But the garden was empty, though the sun was bright in the morning sky. It reflected off the hundreds of mirrors, momentarily blinding me.

Jamie was not interested in the vacant cave. His eyes were on my face, and he sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as the light touched my cheek.

“Oh,” he gasped. “Are you okay? Does that hurt bad?”

I touched my face lightly. The skin felt rough-grit crusted in the blood. It throbbed where my fingers brushed.

“It’s fine,” I whispered; the empty cavern made me wary-I didn’t want to speak too loudly. “Where is everybody?”

Jamie shrugged, his eyes still tight as they surveyed my face. “Busy, I guess.” He didn’t lower his voice.

This reminded me of last night, of the secret he wouldn’t tell me. My eyebrows pulled together.

What do you think he’s not telling us?

You know what I know, Wanda.

You’re human. Aren’t you supposed to have intuition or something?

Intuition? My intuition tells me that we don’t know this place as well as we thought we did, Melanie said.

We pondered the ominous sound of that.

It was almost a relief to hear the normal noises of mealtime coming from the kitchen corridor. I didn’t particularly want to see anyone-besides the sick yearning to see Jared, of course-but the unpopulated tunnels, combined with the knowledge that something was being kept from me, made me edgy.

The kitchen was not even half full-an oddity for this time of the morning. But I barely noticed that, because the smell coming from the banked stone oven overruled every other thought.

“Oooh,” Jamie moaned. “Eggs!”

Jamie pulled me faster now, and I had no reluctance to keep pace with him. We hurried, stomachs growling, to the counter by the oven where Lucina, the mother, stood with a plastic ladle in her hand. Breakfast was usually serve-yourself, but then breakfast was also usually tough bread rolls.

She looked only at the boy as she spoke. "They tasted better an hour ago."

"They'll taste just fine now," Jamie countered enthusiastically. "Has everyone eaten?"

"Pretty much. I think they took a tray down to Doc and the rest..." Lucina trailed off, and her eyes flickered to me for the first time; Jamie's eyes did the same. I didn't understand the expression that crossed Lucina's features-it disappeared too quickly, replaced by something else as she appraised the new marks on my face.

"How much is left?" Jamie asked. His eagerness sounded a trifle forced now.

Lucina turned and bent, tugging a metal pan off the hot stones in the bottom of the oven with the bowl of the ladle. "How much do you want, Jamie? There's plenty," she told him without turning.

"Pretend I'm Kyle," he said with a laugh.

"A Kyle-sized portion it is," Lucina said, but when she smiled, her eyes were unhappy.

She filled one of the soup bowls to overflowing with slightly rubbery scrambled eggs, stood up, and handed it to Jamie.

She eyed me again, and I understood what this look was for.

"Let's sit over there, Jamie," I said, nudging him away from the counter.

He stared in amazement. "Don't you want any?"

"No, I'm -" I was about to say "fine" again, when my stomach gurgled disobediently.

"Wanda?" He looked at me, then back at Lucina, who had her arms folded across her chest.

"I'll just have bread," I muttered, trying to shove him away.

"No. Lucina, what's the problem?" He looked at her expectantly. She didn't move. "If you're done here, I'll take over," he suggested, his eyes narrowing and his mouth setting in a stubborn line.

Lucina shrugged and set the ladle on the stone counter. She walked away slowly, not looking at me again.

"Jamie," I muttered urgently under my breath. "This food isn't meant for me. Jared and the others weren't risking their lives so that I could have eggs for breakfast. Bread is fine."

"Don't be stupid, Wanda," Jamie said. "You live here now, just like the rest of us. Nobody minds it when you wash their clothes or bake their bread. Besides, these eggs aren't going to last much longer. If you don't eat them, they'll get thrown out."

I felt all the eyes in the room boring into my back.

"That might be preferable to some," I said even more quietly. No one but Jamie could possibly hear.

"Forget that," Jamie growled. He hopped over the counter and filled another bowl with eggs, which he then shoved at me. "You're going to eat every bite," he told me resolutely.

I looked at the bowl. My mouth watered. I pushed the eggs a few inches away from me and then folded my arms.

Jamie frowned. "Fine," he said, and shoved his own bowl across the counter. "You don't eat, I don't eat." His stomach grumbled audibly. He folded his arms across his chest.

We stared at each other for two long minutes, both our stomachs rumbling as we inhaled the smell of the eggs. Every now and then, he would peek down at the food out of the corner of his eye. That's what beat me-the longing look in his eyes.

"Fine," I huffed. I slid his bowl back to him and then retrieved my own. He waited until I took the first bite to touch his. I stifled a moan as the taste registered on my tongue. I knew the cooled, rubbery eggs weren't the best thing I'd ever tasted, but that's how it felt. This body lived for the present.

Jamie had a similar reaction. And then he started shoveling the food into his mouth so fast it seemed he didn't have time to breathe. I watched him to make sure he didn't choke.

I ate more slowly, hoping that I'd be able to convince him to eat some of mine when he was done.

That was when, with our minor standoff over and my stomach satisfied, I finally noticed the atmosphere in the kitchen.

I would have expected, with the excitement of eggs for breakfast after months of monotony, more of a feeling of celebration. But the air was somber, the conversations all whispered. Was this a reaction to the scene last night? I scanned the room, trying to understand.

People were looking at me, a few here and there, but they weren't the only ones talking in serious whispers, and the others paid me no mind at all. Besides, none of them seemed angry or guilty or tense or any of

the other emotions I was expecting.

No, they were sad. Despair was etched on every face in the room.

Sharon was the last person I noticed, eating in a distant corner, keeping to herself as usual. She was so composed as she mechanically ate her breakfast that at first I didn't notice the tears dripping in streaks down her face. They fell into her food, but she ate as if she were beyond noticing.

"Is something wrong with Doc?" I whispered to Jamie, suddenly afraid. I wondered if I was being paranoid-maybe this had nothing to do with me. The sadness in the room seemed to be part of some other human drama from which I'd been excluded. Was this what was keeping everyone busy? Had there been an accident?

Jamie looked at Sharon and sighed before he answered me. "No, Doc's fine."

"Aunt Maggie? Is she hurt?"

He shook his head.

"Where's Walter?" I demanded, still whispering. I felt a gnawing anxiety as I thought of harm befalling one of my companions here, even those who hated me.

"I don't know. He's fine, I'm sure."

I realized now that Jamie was just as sad as everyone else here.

"What's wrong, Jamie? Why are you upset?"

Jamie looked down at his eggs, eating them slowly and deliberately now, and did not answer me.

He finished in silence. I tried to pass him what was left in my bowl, but he glowered so fiercely that I took it back and ate the rest without any more resistance.

We added our bowls to the big plastic bin of dirty dishes. It was full, so I took it from the counter. I wasn't sure what was going on in the caves today, but dishes ought to be a safe occupation.

Jamie came along beside me, his eyes alert. I didn't like that. I wouldn't allow him to act as my bodyguard, if the necessity arose. But then, as we made our way around the edge of the big field, my regular bodyguard found me, so it became a moot point.

Ian was filthy; light brown dust covered him from head to toe, darker where it was wet with his sweat. The brown streaks smeared across his face did not disguise the exhaustion there. I was not surprised to see that he was just as down as everyone else. But the dust did make me curious. It was not the purple black dust inside the caves. Ian had been outside this morning.

"There you are," he murmured when he saw us. He was walking swiftly, his long legs cutting the distance with anxious strides. When he reached us, he did not slow, but rather caught me under the elbow and hurried me forward. "Let's duck in here for a minute."

He pulled me into the narrow tunnel mouth that led toward the eastern field, where the corn was almost ripe. He did not lead me far, just into the darkness where we were invisible from the big room. I felt Jamie's hand rest lightly on my other arm.

After half a minute, deep voices echoed through the big cavern. They were not boisterous-they were somber, as depressed as any of the faces I'd read this morning. The voices passed us, close by the crack where we hid, and Ian's hand tensed on my elbow, his fingers pressing into the soft spots above the bone. I recognized Jared's voice, and Kyle's. Melanie strained against my control, and my control was tenuous anyway. We both wanted to see Jared's face. It was a good thing Ian held us back.

". . . don't know why we let him keep trying. When it's over, it's over," Jared was saying.

"He really thought he had it this time. He was so sure.... Oh, well. It will be worth all this if he figures it out someday," Kyle disagreed.

"If." Jared snorted. "I guess it's a good thing we found that brandy. Doc's going to blow through the whole crate by nightfall at the rate he's going."

"He'll pass out soon enough," Kyle said, his voice beginning to fade in the distance. "I wish Sharon would..." And then I couldn't make out any more.

Ian waited until the voices faded completely, and then a few minutes more, before he finally released my arm.

"Jared promised," Jamie muttered to him.

"Yeah, but Kyle didn't," Ian answered.

They walked back out into the light. I followed slowly behind them, not sure what I was feeling.

Ian noticed for the first time what I carried. "No dishes now," he told me. "Let's give them a chance to clean up and move on."

I thought about asking him why he was dirty, but probably, like Jamie, he would refuse to answer. I turned

I thought about asking him why he was dirty, but probably, like Jamie, he would refuse to answer. I turned to stare at the tunnel that led toward the rivers, speculating.

Ian made an angry sound.

I looked back at him, frightened, and then realized what had upset him—he'd only just seen my face.

He raised his hand as if to lift my chin, but I flinched and he dropped it.

"That makes me so sick," he said, and his voice truly did sound as if he were nauseated. "And worse, knowing that if I hadn't stayed behind, I might have been the one to do it..."

I shook my head at him. "It's nothing, Ian."

"I don't agree with that," he muttered, and then he spoke to Jamie. "You probably ought to get to school. It's better that we get everything back to normal as soon as possible."

Jamie groaned. "Sharon will be a nightmare today."

Ian grinned. "Time to take one for the team, kid. I don't envy you."

Jamie sighed and kicked the dirt. "Keep an eye on Wanda."

"Will do."

Jamie shuffled away, casting glances back at us every few minutes until he disappeared into another tunnel.

"Here, give me those," Ian said, pulling the bin of dishes from me before I could respond.

"They weren't too heavy for me," I told him.

He grinned again. "I feel silly standing here with my arms empty while you lug these around. Chalk it up to gallantry. C'mon—let's go relax somewhere out of the way until the coast is clear."

His words troubled me, and I followed him in silence. Why should gallantry apply to me?

He walked all the way to the cornfield, and then into the cornfield, stepping in the low part of the furrow, between the stalks. I trailed behind him until he stopped, somewhere in the middle of the field, set the dishes aside, and sprawled out on the dirt.

"Well, this is out of the way," I said as I settled to the ground beside him, crossing my legs. "But shouldn't we be working?"

"You work too hard, Wanda. You're the only one who never takes a day off."

"It gives me something to do," I mumbled.

"Everyone is taking a break today, so you might as well."

I looked at him curiously. The light from the mirrors threw double shadows through the cornstalks that crisscrossed over him like zebra stripes. Under the lines and the dirt, his pale face was weary.

"You look like you've been working."

His eyes tightened. "But I'm resting now."

"Jamie won't tell me what's going on," I murmured.

"No. And neither will I." He sighed. "It's nothing you want to know anyway."

I stared at the ground, at the dark purple and brown dirt, as my stomach twisted and rolled. I could think of nothing worse than not knowing, but maybe I was just lacking in imagination.

"It's not really fair," Ian said after a silent moment, "seeing as I won't answer your question, but do you mind if I ask you one?"

I welcomed the distraction. "Go ahead."

He didn't speak at once, so I looked up to find the reason for his hesitation. He was staring down now, looking at the dirt streaked across the backs of his hands.

"I know you're not a liar. I know that now," he said quietly. "I'll believe you, whatever your answer is."

I waited again while he continued to stare at the dirt on his skin.

"I didn't buy Jeb's story before, but he and Doc are pretty convinced... Wanda?" he asked, looking up at me. "Is she still in there with you? The girl whose body you wear?"

This was not just my secret anymore—both Jamie and Jeb knew the truth. Neither was it the secret that really mattered. At any rate, I trusted Ian not to go blabbing to anyone who would kill me over it. "Yes," I told him. "Melanie is still here."

He nodded slowly. "What is it like? For you? For her?"

"It's... frustrating, for us both. At first I would have given anything to have her disappear the way she should have. But now I... I've gotten used to her." I smiled wryly. "Sometimes it's nice to have the company. It's harder for her. She's like a prisoner in many ways. Locked away in my head. She prefers that captivity to disappearing, though."

"I didn't know there was a choice."

"There wasn't in the beginning. It wasn't until your kind discovered what was happening that any

resistance started. That seems to be the key-knowing what's going to happen. The humans who were taken by surprise didn't fight back."

"So if I were caught?"

I appraised his fierce expression-the fire in his brilliant eyes.

"I doubt you would disappear. Things have changed, though. When they catch full-grown humans now, they don't offer them as hosts. Too many problems." I half smiled again. "Problems like me. Going soft, getting sympathetic to my host, losing my way..."

He thought about that for a long time, sometimes looking at my face, sometimes at the cornstalks, sometimes at nothing at all.

"What would they do with me, then, if they caught me now?" he finally asked.

"They'd still do an insertion, I think. Trying to get information. Probably they'd put a Seeker in you."

He shuddered.

"But they wouldn't keep you as a host. Whether they found the information or not, you would be... discarded." The word was hard to say. The idea sickened me. Odd-it was usually the human things that made me sick. But I'd never looked at the situation from the body's perspective before; no other planet had forced me to. A body that didn't function right was quickly and painlessly disposed of because it was as useless as a car that could not run. What was the point of keeping it around? There were conditions of the mind, too, that made a body unusable: dangerous mental addictions, malevolent yearnings, things that could not be healed and made the body unsafe to others. Or, of course, a mind with a will too strong to be erased. An anomaly localized on this planet.

I had never seen the ugliness of treating an unconquerable spirit as a defect as clearly as I did now, looking into Ian's eyes.

"And if they caught you?" he asked.

"If they realized who I was... if anyone is still looking for me..." I thought of my Seeker and shuddered as he had. "They would take me out and put me in another host. Someone young, tractable. They would hope that I would be able to be myself again. Maybe they would ship me off-planet-get me away from the bad influences."

"Would you be yourself again?"

I met his gaze. "I am myself. I haven't lost myself to Melanie. I would feel the same as I do now, even as a Bear or a Flower."

"They wouldn't discard you?"

"Not a soul. We have no capital punishment for our kind. Or any punishment, really. Whatever they did, it would be to save me. I used to think there was no need for any other way, but now I have myself as proof against that theory. It would probably be right to discard me. I'm a traitor, aren't I?"

Ian pursed his lips. "More of an expatriate, I'd say. You haven't turned on them; you've just left their society."

We were quiet again. I wanted to believe what he said was true. I considered the word expatriate, trying to convince myself that I was nothing worse.

Ian exhaled loudly enough to make me jump. "When Doc sobers up, we'll get him to take a look at your face." He reached over and put his hand under my chin; this time I didn't flinch. He turned my head to the side so he could examine the wound.

"It's not important. I'm sure it looks worse than it is."

"I hope so-it looks awful." He sighed and then stretched. "I suppose we've hidden long enough that Kyle's clean and unconscious. Want some help with the dishes?"

Ian wouldn't let me wash the dishes in the stream the way I usually did. He insisted that we go into the black bathing room, where I would be invisible. I scrubbed dishes in the shallow end of the dark pool, while he cleaned off the filth left behind by his mystery labors. Then he helped me with the last of the dirty bowls.

When we were done, he escorted me back to the kitchen, which was starting to fill up with the lunch crowd. More perishables were on the menu: soft white bread slices, slabs of sharp cheddar cheese, circles of lush pink bologna. People were scarfing down the delicacies with abandon, though the despair was still perceptible in the slump of their shoulders, in the absence of smiles or laughter.

Jamie was waiting for me at our usual counter. Two double stacks of sandwiches sat in front of him, but he wasn't eating. His arms were folded as he waited for me. Ian eyed his expression curiously but left to get his own food without asking.

I rolled my eyes at Jamie's stubbornness and took a bite. Jamie dug in as soon as I was chewing. Ian was back quickly, and we all ate in silence. The food tasted so good it was hard to imagine a reason for conversation-or anything else that would empty our mouths.

I stopped at two, but Jamie and Ian ate until they were groaning in pain. Ian looked as though he was about to collapse. His eyes struggled to stay open.

"Get back to school, kid," he said to Jamie.

Jamie appraised him. "Maybe I should take over...."

"Go to school," I told him quickly. I wanted Jamie a safe distance from me today.

"I'll see you later, okay? Don't worry about... about anything."

"Sure." A one-word lie wasn't quite so obvious. Or maybe I was just being sarcastic again.

Once Jamie was gone, I turned on the somnolent Ian. "Go get some rest. I'll be fine-I'll stay someplace inconspicuous. Middle of a cornfield or something."

"Where did you sleep last night?" he asked, his eyes surprisingly sharp under his half-closed lids.

"Why?"

"I can sleep there now, and you can be inconspicuous beside me."

We were just murmuring, barely over a whisper now. No one paid us any attention.

"You can't watch me every second."

"Wanna bet?"

I shrugged, giving up. "I was back at the... the hole. Where I was kept in the beginning."

Ian frowned; he didn't like that. But he got up and led the way back to the storage corridor. The main plaza was busy again now, full of people moving around the garden, all of them grave, their eyes on their feet.

When we were alone in the black tunnel, I tried to reason with him again.

"Ian, what's the point of this? Won't it hurt Jamie more, the longer I'm alive? In the end, wouldn't it be better for him if -"

"Don't think like that, Wanda. We're not animals. Your death is not an inevitability."

"I don't think you're an animal," I said quietly.

"Thanks. I didn't say that as an accusation, though. I wouldn't blame you if you did."

That was the end of our conversation; that was the moment we both saw the pale blue light reflecting dimly from around the next turn in the tunnel.

"Shh," Ian breathed. "Wait here."

He pressed my shoulder down gently, trying to stick me where I stood. Then he strode forward, making no attempt to hide the sound of his footsteps. He disappeared around the corner.

"Jared?" I heard him say, feigning surprise.

My heart felt heavy in my chest; the sensation was more pain than fear.

"I know it's with you," Jared answered. He raised his voice, so that anyone between here and the main plaza would hear. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," he called, his voice hard and mocking.

The Host

CHAPTER 29

Betrayed

Maybe I should have run the other way. But no one was holding me back now, and though his voice was cold and angry, Jared was calling to me. Melanie was even more eager than I was as I stepped carefully around the corner and into the blue light; I hesitated there.

Ian stood just a few feet ahead of me, poised on the balls of his feet, ready for whatever hostile movement Jared might make toward me.

Jared sat on the ground, on one of the mats Jamie and I had left here. He looked as weary as Ian, though his eyes, too, were more alert than the rest of his exhausted posture.

"At ease," Jared said to Ian. "I just want to talk to it. I promised the kid, and I'll stand by that promise."

"Where's Kyle?" Ian demanded.

"Snoring. Your cave might shake apart from the vibrations."

Ian didn't move.

"I'm not lying, Ian. And I'm not going to kill it. Jeb is right. No matter how messed up this stupid situation is, Jamie has as much say as I do, and he's been totally suckered, so I doubt he'll be giving me the go-ahead anytime soon."

"No one's been suckered," Ian growled.

Jared waved his hand, dismissing the disagreement over terminology. "It's not in any danger from me, is my point." For the first time he looked at me, evaluating the way I hugged the far wall, watching my hands tremble. "I won't hurt you again," he said to me.

I took a small step forward.

"You don't have to talk to him if you don't want to, Wanda," Ian said quickly. "This isn't a duty or a chore to be done. It's not mandatory. You have a choice."

Jared's eyebrows pulled low over his eyes-Ian's words confused him.

"No," I whispered. "I'll talk to him." I took another short step. Jared turned his hand palm up and curled his fingers twice, encouraging me forward.

I walked slowly, each step an individual movement followed by a pause, not part of a steady advance. I stopped a yard away from him. Ian shadowed each step, keeping close to my side.

"I'd like to talk to it alone, if you don't mind," Jared said to him.

Ian planted himself. "I do mind."

"No, Ian, it's okay. Go get some sleep. I'll be fine." I nudged his arm lightly.

Ian scrutinized my face, his expression dubious. "This isn't some death wish? Sparing the kid?" he demanded.

"No. Jared wouldn't lie to Jamie about this."

Jared scowled when I said his name, the sound of it full of confidence.

"Please, Ian," I pleaded. "I want to talk to him."

Ian looked at me for a long minute, then turned to scowl at Jared. He barked out each sentence like an order.

"Her name is Wanda, not it. You will not touch her. Any mark you leave on her, I will double on your worthless hide."

I winced at the threat.

Ian turned abruptly and stalked into the darkness.

It was silent for a moment as we both watched the empty space where he had disappeared. I looked at Jared's face first, while he still stared after Ian. When he turned to meet my gaze, I dropped my eyes.

"Wow. He's not kidding, is he?" Jared said.

I treated that as a rhetorical question.

"Why don't you have a seat?" he asked me, patting the mat beside him.

I deliberated for a moment, then went to sit against the same wall but close to the hole, putting the length of the mat between us. Melanie didn't like this; she wanted to be near him, for me to smell his scent and feel the warmth of his body beside me.

I did not want that-and it wasn't because I was afraid he would hurt me; he didn't look angry at the moment, only tired and wary. I just didn't want to be any closer to him. Something in my chest was hurting to have him so near-to have him hating me in such close proximity.

He watched me, his head tilted to the side; I could only meet his gaze fleetingly before I had to look away.

"I'm sorry about last night-about your face. I shouldn't have done that."

I stared at my hands, knotted together in a double fist on my lap.

"You don't have to be afraid of me."

I nodded, not looking at him.

He grunted. "Thought you said you would talk to me?"

I shrugged. I couldn't find my voice with the weight of his antagonism in the air between us.

I heard him move. He scooted down the mat until he sat right beside me-the way Melanie had hoped for. Too close-it was hard to think straight, hard to breathe right-but I couldn't bring myself to scoot away. Oddly, for this was what she'd wanted in the first place, Melanie was suddenly irritated.

What? I asked, startled by the intensity of her emotion.

I don't like him next to you. It doesn't feel right. I don't like the way you want him there. For the first time since we'd abandoned civilization together, I felt waves of hostility emanating from her. I was shocked. That was hardly fair.

"I don't like him next to you. It doesn't feel right. I don't like the way you want him there. For the first time since we'd abandoned civilization together, I felt waves of hostility emanating from her. I was shocked. That was hardly fair."

I just have one question, Jared said, interrupting us.

I met his gaze and then shied away-recoiling both from his hard eyes and from Melanie's resentment.

"You can probably guess what it is. Jeb and Jamie spent all night jabbering at me...."

I waited for the question, staring across the dark hall at the rice bag-last night's pillow. In my peripheral vision, I saw his hand come up, and I cringed into the wall.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said again, impatient, and cupped my chin in his rough hand, pulling my face around so I had to look at him.

My heart stuttered when he touched me, and there was suddenly too much moisture in my eyes. I blinked, trying to clear them.

"Wanda." He said my name slowly-unwillingly, I could tell, though his voice was even and toneless. "Is Melanie still alive-still part of you? Tell me the truth."

Melanie attacked with the brute strength of a wrecking ball. It was physically painful, like the sudden stab of a migraine headache, where she tried to force her way out.

Stop it! Can't you see?

It was so obvious in the set of his lips, the tight lines under his eyes. It didn't matter what I said or what she said.

I'm already a liar to him, I told her. He doesn't want the truth-he's just looking for evidence, some way to prove me a liar, a Seeker, to Jeb and Jamie so that he'll be allowed to kill me.

Melanie refused to answer or believe me; it was a struggle to keep her silent.

Jared watched the sweat bead on my forehead, the strange shiver that shook down my spine, and his eyes narrowed. He held on to my chin, refusing to let me hide my face.

Jared, I love you, she tried to scream. I'm right here.

My lips didn't quiver, but I was surprised that he couldn't read the words spelled out plainly in my eyes.

Time passed slowly while he waited for my answer. It was agonizing, having to stare into his eyes, having to see the revulsion there. As if that weren't enough, Melanie's anger continued to slice at me from the inside. Her jealousy swelled into a bitter flood that washed through my body and left it polluted.

More time passed, and the tears welled up until they couldn't be contained in my eyes anymore. They spilled over onto my cheeks and rolled silently into Jared's palm. His expression didn't change.

Finally, I'd had enough. I closed my eyes and jerked my head down. Rather than hurt me, he dropped his hand.

He sighed, frustrated.

I expected he would leave. I stared at my hands again, waiting for that. My heartbeat marked the passing minutes. He didn't move. I didn't move. He seemed carved out of stone beside me. It fit him, this stonelike stillness. It fit his new, hard expression, the flint in his eyes.

Melanie pondered this Jared, comparing him with the man he used to be. She remembered an unremarkable day on the run...

"Argh!" Jared and Jamie groan together.

Jared lounges on the leather sofa and Jamie sprawls on the carpet in front of him. They're watching a basketball game on the big-screen TV. The parasites who live in this house are at work, and we've already filled the jeep with all it can hold. We have hours to rest before we need to disappear again.

On the TV, two players are disagreeing politely on the sideline. The cameraman is close; we can hear what they're saying.

"I believe I was the last one to touch it-it's your ball."

"I'm not sure about that. I wouldn't want to take any unfair advantage. We'd better have the refs review the tape."

The players shake hands, pat each other's shoulders.

"This is ridiculous," Jared grumbles.

"I can't stand it," Jamie agrees, mirroring Jared's tone perfectly; he sounds more like Jared every day-one of the many forms his hero worship has taken. "Is there anything else on?"

Jared flips through a few channels until he finds a track and field meet. The parasites are holding the Olympics in Haiti right now. From what we can see, the aliens are all hugely excited about it. Lots of them have Olympic flags outside their houses. It's not the same, though. Everyone who participates gets a medal now. Pathetic.

But they can't really screw up the hundred-meter dash. Individual parasite sports are much more entertaining than when they try to compete against each other directly. They perform better in separate lanes

challenging than when they try to compete against each other directly. They perform better in separate lanes.

"Mel, come relax," Jared calls.

I stand by the back door out of habit, not because I'm tensed to run. Not because I'm frightened. Empty habit, nothing more.

I go to Jared. He pulls me onto his lap and tucks my head under his chin.

"Comfortable?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, because I really, truly am entirely comfortable. Here, in an alien's house.

Dad used to say lots of funny things-like he was speaking his own language sometimes. Twenty-three skidoo, salad days, nosy parker, bandbox fresh, the catbird seat, chocolate teapot, and something about Grandma sucking eggs. One of his favorites was safe as houses.

Teaching me to ride a bike, my mother worrying in the doorway: "Calm down, Linda, this street is safe as houses." Convincing Jamie to sleep without his nightlight: "It's safe as houses in here, son, not a monster for miles."

Then overnight the world turned into a hideous nightmare, and the phrase became a black joke to Jamie and me. Houses were the most dangerous places we knew.

Hiding in a patch of scrubby pines, watching a car pull out from the garage of a secluded home, deciding whether to make a food run, whether it was too dicey. "Do you think the parasites'll be gone for long?" "No way-that place is safe as houses. Let's get out of here."

And now I can sit here and watch TV like it is five years ago and Mom and Dad are in the other room and I've never spent a night hiding in a drainpipe with Jamie and a bunch of rats while body snatchers with spotlights search for the thieves who made off with a bag of dried beans and a bowl of cold spaghetti.

I know that if Jamie and I survived alone for twenty years we would never find this feeling on our own. The feeling of safety. More than safety, even-happiness. Safe and happy, two things I thought I'd never feel again.

Jared makes us feel that way without trying, just by being Jared.

I breathe in the scent of his skin and feel the warmth of his body under mine.

Jared makes everything safe, everything happy. Even houses.

He still makes me feel safe, Melanie realized, feeling the warmth where his arm was just half an inch from mine. Though he doesn't even know I'm here.

I didn't feel safe. Loving Jared made me feel less safe than anything else I could think of.

I wondered if Melanie and I would have loved Jared if he'd always been who he was now, rather than the smiling Jared in our memories, the one who had come to Melanie with his hands full of hope and miracles. Would she have followed him if he'd always been so hard and cynical? If the loss of his laughing father and wild big brothers had iced him over the way nothing but Melanie's loss had?

Of course. Mel was certain. I would love Jared in any form. Even like this, he belongs with me.

I wondered if the same held true for me. Would I love him now if he were like this in her memory?

Then I was interrupted. Without any cue that I perceived, suddenly Jared was talking, speaking as if we were in the middle of a conversation.

"And so, because of you, Jeb and Jamie are convinced that it's possible to continue some kind of awareness after... being caught. They're both sure Mel's still kicking in there."

He rapped his fist lightly against my head. I flinched away from him, and he folded his arms.

"Jamie thinks she's talking to him." He rolled his eyes. "Not really fair to play the kid like that-but that's assuming a sense of ethics that clearly does not apply."

I wrapped my arms around myself.

"Jeb does have a point, though-that's what's killing me! What are you after? The Seekers' search wasn't well directed or even... suspicious. They only seemed to be looking for you-not for us. So maybe they didn't know what you were up to. Maybe you're freelancing? Some kind of undercover thing. Or..."

It was easier to ignore him when he was speculating so foolishly. I focused on my knees. They were dirty, as usual, purple and black.

"Maybe they're right-about the killing-you part, anyway."

Unexpectedly, his fingers brushed lightly once across the goose bumps his words had raised on my arm. His voice was softer when he spoke again. "Nobody's going to hurt you now. As long as you aren't causing any trouble..." He shrugged. "I can sort of see their point, and maybe, in a sick way, it would be wrong, like they say. Maybe there is no justifiable reason to... Except that Jamie..."

My head flipped up-his eyes were sharp, scrutinizing my reaction. I regretted showing interest and watched

my knees again.

“It scares me how attached he’s getting,” Jared muttered. “Shouldn’t have left him behind. I never imagined... And I don’t know what to do about it now. He thinks Mel’s alive in there. What will it do to him when...?”

I noticed how he said when, not if. No matter what promises he’d made, he didn’t see me lasting in the long term.

“I’m surprised you got to Jeb,” he reflected, changing the subject. “He’s a canny old guy. He sees through deceptions so easily. Till now.”

He thought about that for a minute.

“Not much for conversation, are you?”

There was another long silence.

His words came in a sudden gush. “The part that keeps bugging me is what if they’re right? How the hell would I know? I hate the way their logic makes sense to me. There’s got to be another explanation.”

Melanie struggled again to speak, not as viciously as before, this time without hope of breaking through. I kept my arms and lips locked.

Jared moved, shifting away from the wall so that his body was turned toward me. I watched the movement from the corner of my eye.

“Why are you here?” he whispered.

I peeked up at his face. It was gentle, kind, almost the way Melanie remembered it. I felt my control slipping; my lips trembled. Keeping my arms locked took all my strength. I wanted to touch his face. I wanted it. Melanie did not like this.

If you won’t let me talk, then at least keep your hands to yourself, she hissed.

I’m trying. I’m sorry. I was sorry. This was hurting her. We were both hurting, different hurts. It was hard to know who had it worse at the moment.

Jared watched me curiously while my eyes filled again.

“Why?” he asked softly. “You know, Jeb has this crazy idea that you’re here for me and Jamie. Isn’t that nuts?”

My mouth half-opened; I quickly bit down on my lip.

Jared leaned forward slowly and took my face between both his hands. My eyes closed.

“Won’t you tell me?”

My head shook once, fast. I wasn’t sure who did it. Was it me saying won’t or Melanie saying can’t?

His hands tightened under my jaw. I opened my eyes, and his face was inches away from mine. My heart fluttered, my stomach dropped-I tried to breathe, but my lungs did not obey.

I recognized the intention in his eyes; I knew how he would move, exactly how his lips would feel. And yet it was so new to me, a first more shocking than any other, as his mouth pressed against mine.

I think he meant just to touch his lips to mine, to be soft, but things changed when our skin met. His mouth was abruptly hard and rough, his hands trapped my face to his while his lips moved mine in urgent, unfamiliar patterns. It was so different from remembering, so much stronger. My head swam incoherently.

The body revolted. I was no longer in control of it-it was in control of me. It was not Melanie-the body was stronger than either of us now. Our breathing echoed loudly: mine wild and gasping, his fierce, almost a snarl.

My arms broke free from my control. My left hand reached for his face, his hair, to wind my fingers in it.

My right hand was faster. Was not mine.

Melanie’s fist punched his jaw, knocked his face away from mine with a blunt, low sound. Flesh against flesh, hard and angry.

The force of it was not enough to move him far, but he scrambled away from me the instant our lips were no longer connected, gaping with horrorstruck eyes at my horrorstruck expression.

I stared down at the still-clenched fist, as repulsed as if I’d found a scorpion growing on the end of my arm. A gasp of revulsion choked its way out of my throat. I grabbed the right wrist with my left hand, desperate to keep Melanie from using my body for violence again.

I glanced up at Jared. He was staring at the fist I restrained, too, the horror fading, surprise taking its place. In that second, his expression was entirely defenseless. I could easily read his thoughts as they moved across his unlocked face.

This was not what he had expected. And he’d had expectations; that was plain to see. This had been a test. A test he’d thought he was prepared to evaluate. A test with results he’d anticipated with confidence. But he’d

been surprised.

Did that mean pass or fail?

The pain in my chest was not a surprise. I already knew that a breaking heart was more than an exaggeration.

In a fight-or-flight situation, I never had a choice; it would always be flight for me. Because Jared was between me and the darkness of the tunnel exit, I wheeled and threw myself into the box-packed hole.

The boxes crunched, crackled, and cracked as my weight shoved them into the wall, into the floor. I wriggled my way into the impossible space, twisting around the heavier squares and crushing the others. I felt his fingers scrape across my foot as he made a grab for my ankle, and I kicked one of the more solid boxes between us. He grunted, and despair wrapped choking hands around my throat. I hadn't meant to hurt him again; I hadn't meant to strike. I was only trying to escape.

I didn't hear my own sobbing, loud as it was, until I could go no farther into the crowded hole and the sound of my thrashing stopped. When I did hear myself, heard the ragged, tearing gasps of agony, I was mortified.

So mortified, so humiliated. I was horrified at myself, at the violence I'd allowed to flow through my body, whether consciously or not, but that was not why I was sobbing. I was sobbing because it had been a test, and, stupid, stupid, stupid, emotional creature that I was, I wanted it to be real.

Melanie was writhing in agony inside me, and it was hard to make sense of the double pain. I felt as though I was dying because it was not real; she felt as though she was dying because, to her, it had felt real enough. In all that she'd lost since the end of her world, so long ago, she'd never before felt betrayed. When her father had brought the Seekers after his children, she'd known it was not him. There was no betrayal, only grief. Her father was dead. But Jared was alive and himself.

No one's betrayed you, stupid, I railed at her. I wanted her pain to stop. It was too much, the extra burden of her agony. Mine was enough.

How could he? How? she ranted, ignoring me.

We sobbed, beyond control.

One word snapped us back from the edge of hysteria.

From the mouth of the hole, Jared's low, rough voice-broken and strangely childlike-asked, "Mel?"

The Host

CHAPTER 30

Abbreviated

Mel?" he asked again, the hope he didn't want to feel coloring his tone.

My breath caught in another sob, an aftershock.

"You know that was for you, Mel. You know that. Not for h-it. You know I wasn't kissing it."

My next sob was louder, a moan. Why couldn't I shut up? I tried holding my breath.

"If you're in there, Mel..." He paused.

Melanie hated the "if." A sob burst up through my lungs, and I gasped for air.

"I love you," Jared said. "Even if you're not there, if you can't hear me. I love you."

I held my breath again, biting my lip until it bled. The physical pain didn't distract me as much as I wished it would.

It was silent outside the hole, and then silent inside, too, as I turned blue. I listened intently, concentrating only on what I could hear. I wouldn't think. There was no sound.

I was twisted into the most impossible position. My head was the lowest point, the right side of my face pressed against the rough rock floor. My shoulders were slanted around a crumpled box edge, the right higher than the left. My hips angled the opposite way, with my left calf pressed to the ceiling. Fighting with the boxes had left bruises-I could feel them forming. I knew I would have to find some way to explain to Ian and Jamie that I had done this to myself, but how? What should I say? How could I tell them that Jared had kissed me as a test, like giving a lab rat a jolt of electricity to observe its reaction?

And how long was I supposed to hold this position? I didn't want to make any noise, but it felt like my spine was going to snap in a minute. The pain got more difficult to bear every second. I wouldn't be able to bear

it in silence for long. Already, a whimper was rising in my throat.

Melanie had nothing to say to me. She was quietly working through her own relief and fury. Jared had spoken to her, finally recognized her existence. He had told her he loved her. But he had kissed me. She was trying to convince herself that there was no reason to be wounded by this, trying to believe all the solid reasons why this wasn't what it felt like. Trying, but not yet succeeding. I could hear all this, but it was directed internally. She wasn't speaking to me-in the juvenile, petty sense of the phrase. I was getting the cold shoulder.

I felt an unfamiliar anger toward her. Not like the beginning, when I feared her and wished for her eradication from my mind. No, I felt my own sense of betrayal now. How could she be angry with me for what had happened? How did that make sense? How was it my fault that I'd fallen in love because of the memories she forced on me and then been overthrown by this unruly body? I cared that she was suffering, yet my pain meant nothing to her. She enjoyed it. Vicious human.

Tears, much weaker than the others, flowed down my cheeks in silence. Her hostility toward me simmered in my mind.

Abruptly, the pain in my bruised, twisted back was too much. The straw on the camel.

"Ung," I grunted, pushing against stone and cardboard as I shoved myself backward.

I didn't care about the noise anymore, I just wanted out. I swore to myself that I would never cross the threshold of this wretched pit again-death first. Literally.

It was harder to worm out than it had been to dive in. I wiggled and squirmed around until I felt like I was making things worse, bending myself into the shape of a lopsided pretzel. I started to cry again, like a child, afraid that I would never get free.

Melanie sighed. Hook your foot around the edge of the mouth and pull yourself out, she suggested.

I ignored her, struggling to work my torso around a particularly pointy corner. It jabbed me just under the ribs.

Don't be petty, she grumbled.

That's rich, coming from you.

I know. She hesitated, then caved. Okay, sorry. I am. Look, I'm human. It's hard to be fair sometimes. We don't always feel the right thing, do the right thing. The resentment was still there, but she was trying to forgive and forget that I'd just made out with her true love-that's the way she thought of it, at least.

I hooked my foot around the edge and yanked. My knee hit the floor, and I used that leverage to lift my ribs off the point. It was easier then to get my other foot out and yank again. Finally, my hands found the floor and I shoved my way through, a breech birth, falling onto the dark green mat. I lay there for a moment, facedown, breathing. I was sure at this point that Jared was long gone, but I didn't make certain of that right away. I just breathed in and out until I felt prepared to lift my head.

I was alone. I tried to hold on to the relief and forget the sorrow this fact engendered. It was better to be alone. Less humiliating.

I curled up on the mat, pressing my face against the musty fabric. I wasn't sleepy, but I was tired. The crushing weight of Jared's rejection was so heavy it exhausted me. I closed my eyes and tried to think about things that wouldn't make my stinging eyes tear again. Anything but the appalled look on Jared's face when he'd broken away from me...

What was Jamie doing now? Did he know I was here, or was he looking for me? Ian would be asleep for a long time, he'd looked so exhausted. Would Kyle wake soon? Would he come in search? Where was Jeb? I hadn't seen him all day. Was Doc really drinking himself unconscious? That seemed so unlike him...

I woke slowly, roused by my growling stomach. I lay quietly for a few minutes, trying to orient myself. Was it day or night? How long had I slept here alone?

My stomach wouldn't be ignored for long, though, and I rolled up onto my knees. I must have slept for a while to be this hungry-missed a meal or two.

I considered eating something from the supply pile in the hole-after all, I'd already damaged pretty much everything, maybe destroyed some. But that only made me feel guiltier about the idea of taking more. I'd go scavenge some rolls from the kitchen.

I was feeling a little hurt, on top of all the big hurt, that I'd been down here so long without anyone coming to look for me-what a vain attitude; why should anyone care what happened to me?-so I was relieved and appeased to find Jamie sitting in the doorway to the big garden, his back turned on the human world behind him, unmistakably waiting for me.

My eyes brightened, and so did his. He scrambled to his feet, relief washing over his features.

"You're alive!" he said. I wished he were right. He began to rumble. "I mean, I didn't think Jared was

You're okay," he said, I wished he were right. He began to ramble. I mean, I didn't think Jared was lying, but he said he thought you wanted to be alone, and Jeb said I couldn't go check on you and that I had to stay right here where he could see that I wasn't sneaking back there, but even though I didn't think you were hurt or anything, it was hard to not know for sure, you know?"

"I'm fine," I told him. But I held my arms out, seeking comfort. He threw his arms around my waist, and I was shocked to find that his head could rest on my shoulder while we stood.

"Your eyes are red," he whispered. "Was he mean to you?"

"No." After all, people weren't intentionally cruel to lab rats—they were just trying to get information.

"Whatever you said to him, I think he believes us now. About Mel, I mean. How does she feel?"

"She's glad about that."

He nodded, pleased. "How about you?"

I hesitated, looking for a factual response. "Telling the truth is easier for me than trying to hide it."

My evasion seemed to answer the question enough to satisfy him.

Behind him, the light in the garden was red and fading. The sun had already set on the desert.

"I'm hungry," I told him, and I pulled away from our hug.

"I knew you would be. I saved you something good."

I sighed. "Bread's fine."

"Let it go, Wanda. Ian says you're too self-sacrificing for your own good."

I made a face.

"I think he's got a point," Jamie muttered. "Even if we all want you here, you don't belong until you decide you do."

"I can't ever belong. And nobody really wants me here, Jamie."

"I do."

I didn't fight with him, but he was wrong. Not lying, because he believed what he was saying. But what he really wanted was Melanie. He didn't separate us the way he should.

Trudy and Heidi were baking rolls in the kitchen and sharing a bright green, juicy apple. They took turns taking bites.

"It's good to see you, Wanda," Trudy said sincerely, covering her mouth while she spoke because she was still chewing her last bite. Heidi nodded in greeting, her teeth sunk in the apple. Jamie nudged me, trying to be inconspicuous about it—pointing out that people wanted me. He wasn't making allowances for common courtesy.

"Did you save her dinner?" he asked eagerly.

"Yep," Trudy said. She bent down beside the oven and came back with a metal tray in her hand. "Kept it warm. It's probably nasty and tough now, but it's better than the usual."

On the tray was a rather large piece of red meat. My mouth started to water, even as I rejected the portion I'd been allotted.

"It's too much."

"We have to eat all the perishables the first day," Jamie encouraged me. "Everyone eats themselves sick—it's a tradition."

"You need the protein," Trudy added. "We were on cave rations too long. I'm surprised no one's in worse shape."

I ate my protein while Jamie watched with hawk-like attention as each bite traveled from the tray to my mouth. I ate it all to please him, though it made my stomach ache to eat so much.

The kitchen started to fill up again as I was finishing. A few had apples in their hands—all sharing with someone else. Curious eyes examined the sore side of my face.

"Why's everyone coming here now?" I muttered to Jamie. It was black outside, the dinner hour long over.

Jamie looked at me blankly for a second. "To hear you teach." His tone added the words of course.

"Are you kidding me?"

"I told you nothing's changed."

I stared around the narrow room. It wasn't a full house. No Doc tonight, and none of the returned raiders, which meant no Paige, either. No Jeb, no Ian, no Walter. A few others missing: Travis, Carol, Ruth Ann. But more than I would have thought, if I'd thought anyone would consider following the normal routine after such an abnormal day.

"Can we go back to the Dolphins, where we left off?" Wes asked, interrupting my evaluation of the room. I could see that he'd taken it upon himself to start the ball rolling, rather than that he was vitally interested in the kinship circles of an alien planet.

...ship circles of an alien planet.

Everyone looked at me expectantly. Apparently, life was not changing as much as I'd thought.

I took a tray of rolls from Heidi's hands and turned to shove it into the stone oven. I started talking with my back still turned.

"So... um... hmm... the, uh, third set of grandparents... They traditionally serve the community, as they see it. On Earth, they would be the breadwinners, the ones who leave the home and bring back sustenance. They are farmers, for the most part. They cultivate a plant-like growth that they milk for its sap...."

And life went on.

Jamie tried to talk me out of sleeping in the supply corridor, but his attempt was halfhearted. There just wasn't another place for me. Stubborn as usual, he insisted on sharing my quarters. I imagined Jared didn't like that, but as I didn't see him that night or the next day, I couldn't verify my theory.

It was awkward again, going about my usual chores, with the six raiders home-just like when Jeb had first forced me to join the community. Hostile stares, angry silences. It was harder for them than it was for me, though-I was used to it. They, on the other hand, were entirely unaccustomed to the way everyone else treated me. When I was helping with the corn harvest, for example, and Lily thanked me for a fresh basket with a smile, Andy's eyes bulged in their sockets at the exchange. Or when I was waiting for the bathing pool with Trudy and Heidi, and Heidi began playing with my hair. It was growing, always swinging in my eyes these days, and I was planning to shear it off again. Heidi was trying to find a style for me, flipping the strands this way and that. Brandt and Aaron-Aaron was the oldest man who'd gone on the long raid, someone I couldn't remember having seen before at all-came out and found us there, Trudy laughing at some silly atrocity Heidi was attempting to create atop my head, and both men turned a little green and stalked silently past us.

Of course, little things like that were nothing. Kyle roamed the caves now, and though he was obviously under orders to leave me in peace, his expression made it clear that this restriction was repugnant to him. I was always with others when I crossed his path, and I wondered if that was the only reason he did nothing more than glower at me and unconsciously curl his thick fingers into claws. This brought back all the panic from my first weeks here, and I might have succumbed to it-begun hiding again, avoiding the common areas-but something more important than Kyle's murderous glares came to my attention that second night.

The kitchen filled up again-I'm not sure how much was interest in my stories and how much was interest in the chocolate bars Jeb handed out. I declined mine, explaining to a disgruntled Jamie that I couldn't talk and chew at the same time; I suspected that he would save one for me, obstinate as ever. Ian was back in his usual hot seat by the fire, and Andy was there-eyes wary-beside Paige. None of the other raiders, including Jared, of course, was in attendance. Doc was not there, and I wondered if he was still drunk or perhaps hung-over. And again, Walter was absent.

Geoffrey, Trudy's husband, questioned me for the first time tonight. I was pleased, though I tried not to show it, that he seemed to have joined the ranks of the humans who tolerated me. But I couldn't answer his questions well, which was too bad. His questions were like Doc's.

"I don't really know anything about Healing," I admitted. "I never went to a Healer after... after I first got here. I haven't been sick. All I know is that we wouldn't choose a planet unless we were able to maintain the host bodies perfectly. There's nothing that can't be healed, from a simple cut, a broken bone, to a disease. Old age is the only cause of death now. Even healthy human bodies were only designed to last for so long. And there are accidents, too, I guess, though those don't happen as often with the souls. We're cautious."

"Armed humans aren't just an accident," someone muttered. I was moving hot rolls; I didn't see who spoke, and I didn't recognize the voice.

"Yes, that's true," I agreed evenly.

"So you don't know what they use to cure diseases, then?" Geoffrey pressed. "What's in their medications?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I don't. It wasn't something I was interested in, back when I had access to the information. I'm afraid I took it for granted. Good health is simply a given on every planet I've lived on."

Geoffrey's red cheeks flushed brighter than usual. He looked down, an angry set to his mouth. What had I said to offend him?

Heath, sitting beside Geoffrey, patted his arm. There was a pregnant silence in the room.

"Uh-about the Vultures..." Ian said-the words were forced, a deliberate subject change. "I don't know if I missed this part sometime, but I don't remember you ever explaining about them being 'unkind'...?"

It wasn't something I had explained, but I was pretty sure he wasn't really that interested-this was just the first question he'd been able to think of.

My informal class ended earlier than usual. The questions were slow, and most of them supplied by Jamie and Ian. Geoffrey's questions had left everyone else preoccupied.

"Well, we've got an early one tomorrow, tearing down the stalks..." Jeb mused after yet another awkward silence, making the words a dismissal. People rose to their feet and stretched, talking in low voices that weren't casual enough.

"What did I say?" I whispered to Ian.

"Nothing. They've got mortality on their minds." He sighed.

My human brain made one of those leaps in understanding that they called intuition.

"Where's Walter?" I demanded, still whispering.

Ian sighed again. "He's in the south wing. He's... not doing well."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Things have been... difficult for you lately, so..."

I shook my head impatiently at that consideration. "What's wrong with him?"

Jamie was there beside me now; he took my hand.

"Some of Walter's bones snapped, they're so brittle," he said in a hushed voice. "Doc's sure it's cancer-final stages, he says."

"Walt must have been keeping quiet about the pain for a long while now," Ian added somberly.

I winced. "And there's nothing to be done? Nothing at all?"

Ian shook his head, keeping his brilliant eyes on mine. "Not for us. Even if we weren't stuck here, there would be no help for him now. We never cured that one."

I bit my lip against the suggestion I wanted to make. Of course there was nothing to do for Walter. Any of these humans would rather die slowly and in pain than trade their mind for their body's cure. I could understand that... now.

"He's been asking for you," Ian continued. "Well, he says your name sometimes; it's hard to tell what he means-Doc's keeping him drunk to help with the pain."

"Doc feels real bad about using so much of the alcohol himself," Jamie added. "Bad timing, all around."

"Can I see him?" I asked. "Or will that make the others unhappy?"

Ian frowned and snorted. "Wouldn't that be just like some people, to get worked up over this?" He shook his head. "Who cares, though, right? If it's Walt's final wish..."

"Right," I agreed. The word final had my eyes burning. "If seeing me is what Walter wants, then I guess it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks, or if they get mad."

"Don't worry about that-I'm not going to let anybody harass you." Ian's white lips pressed into a thin line.

I felt anxious, like I wanted to look at a clock. Time had ceased to mean much to me, but suddenly I felt the weight of a deadline. "Is it too late to go tonight? Will we disturb him?"

"He's not sleeping regular hours. We can go see."

I started walking at once, dragging Jamie because he still gripped my hand. The sense of passing time, of endings and finality, propelled me forward. Ian caught up quickly, though, with his long stride.

In the moonlit garden cavern, we passed others who for the most part paid us no mind. I was too often in the company of Jamie and Ian to cause any curiosity, though we weren't headed for the usual tunnels.

The one exception was Kyle. He froze midstride when he saw his brother beside me. His eyes flashed down to see Jamie's hand in mine, and then his lips twisted into a snarl.

Ian squared his shoulders as he absorbed his brother's reaction-his mouth curled into a mirror of Kyle's-and he deliberately reached for my other hand. Kyle made a noise like he was about to be sick and turned his back on us.

When we were in the blackness of the long tunnel south, I tried to free that hand. Ian gripped it tighter.

"I wish you wouldn't make him angrier," I muttered.

"Kyle is wrong. Being wrong is sort of a habit with him. He'll take longer than anyone else to get over it, but that doesn't mean we should make allowances for him."

"He frightens me," I admitted in a whisper. "I don't want him to have more reasons to hate me."

Ian and Jamie squeezed my hands at the same time. They spoke simultaneously.

"Don't be afraid," Jamie said.

"Jeb's made his opinion very clear," Ian said.

"What do you mean?" I asked Ian.

"If Kyle can't accept Jeb's rules, then he's no longer welcome here."

“But that’s wrong. Kyle belongs here.”

Ian grunted. “He’s staying... so he’ll just have to learn to deal.”

We didn’t talk again through the long walk. I was feeling guilty-it seemed to be a permanent emotional state here. Guilt and fear and heartbreak. Why had I come?

Because you do belong here, oddly enough, Melanie whispered. She was very aware of the warmth of Ian’s and Jamie’s hands, wrapped around and twined with mine. Where else have you ever had this?

Nowhere, I confessed, feeling only more depressed. But it doesn’t make me belong. Not the way you do.

We’re a package deal, Wanda.

As if I needed reminding....

I was a little surprised to hear her so clearly. She’d been quiet the last two days, waiting, anxious, hoping to see Jared again. Of course, I’d been similarly occupied.

Maybe he’s with Walter. Maybe that’s where he’s been, Melanie thought hopefully.

That’s not why we’re going to see Walter.

No. Of course not. Her tone was repentant, but I realized that Walter did not mean as much to her as he did to me. Naturally, she was sad that he was dying, but she had accepted that outcome from the beginning. I, on the other hand, could not bring myself to accept it, even now. Walter was my friend, not hers. I was the one he’d defended.

One of those dim blue lights greeted us as we approached the hospital wing. (I knew now that the lanterns were solar powered, left in sunny corners during the day to charge.) We all moved more quietly, slowing at the same time without having to discuss it.

I hated this room. In the darkness, with the odd shadows thrown by the weak glow, it seemed only more forbidding. There was a new smell-the room reeked of slow decay and stinging alcohol and bile.

Two of the cots were occupied. Doc’s feet hung over the edge of one; I recognized his light snore. On the other, looking hideously withered and misshapen, Walter watched us approach.

“Are you up for visitors, Walt?” Ian whispered when Walter’s eyes drifted in his direction.

“Ungh,” Walter moaned. His lips drooped from his slack face, and his skin gleamed wetly in the low light.

“Is there anything you need?” I murmured. I pulled my hands free-they fluttered helplessly in the air between me and Walter.

His loosely rolling eyes searched the darkness. I took a step closer.

“Is there anything we can do for you? Anything at all?”

His eyes roamed till they found my face. Abruptly, they focused through the drunken stupor and the pain.

“Finally,” he gasped. His breath wheezed and whistled. “I knew you would come if I waited long enough. Oh, Gladys, I have so much to tell you.”

The Host

CHAPTER 31

Needed

I froze and then looked quickly over my shoulder to see if someone was behind me.

“Gladys was his wife,” Jamie whispered almost silently. “She didn’t escape.”

“Gladys,” Walter said to me, oblivious to my reaction. “Would you believe I went and got cancer? What are the odds, eh? Never took a sick day in my life...” His voice faded out until I couldn’t hear it, but his lips continued to move. He was too weak to lift his hand; his fingers dragged themselves toward the edge of the cot, toward me.

Ian nudged me forward.

“What should I do?” I breathed. The sweat beading on my forehead had nothing to do with the humid heat.

“... grandfather lived to be a hundred and one,” Walter wheezed, audible again. “Nobody ever had cancer in my family, not even the cousins. Didn’t your aunt Regan have skin cancer, though?”

He looked at me trustingly, waiting for an answer. Ian poked me in the back.

“Um...” I mumbled.

“Maybe that was Bill’s aunt,” Walter allowed.

I shot a panicked glance at Ian, who shrugged. “Help,” I mouthed at him.

He motioned for me to take Walter's searching fingers.

Walter's skin was chalk white and translucent. I could see the faint pulse of blood in the blue veins on the back of his hand. I lifted his hand gingerly, worried about the slender bones that Jamie had said were so brittle. It felt too light, as if it were hollow.

"Ah, Gladdie, it's been hard without you. It's a nice place here; you'll like it, even when I'm gone. Plenty of people to talk to-I know how you need to have your conversation...." The volume of his voice sank until I couldn't make out the words anymore, but his lips still shaped the words he wanted to share with his wife. His mouth kept moving, even when his eyes closed and his head lolled to the side.

Ian found a wet cloth and began wiping Walter's shining face.

"I'm not good at... at deception," I whispered, watching Walter's mumbling lips to make sure he wasn't listening to me. "I don't want to upset him."

"You don't have to say anything," Ian reassured me. "He's not lucid enough to care."

"Do I look like her?"

"Not a bit-I've seen her picture. Stocky redhead."

"Here, let me do that."

Ian gave me the rag, and I cleaned the sweat off Walter's neck. Busy hands always made me feel more comfortable. Walter continued to mumble. I thought I heard him say, "Thanks, Gladdie, that's nice."

I didn't notice that Doc's snores had stopped. His familiar voice was suddenly there behind me, too gentle to startle.

"How is he?"

"Delusional," Ian whispered. "Is that the brandy or the pain?"

"More the pain, I would think. I'd trade my right arm for some morphine."

"Maybe Jared will produce another miracle," Ian suggested.

"Maybe," Doc sighed.

I wiped absently at Walter's pallid face, listening more intently now, but they didn't speak of Jared again.

Not here, Melanie whispered.

Looking for help for Walter, I agreed.

Alone, she added.

I thought about the last time I'd seen him-the kiss, the belief... He probably wanted some time to himself.

I hope he isn't out there convincing himself that you're a very talented actress-slash-Seeker again....

That's possible, of course.

Melanie groaned silently.

Ian and Doc murmured in quiet voices about inconsequential things, mostly Ian catching Doc up on what was going on in the caves.

"What happened to Wanda's face?" Doc whispered, but I could still hear him easily.

"More of the same," Ian said in a tight voice.

Doc made an unhappy noise under his breath and then clicked his tongue.

Ian told him a bit about tonight's awkward class, about Geoffrey's questions.

"It would have been convenient if Melanie had been possessed by a Healer," Doc mused.

I flinched, but they were behind me and probably didn't notice.

"We're lucky it was Wanda," Ian murmured in my defense. "No one else -"

"I know," Doc interrupted, good-natured as always. "I guess I should say, it's too bad Wanda didn't have more of an interest in medicine."

"I'm sorry," I murmured. I was careless to reap the benefits of perfect health without ever being curious about the cause.

A hand touched my shoulder. "You have nothing to apologize for," Ian said.

Jamie was being very quiet. I looked around and saw that he was curled up on the cot where Doc had been napping.

"It's late," Doc noted. "Walter's not going anywhere tonight. You should get some sleep."

"We'll be back," Ian promised. "Let us know what we can bring, for either of you."

I laid Walter's hand down, patting it cautiously. His eyes snapped open, focusing with more awareness than before.

"Are you leaving?" he wheezed. "Do you have to go so soon?"

I took his hand again quickly. "No, I don't have to leave."

He smiled and closed his eyes again. His fingers looked around mine with brittle strength.

He shimmered and closed his eyes again. His fingers locked around mine with brittle strength.

Ian sighed.

"You can go," I told him. "I don't mind. Take Jamie back to his bed."

Ian glanced around the room. "Hold on a sec," he said, and then he grabbed the cot closest to him. It wasn't heavy—he lifted it easily and slid it into place next to Walter's. I stretched my arm to the limit, trying not to jostle Walter, so that Ian could arrange the cot under it. Then he grabbed me up just as easily and set me on the cot beside Walter. Walter's eyes never fluttered. I gasped quietly, caught off guard by the casual way Ian was able to put his hands on me—as though I were human.

Ian jerked his chin toward Walter's hand clasped around mine. "Do you think you can sleep like that?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can."

"Sleep well, then." He smiled at me, then turned and lifted Jamie from the other cot. "Let's go, kid," he muttered, carrying the boy with no more effort than if he were an infant. Ian's quiet footsteps faded into the distance until I couldn't hear them anymore.

Doc yawned and went to sit behind the desk he'd constructed out of wooden crates and an aluminum door, taking the dim lamp with him. Walter's face was too dark to see, and that made me nervous. It was like he was already gone. I took comfort in his fingers, still curled stiffly around mine.

Doc began to shuffle through some papers, humming almost inaudibly to himself. I drifted off to the sound of the gentle rustling.

Walter recognized me in the morning.

He didn't wake until Ian showed up to escort me back; the cornfield was due to be cleared of the old stalks. I promised Doc I would bring him breakfast before I got to work. The very last thing I did was to carefully loosen my numb fingers, freeing them from Walter's grasp.

His eyes opened. "Wanda," he whispered.

"Walter?" I wasn't sure how long he would know me, or if he would remember last night. His hand clutched at the empty air, so I gave him my left, the one that wasn't dead.

"You came to see me. That was nice. I know... with the others back... must be hard... for you... Your face..."

He seemed to be having a difficult time making his lips form the words, and his eyes went in and out of focus. How like him, that his first words to me would be full of concern.

"Everything's fine, Walter. How are you feeling?"

"Ah -" He groaned quietly. "Not so... Doc?"

"Right here," Doc murmured, close behind me.

"Got any more liquor?" he gasped.

"Of course."

Doc was already prepared. He held the mouth of a thick glass bottle to Walter's slack lips and carefully poured the dark brown liquid in slow drips into his mouth. Walter winced as each sip burned down his throat. Some of it trickled out the side of his mouth and onto his pillow. The smell stung my nose.

"Better?" Doc asked after a long moment of slow pouring.

Walter grunted. It didn't sound like assent. His eyes closed.

"More?" Doc asked.

Walter grimaced and then moaned.

Doc cursed under his breath. "Where's Jared?" he muttered.

I stiffened at the name. Melanie stirred and then drifted again.

Walter's face sagged. His head rolled back on his neck.

"Walter?" I whispered.

"The pain's too much for him to stay conscious. Let him be," Doc said.

My throat felt swollen. "What can I do?"

Doc's voice was desolate. "About as much as I can. Which is nothing. I'm useless."

"Don't be like that, Doc," I heard Ian murmur. "This isn't your fault. The world doesn't work the way it used to. No one expects more of you."

My shoulders hunched inward. No, their world didn't work the same way anymore.

A finger tapped my arm. "Let's go," Ian whispered.

I nodded and started to pull my hand free again.

Walter's eyes rolled open, unseeing. "Gladdie? Are you here?" he implored.

"Um... I'm here." I said uncertainly, letting his fingers lock around mine.

Ian shrugged. "I'll get you both some food," he whispered, and then he left.

I waited anxiously for him to return, unnerved by Walter's misconception. Walter murmured Gladys's name over and over, but he didn't seem to need anything from me, for which I was grateful. After a while, half an hour maybe, I began listening for Ian's footsteps in the tunnel, wondering what could be taking him so long.

Doc stood by his desk the whole time, staring into nothing with his shoulders slumped. It was easy to see how useless he felt.

And then I did hear something, but it wasn't footsteps.

"What is that?" I asked Doc in a whisper; Walter was quiet again, maybe unconscious. I didn't want to disturb him.

Doc turned to look at me, cocking his head to the side at the same time to listen.

The noise was a funny thrumming, a fast, soft beat. I thought I heard it get just a little louder, but then it seemed quieter again.

"That's weird," Doc said. "It almost sounds like..." He paused, his forehead furrowing in concentration as the unfamiliar sound faded.

We were listening intently, so we heard the footsteps when they were still far away. They did not match the expected, even pace of Ian's return. He was running-no, sprinting.

Doc reacted immediately to the sound of trouble. He jogged quickly out to meet Ian. I wished I could see what was wrong, too, but I didn't want to upset Walter by trying to free my hand again. I listened hard instead.

"Brandt?" I heard Doc say in surprise.

"Where is it? Where is it?" the other man demanded breathlessly. The running footsteps only paused for a second, then started up again, not quite as fast.

"What are you talking about?" Doc asked, calling back this way.

"The parasite!" Brandt hissed impatiently, anxiously, as he burst through the arched entry.

Brandt was not a big man like Kyle or Ian; he was probably only a few inches taller than me, but he was thick and solid as a rhinoceros. His eyes swept the room; his piercing gaze focused on my face for half a second, then took in Walter's oblivious form, and then raced around the room only to end up on me again.

Doc caught up with Brandt then, his long fingers gripping Brandt's shoulder just as the broader man took the first step in my direction.

"What are you doing?" Doc asked, his voice the closest to a growl I'd ever heard it.

Before Brandt answered, the odd sound returned, going from soft to screaming loud to soft again with a suddenness that had us all frozen. The beats thudded right on top of one another, shaking the air when they were at their loudest.

"Is that-is that a helicopter?" Doc asked, whispering.

"Yes," Brandt whispered back. "It's the Seeker-the one from before, the one who was looking for it." He jerked his chin at me.

My throat was suddenly too small-the breaths moving through it were thin and shallow, not enough. I felt dizzy.

No. Not now. Please.

What is her problem? Mel snarled in my head. Why can't she leave us alone?

We can't let her hurt them!

But how do we stop her?

I don't know. This is all my fault!

Mine, too, Wanda. Ours.

"Are you sure?" Doc asked.

"Kyle got a clear view through the binoculars while it was hovering. Same one he saw before."

"Is it looking here?" Doc's voice was suddenly horrified. He half spun, eyes flashing toward the exit. "Where's Sharon?"

Brandt shook his head. "It's just running sweeps. Starts at Picacho, then fans out in spokes. Doesn't look like it's focusing on anything close. Circled around a few times where we dumped the car."

"Sharon?" Doc asked again.

"She's with the kids and Lucina. They're fine. The boys are getting things packed in case we have to roll tonight, but Jeb says it's not likely."

Doc exhaled, then paced over to his desk. He slouched against it, looking as if he'd just run a long race. "So it's nothing new, really," he murmured.

“Naw. Just have to lay low for a few days,” Brandt reassured him. His eyes were flickering around the room again, settling on me every other second. “Do you have any rope handy?” he asked. He pulled up the edge of the sheet on an empty cot, examining it.

“Rope?” Doc echoed blankly.

“For the parasite. Kyle sent me out here to secure it.”

My muscles contracted involuntarily; my hand gripped Walter’s fingers too tightly, and he whimpered. I tried to force it to relax while I kept my eyes on Brandt’s hard face. He was waiting for Doc, expectant.

“You’re here to secure Wanda?” Doc said, his voice hard again. “And what makes you think that’s necessary?”

“Come on, Doc. Don’t be stupid. You’ve got some big vents in here, and a lot of reflective metal.” Brandt gestured to a file cabinet against the far wall. “You let your attention wander for half a minute, and it’ll be flashing signals to that Seeker.”

I sucked in a shocked breath; it was loud in the still room.

“See?” Brandt said. “Guessed its plan in one.”

I wanted to bury myself under a boulder to hide from the bulging, relentless eyes of my Seeker, yet he imagined I wanted to guide her in. Bring her here to kill Jamie, Jared, Jeb, Ian... I felt like gagging.

“You can go, Brandt,” Doc said in an icy tone. “I will keep an eye on Wanda.”

Brandt raised one eyebrow. “What happened to you guys? To you and Ian and Trudy and the rest? It’s like you’re all hypnotized. If your eyes weren’t right, I’d have to wonder...”

“Go ahead and wonder all you want, Brandt. But get out while you’re doing it.”

Brandt shook his head. “I’ve got a job to do.”

Doc walked toward Brandt, stopping when he was between Brandt and me. He folded his arms across his chest.

“You’re not going to touch her.”

The throbbing helicopter blades sounded in the distance. We were all very still, not breathing, until they faded.

Brandt shook his head when it was quiet again. He didn’t speak; he just went to the desk and picked up Doc’s chair. He carried it to the wall by the file cabinet, slammed it to the ground, and then sat down hard, making the metal legs squeal against the stone. He leaned forward, his hands on his knees, and stared at me. A vulture waiting for a dying hare to stop moving.

Doc’s jaw tightened, making a little popping noise.

“Glady’s,” Walter muttered, surfacing from his dazed sleep. “You’re here.”

Too nervous to speak with Brandt watching, I just patted his hand. His clouded eyes searched my face, seeing features that weren’t there.

“It hurts, Gladdie. It hurts a lot.”

“I know,” I whispered. “Doc?”

He was already there, the brandy in hand. “Open up, Walter.”

The sound of the helicopter thumped quietly, far away but still much too close. Doc flinched, and a few drops of brandy splattered on my arm.

It was a horrible day. The worst of my life on this planet, even including my first day in the caves and the last hot, dry day in the desert, hours from death.

The helicopter circled and circled. Sometimes more than an hour would pass, and I would think it was finally over. Then the sound would come back, and I would see the Seeker’s obstinate face in my head, her protruding eyes scouring the blank desert for some sign of humans. I tried to will her away, concentrating hard on my memories of the desert’s featureless, colorless plain, as if I could somehow make sure she saw nothing else, as if I could bore her into leaving.

Brandt never took his suspicious stare off of me. I could always feel it, though I rarely looked at him. It got a little better when Ian came back with both breakfast and lunch. He was all dirty from packing in case of an evacuation-whatever that meant. Did they have anywhere to go? Ian scowled so hard he looked like Kyle when Brandt explained in clipped phrases why he was there. Then Ian dragged another empty cot beside mine, so that he could sit in Brandt’s line of sight and block his view.

The helicopter, Brandt’s distrustful watch, these were not really so bad. On an ordinary day-if there was really such a thing anymore-either one of these might have seemed agonizing. Today, they were nothing.

By noon, Doc had given Walter the last of the brandy. It seemed like only minutes later that Walter was

writhing, moaning, and gasping for breath. His fingers bruised and chafed mine, but if I ever pulled away, his moans turned to shrill screams. I ducked out once to use the latrine; Brandt followed me, which made Ian feel like he had to come, too. By the time we got back-after nearly running the whole way-Walter's screams no longer sounded human. Doc's face was hollow with echoed agony. Walter quieted after I spoke to him for a moment, letting him think his wife was near. It was an easy lie, a kind one. Brandt made little noises of irritation, but I knew that he was wrong to be upset. Nothing mattered beside Walter's pain.

The whimpers and the writhing continued, though, and Brandt paced back and forth at the other end of the room, trying to be as far from the sound as possible.

Jamie came looking for me, bringing food enough for four, when the light was growing orangey overhead. I wouldn't let him stay; I made Ian take him back to the kitchen to eat, made Ian promise to watch him all night so he wouldn't sneak back here. Walter couldn't help shrieking when his twisting moved his broken leg, and the sound of it was nearly unbearable. Jamie shouldn't have this night burned into his memory the way it would surely be burned into Doc's and mine. Perhaps Brandt's as well, though he did what he could to ignore Walter, plugging his ears and humming a dissonant tune.

Doc did not try to distance himself from Walter's hideous suffering; instead, he suffered with him. Walter's cries carved deep lines in Doc's face, like claws raking his skin.

It was strange to see such depths of compassion in a human, particularly Doc. I couldn't look at him the same way after watching him live Walter's pain. So great was his compassion, he seemed to bleed internally with it. As I watched, it became impossible to believe that Doc was a cruel person; the man simply could not be a torturer. I tried to remember what had been said to found my conjectures-had anyone made the accusation outright? I didn't think so. I must have jumped to false conclusions in my terror.

I doubted I could ever mistrust Doc again after this nightmarish day. However, I would always find his hospital a horrible place.

When the last of the daylight disappeared, so did the helicopter. We sat in the darkness, not daring to turn on even the dim blue light. It took a few hours before any of us would believe the hunt was over. Brandt was the first to accept it; he'd had enough of the hospital, too.

"Makes sense for it to give up," he muttered, edging out the exit. "Nothing to see at night. I'll just take your light with me, Doc, so that Jeb's pet parasite can't get up to anything, and be on my way."

Doc didn't respond, didn't even look at the sullen man as he left.

"Make it stop, Gladdie, make it stop!" Walter begged me. I wiped the sweat from his face while he crushed my hand.

Time seemed to slow down and stop; the black night felt unending. Walter's screams got more and more frequent, more and more excruciating.

Melanie was far away, knowing she could do nothing useful. I would have hidden, too, if Walter hadn't needed me. I was all alone in my head-exactly what I had once wanted. It made me feel lost.

Eventually, a dim gray light started to creep in through the high vents overhead. I was hovering on the edge of sleep, Walter's moans and screams keeping me from sinking under. I could hear Doc snoring behind me. I was glad that he'd been able to escape for a little while.

I didn't hear Jared come in. I was mumbling weak assurances, barely coherent, trying to calm Walter.

"I'm here, I'm here," I murmured as he cried out his wife's name. "Shh, it's okay." The words were meaningless. It was something to say, though, and it did seem that my voice calmed the worst of his cries.

I don't know how long Jared watched me with Walter before I realized he was there. It must have been a while. I was sure his first reaction would be anger, but when I heard him speak, his voice was cool.

"Doc," he said, and I heard the cot behind me shake. "Doc, wake up."

I jerked my hand free, whirling, disoriented, to see the face that went with the unmistakable voice.

His eyes were on me as he shook the sleeping man's shoulder. They were impossible to read in the dim light. His face had no expression at all.

Melanie jolted into awareness. She pored over his features, trying to read the thoughts behind the mask.

"Gladdie! Don't leave! Don't!" Walter's screech had Doc bolting upright, nearly capsizing his cot.

I spun back to Walter, shoving my sore hand into his searching fingers.

"Shhh, shhh! Walter, I'm here. I won't leave. I won't, I promise."

He quieted down, whimpering like a small child. I wiped the damp cloth over his forehead; his sob hitched and turned into a sigh.

"What's that about?" Jared murmured behind me.

"Shhh, shhh! Walter, I'm here. I won't leave. I won't, I promise."

She's the best painkiller I've been able to find, Doc said wearily.

"Well, I've found you something better than a tame Seeker."

My stomach knotted, and Melanie hissed in my head. So stupidly, blindly stubborn! she growled. He wouldn't believe you if you told him the sun sets in the west.

But Doc was beyond caring about the slight to me. "You found something!"

"Morphine-there's not much. I would have gotten here sooner if the Seeker hadn't pinned me down out there."

Doc was instantly in action. I heard him rustling through something papery, and he crowed in delight. "Jared, you're the miracle man!"

"Doc, just a sec..."

But Doc was at my side already, his haggard face alight with anticipation. His hands were busy with a small syringe. He stuck the tiny needle into the crease at Walter's elbow, on the arm that was attached to me. I turned my face away. It seemed so horribly invasive to stab something through his skin.

I couldn't argue with the results, though. Within half a minute, Walter's entire body relaxed, melting into a pile of loose flesh against the thin mattress. His breathing went from harsh and urgent to whispery and even. His hand relaxed, freeing mine.

I massaged my left hand with my right, trying to bring the blood back to my fingertips. Little prickles followed the flow of blood under my skin.

"Uh, Doc, there really isn't enough for that," Jared murmured.

I looked up from Walter's face, peaceful at last. Jared had his back to me, but I could see the surprise in Doc's expression.

"Enough for what? I'm not going to save this for a rainy day, Jared. I'm sure we'll wish we had it again, and too soon, but I'm not going to let Walter scream in agony while I have a way to help him!"

"That's not what I meant," Jared said. He spoke the way he did when he'd already thought about something long and hard. Slow and even, like Walter's breath.

Doc frowned, confused.

"There's enough to stop the pain for maybe three or four days, that's all," Jared said. "If you give it to him in doses."

I didn't understand what Jared was saying, but Doc did.

"Ah," he sighed. He turned to look at Walter again, and I saw a rim of fresh tears start to pool above his lower lids. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

I wanted to know what they were talking about, but Jared's presence made me silent, brought back the reserve I rarely felt the need for anymore.

"You can't save him. You can only save him pain, Doc."

"I know," Doc said. His voice broke, like he was holding back a sob. "You're right."

What's going on? I asked. As long as Melanie was going to be around, I might as well make use of her.

They're going to kill Walter, she told me matter-of-factly. There's enough morphine to give him an overdose.

My gasp sounded loud in the quiet room, but it was really just a breath. I didn't look up to see how the two healthy men would react. My own tears pooled as I leaned over Walter's pillow.

No, I thought, no. Not yet. No.

You'd rather he died screaming?

I just... I can't stand the... finality. It's so absolute. I'll never see my friend again.

How many of your other friends have you gone back to visit, Wanderer?

I've never had friends like this before.

My friends on other planets were all blurred together in my head; the souls were so similar, almost interchangeable in some ways. Walter was distinctly himself. When he was gone, there would be no one who could fill his place.

I cradled Walter's head in my arms and let my tears fall onto his skin. I tried to stifle my crying, but it made its way out regardless, a keening rather than sobs.

I know. Another first, Melanie whispered, and there was compassion in her tone. Compassion for me-that was a first, too.

"Wanda?" Doc asked.

I just shook my head, not able to answer.

"I think you've been here too long," he said. I felt his hand light and warm on my shoulder. "You should

I think you've been here too long," he said. I felt his hand, light and warm, on my shoulder. "You should take a break."

I shook my head again, still keening softly.

"You're worn out," he said. "Go clean up, stretch your legs. Eat something."

I glared up at him. "Will Walter be here when I get back?" I mumbled through my tears.

His eyes tightened anxiously. "Do you want that?"

"I'd like a chance to say goodbye. He's my friend."

He patted my arm. "I know, Wanda, I know. Me, too. I'm in no hurry. You get some air and then come back. Walter will be sleeping for a while."

I read his worn face, and I believed the sincerity there.

I nodded and carefully put Walter's head back on the pillow. Maybe if I got away from this place for a little bit, I'd find a way to handle this. I wasn't sure how-I had no experience with real goodbyes.

Because I was in love with him, no matter that it was unwilling, I had to look at Jared before I left. Mel wanted this, too, but wished that she could somehow exclude me from the process.

He was staring at me. I had a feeling his eyes had been on me for a long time. His face was carefully composed, but there was surprise and suspicion in there again. It made me tired. What would be the point of acting out a charade now, even if I were that talented a liar? Walter would never stand up for me again. I couldn't sucker him anymore.

I met Jared's gaze for one long second, then turned to hurry down the pitch-black corridor that was brighter than his expression.

The Host

CHAPTER 32

Ambushed

The caves were quiet; the sun had not yet risen. In the big plaza, the mirrors were a pale gray with the coming dawn.

My few clothes were still in Jamie and Jared's room. I snuck in, glad that I knew where Jared was.

Jamie was sound asleep, curled into a tight ball in the top corner of the mattress. He didn't usually sleep so compactly, but he had good reason to at the moment. Ian was sprawled across the rest of the space, his feet and hands hanging off the edges, one appendage to each of the four sides.

For some reason, this was hysterical to me. I had to put my fist in my mouth to choke back the laughter as I quickly snatched up my old dirt-dyed T-shirt and shorts. I hurried into the hall, still stifling the giggles.

You're slaphappy, Melanie told me. You need some sleep.

I'll sleep later. When... I couldn't finish the thought. It sobered me instantaneously, and everything was quiet again.

I was still rushing as I headed for the bathing room. I trusted Doc, but... Maybe he would change his mind. Maybe Jared would argue against what I wanted. I couldn't be all day.

I thought I heard something behind me when I reached the octopus-like juncture where all the sleeping halls met. I looked back, but I couldn't see anyone in the dim cave. People were beginning to stir. Soon it would be time for breakfast and another day of work. If they'd finished with the stalks, the ground in the east fields would need to be turned. Maybe I would have time to help... later...

I followed the familiar path to the underground rivers, my mind in a million other places. I couldn't seem to concentrate on anything in particular. Every time I tried to focus on a subject-Walter, Jared, breakfast, chores, baths-some other thought would pull my head away in seconds. Melanie was right; I needed to sleep. She was just as muddled. Her thoughts all spun around Jared, but she could make nothing coherent of them, either.

I'd gotten used to the bathing room. The utter blackness of it didn't bother me anymore. So many places were black here. Half my daylight hours were lived in darkness. And I'd been here too many times. There was never anything lurking under the water's surface, waiting to pull me under.

I knew I didn't have time to soak, though. Others would be up soon, and some people liked to start their day clean. I got to work, washing myself first, then moving on to my clothes. I scrubbed at my shirt fiercely, wishing I could scrub out my memory of the past two nights.

My hands were stinging when I was done. the drv cracks on my knuckles burning worst of all. I rinsed

them in the water, but it made no noticeable difference. I sighed and climbed out to get dressed.

I'd left my dry clothes on the loose rocks in the back corner. I kicked a stone by accident, hard enough to hurt my bare foot, and it clattered loudly across the room, bouncing off the wall and landing with a plunk and a gurgle in the pool. The sound made me jump, though it wasn't all that loud next to the roar of the hot river in the outer room.

I was just shoving my feet into my scruffy tennis shoes when my turn was up.

"Knock, knock," a familiar voice called from the dark entry.

"Good morning, Ian," I said. "I'm just done. Did you sleep well?"

"Ian's still sleeping," Ian's voice answered. "I'm sure that won't last forever, though, so we'd best get on with this."

Splinters of ice pinned my joints in place. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

I'd noticed it before, and then forgotten it in the long weeks of Kyle's absence: not only did Ian and his brother look very much alike, but-when Kyle spoke at a normal volume, which so rarely happened-they also had exactly the same voice.

There was no air. I was trapped in this black hole with Kyle at the door. There was no way out.

Keep quiet! Melanie shrieked in my head.

I could do that. There was no air to scream with.

Listen!

I did as I was told, trying to focus in spite of the fear that stabbed through my head like a million slender spears of ice.

I couldn't hear anything. Was Kyle waiting for a response? Was he sneaking around the room in silence? I listened harder, but the rush of the river covered any sounds.

Quick, grab a rock! Melanie ordered.

Why?

I saw myself crashing a rough stone against Kyle's head.

I can't do it!

Then we're going to die! she screamed back at me. I can do it! Let me!

There has to be another way, I moaned, but I forced my ice-locked knees to bend. My hands searched the darkness and came up with a large, jagged rock and a handful of pebbles.

Fight or flight.

In desperation, I tried to unlock Melanie, to let her out. I couldn't find the door-my hands were still my own, clutched uselessly around the objects I could never make into weapons.

A noise. A tiny splash as something entered the stream that drained the pool into the latrine room. Only a few yards away.

Give me my hands!

I don't know how! Take them!

I started to creep away, close to the wall, toward the exit. Melanie struggled to find her way out of my head, but she couldn't find the door from her side, either.

Another sound. Not by the far stream. A breath, by the exit. I froze where I was.

Where is he?

I don't know!

Again, I could hear nothing but the river. Was Kyle alone? Was someone waiting by the door to catch me when he herded me around the pool? How close was Kyle now?

I felt the hairs on my arms and legs standing on end. There was some kind of pressure in the air, as though I could feel his silent movements. The door. I half turned, easing back in the direction I'd come, away from where I'd heard the breath.

He couldn't wait forever. The little he'd said told me he was in a hurry. Someone could come at any time. Odds were on his side, though. There were fewer who would be inclined to stop him than there were who might think this was for the best. And of those inclined to stop him, even fewer who'd have much of a chance of doing that. Only Jeb and his gun would make a difference. Jared was at least as strong as Kyle, but Kyle was more motivated. Jared would probably not fight him now.

Another noise. Was that a footstep by the door? Or just my imagination? How long had this silent standoff lasted? I couldn't guess how many seconds or minutes had passed.

Get ready. Melanie knew that the stalling would soon be at an end. She wanted me to clench the rock

tighter.

But I would give flight a chance first. I would not be an effective fighter, even if I could bring myself to try. Kyle was probably twice my weight, and he had a much longer reach.

I raised the hand with the pebbles and aimed them toward the back passage to the latrine. Maybe I could make him think that I was going to hide and hope for rescue. I threw the handful of small stones and shied away from the noise when they clattered against the rock wall.

The breath at the door again, the sound of a light footfall headed toward my decoy. I edged as quietly along the wall as I could.

What if there are two?

I don't know.

I was almost to the exit. If I could just make the tunnel, I thought I could outrun him. I was lighter and fast....

I heard a footstep, very clearly this time, disrupting the stream in the back of the room. I crept faster.

A gigantic splash shattered the tense standoff. Water pelted my skin, making me gasp. It splattered against the wall in a wave of wet sound.

He's coming through the pool! Run!

I hesitated just a second too long. Big fingers clutched at my calf, my ankle. I yanked against the pull, lurching forward. I stumbled, and the momentum that threw me down to the floor made his fingers slip. He caught my sneaker. I kicked it off, leaving it in his hand.

I was down, but he was down, too. It gave me enough time to scramble forward, ripping my knees against the rough stone.

Kyle grunted, and his hand clutched at my naked heel. There was nothing to catch hold of; I slid free again. I wrenched myself forward, pulling to my feet with my head still down, every second in danger of falling again because my body was moving almost parallel to the floor. I kept my balance through sheer force of will.

There was no one else. No one to catch me at the exit to the outer room. I sprinted forward, hope and adrenaline surging in my veins. I burst into the river room at full speed, my only thought to reach the tunnel. I could hear Kyle's heavy breath close behind but not close enough. With each step, I pushed harder against the ground, throwing myself ahead of him.

Pain lanced through my leg, crumpling it.

Over the babble of the river, I heard two heavy stones hit the ground and roll—the one I'd been clutching and the one he'd thrown to cripple me. My leg twisted under me, spinning me backward to the ground, and in the same second he was on top of me.

His weight knocked my head against the rock in a ringing blow and pinned me flat against the floor. No leverage.

Scream!

The air blew out of me in a siren of sound that surprised us all. My wordless shriek was more than I'd hoped for—surely someone would hear it. Please let that someone be Jeb. Please let him have the gun.

"Uhg!" Kyle protested. His hand was big enough to cover most of my face. His palm mashed against my mouth, cutting off my scream.

He rolled then, and the motion so took me by surprise that I had no time to try to find an advantage in it. He pulled me swiftly over and under and over his body. I was dizzy and confused, my head still spinning, but I understood as soon as my face hit the water.

His hand locked on the back of my neck, forcing my face into the shallow stream of cooler water that wound its way into the bathing pool. It was too late to hold my breath. I'd already inhaled a mouthful of water.

My body panicked when the water hit my lungs. Its flailing was stronger than he'd expected. My limbs all jerked and thrashed in different directions, and his grip on my neck slipped. He tried to get a better hold, and some instinct made me pull myself into him rather than away, as he was expecting. I only pulled half a foot closer to him, but that got my chin out of the stream, and enough of my mouth to choke some of the water back out and drag in a breath.

He fought to push me back into the stream, but I wriggled and wedged myself under him so that his own weight was working against his goal. I was still reacting to the water in my lungs, coughing and spasming out of control.

"Enough!" Kyle growled.

He pulled himself off me, and I tried to drag myself away.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” he spit through his teeth.

It was over, and I knew it.

There was something wrong with my injured leg. It felt numb, and I couldn’t make it do what I wanted. I could only push myself along the floor with my arms and my good leg. I was coughing too hard to do even that well. Too hard to scream again.

Kyle grabbed my wrist and yanked me up from the floor. The weight of my body made my leg buckle, and I slumped into him.

He got both my wrists in one hand and wrapped the other arm around my waist. He pulled me off the floor and into his side, like an awkward bag of flour. I twisted, and my good leg kicked against the empty air.

“Let’s get this over with.”

He jumped over the smaller stream with a bound and carried me toward the closest sinkhole. The steam from the hot spring washed my face.

He was going to throw me into the dark, hot hole and let the boiling water pull me into the ground as it burned me.

“No, no!” I shouted, my voice too hoarse and low to carry.

I writhed frantically. My knee knocked against one of the ropy rock columns, and I hooked my foot around it, trying to yank myself out of his grip. He jerked me free with an impatient grunt.

At least that loosened his hold enough that I could make one more move. It had worked before, so I tried it again. Instead of trying to free myself, I twisted in and wrapped my legs around his waist, locking the good ankle around the bad, trying to ignore the pain so that I could get a good hold there.

“Get off me, you -” He fought to knock me loose, and I jerked one of my wrists free. I wrapped that arm around his neck and grabbed his thick hair. If I was going into the black river, so was he.

Kyle hissed and stopped prying at my leg long enough to punch my side.

I gasped in pain but got my other hand into his hair.

He wrapped both arms around me, as if we were embracing rather than locked in a killing struggle. Then he grabbed my waist from both sides and heaved with all his strength against my hold.

His hair started to come out in my hands, but he just grunted and pulled harder.

I could hear the steaming water rushing close by, right below me, it seemed. The steam billowed up in a thick cloud, and for a minute I couldn’t see anything but Kyle’s face, twisted with rage into something beastlike and merciless.

I felt my bad leg giving. I tried to pull myself closer to him, but his brute strength was winning against my desperation. He would have me free in a moment, and I would fall into the hissing steam and disappear.

Jared! Jamie! The thought, the agony, belonged to both Melanie and me. They would never know what had happened to me. Ian. Jeb. Doc. Walter. No goodbyes.

Kyle abruptly jumped into the air and came down with a thud. The jarring impact had the effect he wanted: my legs came loose.

But before he could take advantage, there was another result.

The cracking sound was deafening. I thought the whole cave was coming down. The floor shuddered beneath us.

Kyle gasped and jumped back, taking me-hands still locked in his hair-with him. The rock under his feet, with more cracking and groaning, began to crumble away.

Our combined weight had broken the brittle lip of the hole. As Kyle stumbled away, the crumbling followed his heavy steps. It was faster than he was.

A piece of the floor disappeared from under his heel, and he went down with a thud. My weight pushed him back hard, and his head smacked sharply against a stone pillar. His arms fell away from me, limp.

The cracking of the floor settled into a sustained groan. I could feel it shiver beneath Kyle’s body.

I was on his chest. Our legs dangled above empty space, the steam condensing into a million drops on our skin.

“Kyle?”

There was no answer.

I was afraid to move.

You’ve got to get off him. You’re too heavy together. Carefully-use the pillar. Pull away from the hole.

Whimpering in fear, too terrified to think for myself, I did as Melanie ordered. I freed my fingers from Kyle’s hair and climbed gingerly over his unconscious form, using the pillar as an anchor to pull myself forward. It felt steady enough, but the floor still wobbled under us.

forward. It felt steady enough, but the floor still moaned under us.

I pulled myself past the pillar and onto the ground beyond it. This ground stayed firm under my hands and knees, but I scrambled farther away, toward the safety of the exit tunnel.

There was another crack, and I glanced back. One of Kyle's legs drooped farther down as a rock fell from beneath it. I heard the splash this time as the chunk of stone met the river below. The ground shuddered under his weight.

He's going to fall, I realized.

Good, Melanie snarled.

But... !

If he falls, he can't kill us, Wanda. If he doesn't fall, he will.

I can't just...

Yes, you can. Walk away. Don't you want to live?

I did. I wanted to live.

Kyle could disappear. And if he did, there was a chance that no one would ever hurt me again. At least not among the people here. There was still the Seeker to consider, but maybe she would give up someday, and then I could stay here indefinitely with the humans I loved....

My leg throbbed, pain replacing some of the numbness. Warm fluid trickled down my lips. I tasted the moisture without thinking and realized it was my blood.

Walk away, Wanderer. I want to live. I want a choice, too.

I could feel the tremors from where I stood. Another piece of floor splashed into the river. Kyle's weight shifted, and he slid an inch toward the hole.

Let him go.

Melanie knew better than I what she was talking about. This was her world. Her rules.

I stared at the face of the man who was about to die-the man who wanted me dead. With him unconscious, Kyle's face was no longer that of an angry animal. It was relaxed, almost peaceful.

The resemblance to his brother was very apparent.

No! Melanie protested.

I crawled back to him on my hands and knees-slowly, feeling the ground with care before each inch I moved. I was too afraid to go beyond the pillar, so I hooked my good leg around it, an anchor again, and leaned around to wedge my hands under Kyle's arms and over his chest.

I heaved so hard I nearly pulled my arms from their sockets, but he didn't move. I heard a sound like the trickle of sand through an hourglass as the floor continued to dissolve into tiny pieces.

I yanked again, but the only result was that the trickle sped up. Shifting his weight was breaking the floor faster.

Just as I thought that, a large chunk of rock plummeted into the river, and Kyle's precarious balance was overthrown. He began to fall.

"No!" I screamed, the siren bursting from my throat again. I flattened myself against the column and managed to pin him to the other side, locking my hands around his wide chest. My arms ached.

"Help me!" I shrieked. "Somebody! Help!"

The Host

CHAPTER 33

Doubted

Another splash. Kyle's weight tortured my arms.

"Wanda? Wanda!"

"Help me! Kyle! The floor! Help!"

I had my face pressed against the stone, my eyes toward the cave entrance. The light was bright overhead as the day dawned. I held my breath. My arms screamed.

"Wanda! Where are you?"

Ian leaped through the door, the rifle in his hands, held low and ready. His face was the angry mask his brother had worn.

"Watch out!" I screamed at him. "The floor is breaking up! I can't hold him much longer!"

Wanda... I screamed at him. The roof is breaking up! I can't hold him much longer!

It took him two long seconds to process the scene that was so different from the one he'd been expecting- Kyle, trying to kill me. The scene that had been, just seconds ago.

Then he threw the gun to the cave floor and started toward me with a long stride.

"Get down-disperse your weight!"

He dropped to all fours and scuttled to me, his eyes burning in the light of dawn.

"Don't let go," he cautioned.

I groaned in pain.

He assessed for another second, and then slid his body behind mine, pushing me closer to the rock. His arms were longer than mine. Even with me in the way, he was able to get his hands around his brother.

"One, two, three," he grunted.

He pulled Kyle up against the rock, much more securely than I'd had him. The movement smashed my face into the pillar. The bad side, though-it couldn't get much more scarred at this point.

"I'm going to pull him to this side. Can you squeeze out?"

"I'll try."

I loosened my hold on Kyle, feeling my shoulders ache in relief, making sure Ian had him. Then I wriggled out from between Ian and the rock, careful not to put myself on a dangerous section of the floor. I crawled backward a few feet toward the door, ready to make a grab for Ian if he started slipping.

Ian hauled his inert brother around one side of the pillar, dragging him in jerks, a foot at a time. More of the floor crumbled, but the foundation of the pillar remained intact. A new shelf formed about two feet out from the column of rock.

Ian crawled backward the way I had, dragging his brother along in short surges of muscle and will. Within a minute, we were all three in the mouth of the corridor, Ian and I breathing in gasps.

"What... the hell... happened?"

"Our weight... was too... much. Floor caved in."

"What were you doing... by the edge? With Kyle?"

I put my head down and concentrated on breathing.

Well, tell him.

What will happen then?

You know what will happen. Kyle broke the rules. Jeb will shoot him, or they'll kick him out. Maybe Ian will beat the snot out of him first. That would be fun to watch.

Melanie didn't really mean it-I didn't think so, anyway. She was just still mad at me for risking our lives to save our would-be murderer.

Exactly, I told her. And if they kick Kyle out for me... or kill him... I shuddered. Well, can't you see how little sense that would make? He's one of you.

We've got a life here, Wanda. You're jeopardizing that.

It's my life, too. And I'm... well, I'm me.

Melanie groaned in disgust.

"Wanda?" Ian demanded.

"Nothing," I muttered.

"You're a rotten liar. You know that, right?"

I kept my head down and breathed.

"What did he do?"

"Nothing," I lied. Poorly.

Ian put his hand under my chin, pulled my face up. "Your nose is bleeding." He twisted my head to the side. "And there's more blood in your hair."

"I-hit my head when the floor fell."

"On both sides?"

I shrugged.

Ian glared at me for a long moment. The darkness of the tunnel muted the brilliance of his eyes.

"We should get Kyle to Doc-he really cracked his head when he went down."

"Why are you protecting him? He tried to kill you." It was a statement of fact, not a question. His expression slowly melted from anger to horror. He was imagining what we had been doing on that unstable shelf-I could see that in his eyes. When I did not answer, he spoke again in a whisper. "He was going to throw you in the river..." A strange tremor shook his body.

Ian had one arm around Kyle-he'd collapsed that way and seemed too tired to move. Now he shoved his unconscious brother away roughly, sliding farther from him in disgust. He slid into me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. He pulled me close against his chest-I could feel his breath go in and out, still more ragged than normal.

It felt very strange.

"I should roll him right back in there and kick him over the edge myself."

I shook my head frantically, making it throb in pain. "No."

"Saves time. Jeb made the rules clear. You try to hurt someone here, there are penalties. There'll be a tribunal."

I tried to pull away from him, but he tightened his grip. It wasn't frightening, not like the way Kyle had grabbed me. But it was upsetting-it threw me off balance. "No. You can't do that, because no one broke the rules. The floor collapsed, that's all."

"Wanda -"

"He's your brother."

"He knew what he was doing. He's my brother, yes, but he did what he did, and you are... you are... my friend."

"He did nothing. He is human," I whispered. "This is his place, not mine."

"We're not having this discussion again. Your definition of human is not the same as mine. To you, it means something... negative. To me, it's a compliment-and by my definition, you are and he isn't. Not after this."

"Human isn't a negative to me. I know you now. But Ian, he's your brother."

"A fact that shames me."

I pushed away from him again. This time, he let me go. It might have had something to do with the moan of pain that escaped my lips when I moved my leg.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so. We need to find Doc, but I don't know if I can walk. I-I hit my leg, when I fell."

A growl strangled in his throat. "Which leg? Let me see."

I tried to straighten out my hurt leg-it was the right one-and groaned again. His hands started at my ankle, testing the bones, the joints. He rotated my ankle carefully.

"Higher. Here." I pulled his hand to the back of my thigh, just above the knee. I moaned again when he pressed the sore place. "It's not broken or anything, I don't think. Just really sore."

"Deep muscle bruise, at least," he muttered. "And how did this happen?"

"Must have... landed on a rock when I fell."

He sighed. "Okay, let's get you to Doc."

"Kyle needs him more than I do."

"I have to go find Doc anyway-or some help. I can't carry Kyle that far, but I can certainly carry you. Oops-hold on."

He turned abruptly and ducked back into the river room. I decided I wouldn't argue with him. I wanted to see Walter before... Doc had promised to wait for me. Would that first dose of painkiller wear off soon? My head swam. There was so much to worry about, and I was so tired. The adrenaline had drained, leaving me empty.

Ian came back with the gun. I frowned because this reminded me that I'd wished for it before. I didn't like that.

"Let's go."

Without thinking, he handed the gun to me. I let it fall into my open palms, but I couldn't curl my hands around it. I decided it was a suitable punishment, to have to carry the thing.

Ian chuckled. "How anyone could be afraid of you..." he mumbled to himself.

He picked me up easily and was moving before I was settled. I tried to keep the tenderest parts-the back of my head, the back of my leg-from resting on him too hard.

"How'd your clothes get so wet?" he asked. We were passing under one of the fist-sized skylights, and I could see the hint of a grim smile on his pale lips.

"I don't know," I muttered. "Steam?"

We passed into darkness again.

"You're missing a shoe."

“Oh.”

We passed through another beam of light, and his eyes flashed sapphire. They were serious now, locked on my face.

“I’m . . . very glad that you weren’t hurt, Wanda. Hurt worse, I should say.”

I didn’t answer. I was afraid of giving him something to use against Kyle.

Jeb found us just before we hit the big cave. There was enough light for me to see the sharp glint of curiosity in his eyes when he saw me in Ian’s arms, face bleeding, the gun resting gingerly on my open hands.

“You were right, then,” Jeb guessed. The curiosity was strong, but the steel in his tone was stronger. His jaw was tight beneath the fan of his beard. “I didn’t hear a shot. Kyle?”

“He’s unconscious,” I said in a rush. “You need to warn everyone—part of the floor collapsed in the river room. I don’t know how stable it is now. Kyle hit his head really hard trying to get out of the way. He needs Doc.”

Jeb raised one eyebrow so high it almost touched the faded bandanna at his hairline.

“That’s the story,” Ian said, making no effort to conceal his doubt. “And she’s apparently sticking to it.”

Jeb laughed. “Let me take that off your hands,” he said to me.

I let him have the gun willingly. He laughed again at my expression.

“I’ll get Andy and Brandt to help me with Kyle. We’ll follow behind you.”

“Keep a close eye on him when he wakes up,” Ian said in a hard tone.

“Can do.”

Jeb slouched off, looking for more hands. Ian hurried me toward the hospital cave.

“Kyle could be really hurt. . . . Jeb should hurry.”

“Kyle’s head is harder than any rock in this place.”

The long tunnel felt longer than usual. Was Kyle dying, despite my efforts? Was he conscious again and looking for me? What about Walter? Was he sleeping . . . or gone? Had the Seeker given up her hunt, or would she be back now that it was light again?

Will Jared still be with Doc? Mel added her questions to mine. Will he be angry when he sees you? Will he know me?

When we reached the sunlit southern cave, Jared and Doc didn’t look like they’d moved much. They leaned, side by side, against Doc’s makeshift desk. It was quiet as we approached. They weren’t talking, just watching Walter sleep.

They started up with wide eyes as Ian carried me into the light and laid me on the cot next to Walter’s. He straightened my right leg carefully.

Walter was snoring. That sound eased some of my tension.

“What now?” Doc demanded angrily. He was bending over me as soon as the words were out, wiping at the blood on my cheek.

Jared’s face was frozen in surprise. He was being careful, not letting the expression give way to anything else.

“Kyle,” Ian answered at the same time that I said, “The floor -“

Doc looked back and forth between us, confused.

Ian sighed and rolled his eyes. Absently, he laid one hand lightly on my forehead. “The floor crumbled by the first river hole. Kyle fell back and cracked his head on a rock. Wanda saved his worthless life. She says she fell, too, when the floor gave.” Ian gave Doc a meaningful look. “Something,” he said the word sarcastically, “bashed the back of her head pretty good.” He started listing. “Her nose is bleeding but not broken, I don’t think. She’s got some damage to the muscle here.” He touched my sore thigh. “Knees sliced up pretty good, got her face again, but I think maybe I did that, trying to pull Kyle out of the hole. Shouldn’t have bothered.” Ian muttered the last part.

“Anything else?” Doc asked. At that moment, his fingers, probing along my side, reached the place where Kyle had punched me. I gasped.

Doc tugged my shirt up, and I heard both Ian and Jared hiss at what they saw.

“Let me guess,” Ian said in a voice like ice. “You fell on a rock.”

“Good guess,” I agreed, breathless. Doc was still touching my side, and I was trying to hold back whimpers.

“Might have broken a rib, not sure,” Doc murmured. “I wish I could give you something for the pain -“

“Don’t worry about that, Doc,” I panted. “I’m okay. How’s Walter? Did he wake up at all?”

"No, it will take some time to sleep that dose off," Doc said. He took my hand and started bending my wrist, my elbow.

"I'm okay."

His kind eyes were soft as he met my gaze. "You will be. You'll just have to rest for a while. I'll keep an eye on you. Here, turn your head."

I did as he asked, and then winced while he examined my wound.

"Not here," Ian muttered.

I couldn't see Doc, but Jared threw Ian a sharp look.

"They're bringing Kyle. I'm not having them in the same room."

Doc nodded. "Probably wise."

"I'll get a place ready for her. I'll need you to keep Kyle here until... until we decide what to do with him."

I started to speak, but Ian put his fingers on my lips.

"All right," Doc agreed. "I'll tie him down, if you want."

"If we have to. Is it okay to move her?" Ian glanced toward the tunnel, his face anxious.

Doc hesitated.

"No," I whispered, Ian's fingers still touching my mouth. "Walter. I want to be here for Walter."

"You've saved all the lives you can save today, Wanda," Ian said, his voice gentle and sad.

"I want to say... to say good-goodbye."

Ian nodded. Then he looked at Jared. "Can I trust you?"

Jared's face flushed with anger. Ian held up his hand.

"I don't want to leave her here unprotected while I find her a safe place," Ian said. "I don't know if Kyle will be conscious when he arrives. If Jeb shoots him, it will upset her. But you and Doc should be able to handle him. I don't want Doc to be on his own, and force Jeb's hand."

Jared spoke through clenched teeth. "Doc won't be on his own."

Ian hesitated. "She's been through hell in the past couple of days. Remember that."

Jared nodded once, teeth still clamped together.

"I'll be here," Doc reminded Ian.

Ian met his gaze. "Okay." He leaned over me, and his luminous eyes held mine. "I'll be back soon. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not."

He ducked in and touched his lips to my forehead.

No one was more surprised than I, though I heard Jared gasp quietly. My mouth hung open as Ian wheeled and nearly sprinted from the room.

I heard Doc pull a breath in through his teeth, like a backward whistle. "Well," he said.

They both stared at me for a long moment. I was so tired and sore, I barely cared what they were thinking.

"Doc -" Jared started to say something in an urgent tone, but a clamor from the tunnel interrupted him.

Five men struggled through the opening. Jeb, in front, had Kyle's left leg in his arms. Wes had the right leg, and behind them, Andy and Aaron worked to support his torso. Kyle's head lolled back over Andy's shoulder.

"Stars, but he's heavy," Jeb grunted.

Jared and Doc sprang forward to help. After a few minutes of cursing and groaning, Kyle was lying on a cot a few feet away from mine.

"How long has he been out, Wanda?" Doc asked me. He pulled Kyle's eyelids back, letting the sunlight shine into his pupils.

"Um..." I thought quickly. "As long as I've been here, the ten minutes or so it took Ian to carry me here, and then maybe five more minutes before that?"

"At least twenty minutes, would you say?"

"Yes. Close to that."

While we were consulting, Jeb had made his own diagnosis. No one paid any attention as he came to stand at the head of Kyle's cot. No one paid any attention-until he turned an open bottle of water over Kyle's face.

"Jeb," Doc complained, knocking his hand away.

But Kyle sputtered and blinked, and then moaned. "What happened? Where did it go?" He started to shift his weight, trying to look around. "The floor... is moving...."

Kyle's voice had my fingers clenching the sides of my cot and panic washing through me. My leg ached. Could I limp away? Slowly, perhaps.

Could I limp away? Slowly, perhaps...

“S okay,” someone murmured. Not someone. I would always know that voice.

Jared moved to stand between my cot and Kyle’s, his back to me, his eyes on the big man. Kyle rolled his head back and forth, groaning.

“You’re safe,” Jared said in a low voice. He didn’t look at me. “Don’t be afraid.”

I took a deep breath.

Melanie wanted to touch him. His hand was close to mine, resting on the edge of my cot.

Please, no, I told her. My face hurts quite enough as it is!

He won’t hit you.

You think. I’m not willing to risk it.

Melanie sighed; she yearned to move toward him. It wouldn’t have been so hard to bear if I weren’t yearning also.

Give him time, I pleaded. Let him get used to us. Wait till he really believes.

She sighed again.

“Aw, hell!” Kyle grumbled. My gaze flickered toward him at the sound of his voice. I could just see his bright eyes around Jared’s elbow, focused on me. “It didn’t fall!” he complained.

The Host

CHAPTER 34

Buried

Jared lunged forward, away from me. With a loud smacking sound, his fist hit Kyle’s face.

Kyle’s eyes rolled back in his head, and his mouth fell slack.

The room was very quiet for a few seconds.

“Um,” Doc said in a mild voice, “medically speaking, I’m not sure that was the most helpful thing for his condition.”

“But I feel better,” Jared answered, sullen.

Doc smiled the tiniest smile. “Well, maybe a few more minutes of unconsciousness won’t kill him.”

Doc began looking under Kyle’s lids again, taking his pulse...

“What happened?” Wes was by my head, speaking in a murmur.

“Kyle tried to kill it,” Jared answered before I could. “Are we really surprised?”

“Did not,” I muttered.

Wes looked at Jared.

“Altruism seems to come more naturally to it than lies,” Jared noted.

“Are you trying to be annoying?” I demanded. My patience was not waning, but entirely gone. How long had it been since I’d slept? The only thing that ached worse than my leg was my head. Every breath hurt my side. I realized, with some surprise, that I was in a truly bad mood. “Because if you are, then be assured, you have succeeded.”

Jared and Wes looked at me with shocked eyes. I was sure that if I could see the others, their expressions would match. Maybe not Jeb’s. He was the master of the poker face.

“I am female,” I complained. “That ‘it’ business is really getting on my nerves.”

Jared blinked in surprise. Then his face settled back into harder lines. “Because of the body you wear?”

Wes glared at him.

“Because of me,” I hissed.

“By whose definition?”

“How about by yours? In my species, I am the one that bears young. Is that not female enough for you?”

That stopped him short. I felt almost smug.

As you should, Melanie approved. He’s wrong, and he’s being a pig about it.

Thank you.

We girls have to stick together.

“That’s a story you’ve never told us,” Wes murmured, while Jared struggled for a rebuttal. “How does that work?”

Wes’s olive-toned face darkened as if he’d just realized he had spoken the words out loud. “I mean I

I guess you don't have to answer that, if I'm being rude."

I laughed. My mood was swinging around wildly, out of control. Slaphappy, like Mel had said. "No, you're not asking anything... inappropriate. We don't have such a complicated... elaborate setup as your species." I laughed again, and then felt warmth in my face. I remembered only too clearly how elaborate it could be.

Get your mind out of the gutter.

It's your mind, I reminded her.

"Then...?" Wes asked.

I sighed. "There are only a few of us who are... Mothers. Not Mothers. That's what they call us, but it's just the potential to be one..." I was sober again, thinking of it. There were no Mothers, no surviving Mothers, only the memories of them.

"You have that potential?" Jared asked stiffly.

I knew the others were listening. Even Doc had paused in the act of putting his ear to Kyle's chest.

I didn't answer his question. "We're... a little like your hives of bees, or your ants. Many, many sexless members of the family, and then the queen..."

"Queen?" Wes repeated, looking at me with a strange expression.

"Not like that. But there is only one Mother for every five, ten thousand of my kind. Sometimes less. There's no hard-and-fast rule."

"How many drones?" Wes wondered.

"Oh, no-there aren't drones. No, I told you, it's simpler than that."

They waited for me to explain. I swallowed. I shouldn't have brought this up. I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Was it really such a big thing to have Jared call me "it"?

They still waited. I frowned, but then I spoke. I'd started this. "The Mothers... divide. Every... cell, I guess you could call it, though our structure isn't the same as yours, becomes a new soul. Each new soul has a little of the Mother's memory, a piece of her that remains."

"How many cells?" Doc asked, curious. "How many young?"

I shrugged. "A million or so."

The eyes that I could see widened, looked a little wilder. I tried not to feel hurt when Wes cringed away from me.

Doc whistled under his breath. He was the only one who was still interested in continuing. Aaron and Andy had wary, disturbed expressions on their faces. They'd never heard me teach before. Never heard me speak so much.

"When does that happen? Is there a catalyst?" Doc asked.

"It's a choice. A voluntary choice," I told him. "It's the only way we ever willingly choose to die. A trade, for a new generation."

"You could choose now, to divide all your cells, just like that?"

"Not quite just like that, but yes."

"Is it complicated?"

"The decision is. The process is... painful."

"Painful?"

Why should that have surprised him so? Wasn't it the same for his kind?

Men. Mel snorted.

"Excruciating," I told him. "We all remember how it was for our Mothers."

Doc was stroking his chin, entranced. "I wonder what the evolutionary track would be... to produce a hive society with suiciding queens..." He was lost on another plane of thought.

"Altruism," Wes murmured.

"Hmm," Doc said. "Yes, that."

I closed my eyes, wishing my mouth had stayed closed. I felt dizzy. Was I just tired or was it my head wound?

"Oh," Doc muttered. "You've slept even less than I have, haven't you, Wanda? We should let you get some rest."

"M fine," I mumbled, but I didn't open my eyes.

"That's just great," someone said under his breath. "We've got a bloody queen mother alien living with us. She could blow into a million new buggers at any moment."

“Shh.”

“They couldn’t hurt you,” I told whoever it was, not opening my eyes. “Without host bodies, they would die quickly.” I winced, imagining the unimaginable grief. A million tiny, helpless souls, tiny silver babies, withering...

No one answered me, but I could feel their relief in the air.

I was so tired. I didn’t care that Kyle was three feet from me. I didn’t care that two of the men in the room would side with Kyle if he came around. I didn’t care about anything but sleep.

Of course, that was when Walter woke up.

“Uuuh,” he groaned, just a whisper. “Gladdie?”

With a groan of my own, I rolled toward him. The pain in my leg made me wince, but I couldn’t twist my torso. I reached out to him, found his hand.

“Here,” I whispered.

“Ahh,” Walter sighed in relief.

Doc hushed the men who began to protest. “Wanda’s given up sleep and peace to help him through the pain. Her hands are bruised from holding his. What have you done for him?”

Walter groaned again. The sound began low and guttural but turned quickly to a high-pitched whimper.

Doc winced. “Aaron, Andy, Wes... would you, ah, go get Sharon for me, please?”

“All of us?”

“Get out,” Jeb translated.

The only answer was a shuffling of feet as they left.

“Wanda,” Doc whispered, close beside my ear. “He’s in pain. I can’t let him come all the way around.”

I tried to breathe evenly. “It’s better if he doesn’t know me. It’s better if he thinks Gladdie is here.”

I pulled my eyes open. Jeb was beside Walter, whose face still looked as if he slept.

“Bye, Walt,” Jeb said. “See you on the other side.”

He stepped back.

“You’re a good man. You’ll be missed,” Jared murmured.

Doc was fumbling in the package of morphine again. The paper crackled.

“Gladdie?” Walt sobbed. “It hurts.”

“Shhh. It won’t hurt much longer. Doc will make it stop.”

“Gladdie?”

“Yes?”

“I love you, Gladdie. I’ve loved you my whole life long.”

“I know, Walter. I-I love you, too. You know how I love you.”

Walter sighed.

I closed my eyes when Doc leaned over Walter with the syringe.

“Sleep well, friend,” Doc murmured.

Walter’s fingers relaxed, loosened. I held on to them-I was the one clinging now.

The minutes passed, and all was quiet except my breathing. It was hitching and breaking, tending toward quiet sobs.

Someone patted my shoulder. “He’s gone, Wanda,” Doc said, his voice thick. “He’s out of pain.”

He pulled my hand free and rolled me carefully out of my awkward position into one that was less agonizing. But only slightly so. Now that I knew Walter wouldn’t be disturbed, the sobs were not so quiet. I clutched at my side, where it throbbed.

“Oh, go ahead. You won’t be happy otherwise,” Jared muttered in a grudging tone. I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn’t do it.

Something stung my arm. I didn’t remember having hurt my arm. And in such a strange place, just inside my elbow...

Morphine, Melanie whispered.

We were already drifting now. I tried to be alarmed, but I couldn’t be. I was too far gone.

No one said goodbye, I thought dully. I couldn’t expect Jared... but Jeb... Doc... Ian wasn’t here...

No one’s dying, she promised me. Just sleeping this time...

When I woke, the ceiling above me was dim, starlit. Nighttime. There were so many stars. I wondered where I was. There were no black obstructions, no pieces of ceiling in my view. Just stars and stars and stars...

Wind fanned my face. It smelled like... dust and... something I couldn’t put my finger on. An absence.

The musty smell was gone. No sulfur, and it was so dry.

“Wanda?” someone whispered, touching my good cheek.

My eyes found Ian’s face, white in the starlight, leaning over me. His hand on my skin was cooler than the breeze, but the air was so dry it wasn’t uncomfortable. Where was I?

“Wanda? Are you awake? They won’t wait any longer.”

I whispered because he did. “What?”

“They’re starting already. I knew you would want to be here.”

“She comin’ around?” Jeb’s voice asked.

“What’s starting?” I asked.

“Walter’s funeral.”

I tried to sit up, but my body was all rubbery. Ian’s hand moved to my forehead, holding me down.

I twisted my head under his hand, trying to see...

I was outside.

Outside.

On my left, a rough, tumbled pile of boulders formed a miniature mountain, complete with scrubby brush. On my right, the desert plain stretched away from me, disappearing in the darkness. I looked down past my feet, and I could see the huddle of humans, ill at ease in the open air. I knew just how they felt. Exposed.

I tried to get up again. I wanted to be closer, to see. Ian’s hand restrained me.

“Easy there,” he said. “Don’t try to stand.”

“Help me,” I pleaded.

“Wanda?”

I heard Jamie’s voice, and then I saw him, his hair bobbing as he ran to where I was lying.

My fingertips traced the edges of the mat beneath me. How did I get here, sleeping under the stars?

“They didn’t wait,” Jamie said to Ian. “It will be over soon.”

“Help me up,” I said.

Jamie reached for my hand, but Ian shook his head. “I got her.”

Ian slid his arms under me, very careful to avoid the worst of the sore spots. He pulled me up off the ground, and my head spun like a ship about to capsize. I groaned.

“What did Doc do to me?”

“He gave you a little of the leftover morphine, so that he could check you out without hurting you. You needed sleep anyway.”

I frowned, disapproving. “Won’t someone else need the medicine more?”

“Shh,” he said, and I could hear a low voice in the distance. I turned my head.

I could see the group of humans again. They stood at the mouth of a low, dark, open space carved out by the wind under the unstable-looking pile of boulders. They stood in a ragged line, facing the shadowed grotto.

I recognized Trudy’s voice.

“Walter always saw the bright side of things. He could see the bright side of a black hole. I’ll miss that.”

I saw a figure step forward, saw the gray-and-black braid swing as she moved, and watched Trudy toss a handful of something into the darkness. Sand scattered from her fingers, falling to the ground with a faint hiss.

She went back to stand beside her husband. Geoffrey moved away from her, stepped forward toward the black space.

“He’ll find his Gladys now. He’s happier where he is.” Geoffrey threw his handful of dirt.

Ian carried me to the right side of the line of people, close enough to see into the murky grotto. There was a darker space on the ground in front of us, a big oblong around which the entire human population stood in a loose half circle.

Everyone was there-everyone.

Kyle stepped forward.

I trembled, and Ian squeezed me gently.

Kyle did not look in our direction. I saw his face in profile; his right eye was nearly swollen shut.

“Walter died human,” Kyle said. “None of us can ask for more than that.” He threw a fistful of dirt into the dark shape on the ground.

Kyle rejoined the group.

Jared stood beside him. He took the short walk and stopped at the edge of Walter’s grave.

“Walter was good through and through. Not one of us is his equal.” He threw his sand.

Jamie walked forward, and Jared patted his shoulder once as they passed each other.

“Walter was brave,” Jamie said. “He wasn’t afraid to die, he wasn’t afraid to live, and... he wasn’t afraid to believe. He made his own decisions, and he made good ones.” Jamie threw his handful. He turned and walked back, his eyes locked on mine the whole way.

“Your turn,” he whispered when he was at my side.

Andy was already moving forward, a shovel in his hands.

“Wait,” Jamie said in a low voice that carried in the silence. “Wanda and Ian haven’t said anything.”

There was an unhappy mutter around me. My brain felt like it was pitching and heaving inside my skull.

“Let’s have some respect,” Jeb said, louder than Jamie. It felt too loud to me.

My first instinct was to wave Andy ahead and make Ian carry me away. This was human mourning, not mine.

But I did mourn. And I did have something to say.

“Ian, help me get some sand.”

Ian crouched down so I could scoop up a handful of the loose rocks at our feet. He rested my weight on his knee to get his own share of dirt. Then he straightened and carried me to the edge of the grave.

I couldn’t see into the hole. It was dark under the overhang of rock, and the grave seemed to be very deep.

Ian began speaking before I could.

“Walter was the best and brightest of what is human,” he said, and scattered his sand into the hole. It fell for a long time before I heard it hiss against the bottom.

Ian looked down at me.

It was absolutely silent in the starlit night. Even the wind was calm. I whispered, but I knew my voice carried to everyone.

“There was no hatred in your heart,” I whispered. “That you existed is proof that we were wrong. We had no right to take your world from you, Walter. I hope your fairytales are true. I hope you find your Gladdie.”

I let the rocks trickle through my fingers and waited until I heard them fall with a soft patter onto Walter’s body, obscured in the deep, dark grave.

Andy started to work as soon as Ian took the first step back, shoveling from a mound of pale, dusty earth that was piled a few feet farther into the grotto. The shovel load hit with a thump rather than a whisper. The sound made me cringe.

Aaron stepped past us with another shovel. Ian turned slowly and carried me away to make room for them. The heavy thuds of falling dirt echoed behind us. Low voices began to murmur. I heard footsteps as people milled and huddled to discuss the funeral.

I really looked at Ian for the first time as he walked back to the dark mat where it lay on the open dirt-out of place, not belonging. Ian’s face was streaked with pale dust, his expression weary. I’d seen his face like that before. I couldn’t pinpoint the memory before Ian had laid me on the mat again, and I was distracted. What was I supposed to do out here in the open? Sleep? Doc was right behind us; he and Ian both knelt down in the dust beside me.

“How are you feeling?” Doc asked, already prodding at my side.

I wanted to sit up, but Ian pressed my shoulder down when I tried.

“I’m fine. I think maybe I could walk...”

“No need to push it. Let’s give that leg a few days, okay?” Doc pulled my left eyelid up, absentminded, and shone a tiny beam of light into it. My right eye saw the bright reflection that danced across his face. He squinted away from the light, recoiling a few inches. Ian’s hand on my shoulder didn’t flinch. That surprised me.

“Hmm. That doesn’t help a diagnosis, does it? How does your head feel?” Doc asked.

“A little dizzy. I think it’s the drugs you gave me, though, not the wound. I don’t like them-I’d rather feel the pain, I think.”

Doc grimaced. So did Ian.

“What?” I demanded.

“I’m going to have to put you under again, Wanda. I’m sorry.”

“But... why?” I whispered. “I’m really not that hurt. I don’t want -“

“We have to take you back inside,” Ian said, cutting me off, his voice low, as if he didn’t want it to carry back to the others. I could hear the voices behind us, echoing quietly off the rocks. “We promised... that you wouldn’t be conscious.”

“Blindfold me again.”

Doc pulled the little syringe from his pocket. It was already depressed, only a quarter left. I chided away

Doc pulled the blue syringe from his pocket. It was already depressed, only a quarter full. I snatched it away from him, toward Ian. His hand on my shoulder became a restraint.

"You know the caves too well," Doc murmured. "They don't want you having the chance to guess..."

"But where would I go?" I whispered, my voice frantic. "If I knew the way out? Why would I leave now?"

"If it eases their minds..." Ian said.

Doc took my wrist, and I didn't fight him. I looked away as the needle bit into my skin, looked at Ian. His eyes were midnight in the dark. They tightened at the look of betrayal in mine.

"Sorry," he muttered. It was the last thing I heard.

The Host

CHAPTER 35

Tried

I groaned. My head felt all swirly and disconnected. My stomach rolled nauseatingly.

"Finally," someone murmured in relief. Ian. Of course. "Hungry?"

I thought about that and then made an involuntary gagging sound.

"Oh. Never mind. Sorry. Again. We had to do it. People got all... paranoid when we took you outside."

"S okay," I sighed.

"Want some water?"

"No."

I opened my eyes, trying to focus in the darkness. I could see two stars through the cracks overhead. Still night. Or night again, who knew?

"Where am I?" I asked. The shapes of the cracks were unfamiliar. I would swear I'd never stared at this ceiling before.

"Your room," Ian said.

I searched for his face in the darkness but could only make out the black shape that was his head. With my fingers, I examined the surface I lay on; it was a real mattress. There was a pillow under my head. My searching hand touched his, and he caught my fingers before I could withdraw them.

"Whose room is it really?"

"Yours."

"Ian..."

"It used to be ours-Kyle's and mine. Kyle's being... held in the hospital wing until things can be decided. I can move in with Wes."

"I'm not taking your room. And what do you mean, until things can be decided?"

"I told you there would be a tribunal."

"When?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because if you're going through with that, then I have to be there. To explain."

"To lie."

"When?" I asked again.

"First light. I won't take you."

"Then I'll take myself. I know I'll be able to walk as soon as my head stops spinning."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. It's not fair if you don't let me speak."

Ian sighed. He dropped my hand and straightened slowly to his feet. I could hear his joints pop as he stood. How long had he been sitting in the dark, waiting for me to wake? "I'll be back soon. You might not be hungry, but I'm starving."

"You had a long night."

"Yes."

"If it gets light, I won't sit here waiting for you."

He chuckled without humor. "I'm sure that's true. So I'll be back before that, and I will help you get where you're going."

He leaned one of the doors away from the entrance to his cave, stepped around it, and then let it fall back into place. I frowned. That might be hard to do on one leg. I hoped Ian truly was coming back.

While I waited for him, I stared up at the two stars I could see and let my head slowly become stationary. I really didn't like human drugs. Ugh. My body hurt, but the lurching in my head was worse.

Time passed slowly, but I didn't fall asleep. I'd been sleeping most of the last twenty-four hours. I probably was hungry, too. I would have to wait for my stomach to calm before I was sure.

Ian came back before the light, just as he'd promised.

"Feeling any better?" he asked as he stepped around the door.

"I think so. I haven't moved my head yet."

"Do you think it's you reacting to the morphine, or Melanie's body?"

"It's Mel. She reacts badly to most painkillers. She found that out when she broke her wrist ten years ago."

He thought about that for a moment. "It's... odd. Dealing with two people at once."

"Odd," I agreed.

"Are you hungry yet?"

I smiled. "I thought I smelled bread. Yes, I think my stomach is past the worst."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

His shadow sprawled out beside me. He felt for my hand, then pulled my fingers open and placed a familiar round shape in it.

"Help me up?" I asked.

He put his arm carefully around my shoulders and folded me up in one stiff piece, minimizing the ache in my side. I could feel something foreign on the skin there, tight and rigid.

"Thanks," I said, a little breathless. My head spun slowly. I touched my side with my free hand. Something adhered to my skin, under my shirt. "Are my ribs broken, then?"

"Doc's not sure. He's doing as much as he can."

"He tries so hard."

"He does."

"I feel bad... that I used to not like him," I admitted.

Ian laughed. "Of course you didn't. I'm amazed you can like any of us."

"You've got that turned around," I mumbled, and dug my teeth into the hard roll. I chewed mechanically and then swallowed, setting the bread down as I waited to see how it hit my stomach.

"Not very appetizing, I know," Ian said.

I shrugged. "Just testing-to see if the nausea's really passed."

"Maybe something more appealing..."

I looked at him, curious, but I couldn't see his face. I listened to a sharp crackle and a ripping sound... and then I could smell, and I understood.

"Cheetos!" I cried. "Really? For me?"

Something touched my lip, and I crunched into the delicacy he offered.

"I've been dreaming about this." I sighed as I chewed.

That made him laugh. He put the bag in my hands.

I downed the contents of the small bag quickly, and then finished my roll, seasoned by the cheese flavor still in my mouth. He handed me a bottle of water before I could ask.

"Thank you. For more than the Cheetos, you know. For so much."

"You're more than welcome, Wanda."

I stared into his dark blue eyes, trying to decipher everything he was saying with that sentence-there seemed to be something more than just courtesy in the words. And then I realized that I could see the color of Ian's eyes; I glanced quickly up at the cracks above. The stars were gone, and the sky was turning pale gray. Dawn was coming. First light.

"Are you sure you have to do this?" Ian asked, his hands already half-extended as if to pick me up.

I nodded. "You don't have to carry me. My leg feels better."

"We'll see."

He helped me to my feet, leaving his arm around my waist and pulling my arm around his neck.

"Careful, now. How's that?"

I hobbled forward a step. It hurt, but I could do it. "Great. Let's go."

I think Ian likes you too much.

Too much? I was surprised to hear from Melanie, and so distinctly. Lately, she only spoke up like this when Jared was around.

I'm here, too. Does he even care about that?

Of course he does. He believes us more than anyone besides Jamie and Jeb.

I don't mean that.

What do you mean?

But she was gone.

It took us a long time. I was surprised by how far we had to go. I'd been thinking we were going to the big plaza or the kitchen-the usual places for congregating. But we went through the eastern field and kept going until we finally reached the big, deep black cave that Jeb had called the game room. I hadn't been here since my first tour. The biting scent of the sulfurous spring greeted me.

Unlike most of the caverns here, the game room was much wider than it was tall. I could see that now because the dim blue lights hung from the ceiling rather than resting on the floor. The ceiling was only a few feet over my head, the height of a normal ceiling in a house. But I couldn't even see the walls, they were so distant from the lights. I couldn't see the smelly spring, tucked away in some far corner, but I could hear it dribble and gush.

Kyle sat in the brightest spot of light. He had his long arms wrapped around his legs. His face was set in a stiff mask. He didn't look up when Ian helped me limp in.

On either side of him were Jared and Doc, on their feet, both with their arms hanging loose and ready at their sides. As though they were... guards.

Jeb stood beside Jared, his gun slung over one shoulder. He appeared relaxed, but I knew how quickly that could change. Jamie held his free hand... no, Jeb had his hand around Jamie's wrist, and Jamie didn't seem happy about it. When he saw me come in, though, he smiled and waved. He took a deep breath and looked pointedly at Jeb. Jeb dropped Jamie's wrist.

Sharon stood beside Doc, with Aunt Maggie at her other side.

Ian pulled me toward the edge of the darkness surrounding the tableau. We weren't alone there. I could see the shapes of many others, but not their faces.

It was strange; through the caves, Ian had supported most of my weight with ease. Now, though, he seemed to have tired. His arm around my waist was slack. I lurched and hopped forward as best I could until he picked the spot he wanted. He settled me to the floor, and then sat beside me.

"Ouch," I heard someone whisper.

I turned and could just make out Trudy. She scooted closer to us, Geoffrey and then Heath copying her.

"You look rotten," she told me. "How bad are you hurt?"

I shrugged. "I'm fine." I started to wonder if Ian had let me struggle just to make a show of my injuries-to make me testify against Kyle without words. I frowned at his innocent expression.

Wes and Lily arrived then and came to sit with my little group of allies. Brandt entered a few seconds later, and then Heidi, and then Andy and Paige. Aaron was last.

"That's everybody," he said. "Lucina's staying with her kids. She doesn't want them here-she said to go on without her."

Aaron sat beside Andy, and there was a short moment of silence.

"Okay, then," Jeb said in a loud voice meant to be heard by all. "Here's how it's gonna work. Straight-up majority vote. As usual, I'll make my own decision if I have a problem with the majority, 'cause this -"

"Is my house," several voices interjected in chorus. Someone chuckled but stopped quickly. This wasn't funny. A human was on trial for trying to kill an alien. This had to be a horrible day for all of them.

"Who's speaking against Kyle?" Jeb asked.

Ian started to stand beside me.

"No!" I whispered, tugging on his elbow.

He shrugged me off and rose to his feet.

"This is simple enough," Ian said. I wanted to jump up and clap my hand over his mouth, but I didn't think I could get to my feet without help. "My brother was warned. He was not in any doubt about Jeb's ruling on this. Wanda is one of our community-the same rules and protections apply to her as to any of us. Jeb told Kyle point-blank that if he couldn't live with her here, he should move on. Kyle decided to stay. He knew then and he knows now the penalty for murder in this place."

"It's still alive," Kyle grunted.

Jeb counted out loud. Ten... eleven... twelve... thirteen... fourteen... fifteen... sixteen... seventeen... eighteen... nineteen... twenty... twenty-one... twenty-two... twenty-three. Okay, that's a clear majority.

I didn't look around to see who had voted how. It was enough that in my little corner all arms were crossed tightly over chests and all eyes stared at Jeb with expectant expressions.

Jamie walked away from Jeb to come squeeze in between Trudy and me. He put his arm around me, under Ian's.

"Maybe your souls were right about us," he said, loud enough for most to hear his high, hard voice. "The majority are no better than -"

"Hush!" I hissed at him.

"Okay," Jeb said. Everyone went silent. Jeb looked down at Kyle, then at me, and then at Jared. "Okay, I'm inclined to go with the majority on this."

"Jeb -" Jared and Ian said simultaneously.

"My house, my rules," Jeb reminded them. "Never forget that. So you listen to me, Kyle. And you'd better listen, too, I think, Magnolia. Anyone who tries to hurt Wanda again will not get a tribunal, they will get a burial." He slapped the butt of his gun for emphasis.

I flinched.

Magnolia glared hatefully at her brother.

Kyle nodded, as if accepting the terms.

Jeb looked around the unevenly spaced audience, locking eyes with each member except the little group beside me.

"Tribunal's over," Jeb announced. "Who's up for a game?"

The Host

CHAPTER 36

Believed

The congregation relaxed, and a more enthusiastic murmur ran around the half circle.

I looked at Jamie. He pursed his lips and shrugged. "Jeb's just trying to get things back to normal. It's been a bad couple of days. Burying Walter..."

I winced.

I saw that Jeb was grinning at Jared. After a moment of resistance, Jared sighed and rolled his eyes at the strange old man. He turned and strode quickly from the cave.

"Jared got a new ball?" someone asked.

"Cool," Wes said beside me.

"Playing games," Trudy muttered, and shook her head.

"If it eases the tension," Lily responded quietly, shrugging.

Their voices were low, close beside me, but I could also hear other, louder voices.

"Easy on the ball this time," Aaron said to Kyle. He stood over him, offering his hand.

Kyle took the offered hand and got slowly to his feet. When he was standing, his head almost hit the hanging lanterns.

"The last ball was weak," Kyle said, grinning at the older man. "Structurally deficient."

"I nominate Andy for captain," someone shouted.

"I nominate Lily," Wes called out, getting to his feet and stretching.

"Andy and Lily."

"Yeah, Andy and Lily."

"I want Kyle," Andy said quickly.

"Then I get Ian," Lily countered.

"Jared."

"Brandt."

Jamie got to his feet and stood on his toes, trying to look tall.

"Paige."

"Heidi."

"Aaron."

"Wes."